

INTRODUCTION

Out of the Silence documents the growth of the international human rights movement, underscores the importance of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, and focuses on the work of individuals and non-governmental organizations (NGO's) in protecting human rights. No matter what country you live in, what rights you advocate, or what level of human rights abuse you experience, there are common strategies and resources available to everyone involved in human rights work.

Our hope is that this video will be used for raising general awareness, for educational purposes in the community, for organizing, and simply to create a sense of solidarity with others involved in the fight; secondarily, where appropriate, as a set of strategies and resources to consider.



SYNOPSIS

Out of the Silence is a fifty minute video in three parts. It can be shown as a single program or in separate parts. If possible, every viewing should provide additional time for discussion.

Part 1. Universal Declaration of Human Rights

The first part (9 minutes) describes how the Universal Declaration of Human Rights came into being, and its importance in establishing international human rights standards. While the Universal Declaration is not legally binding, those governments who signed it become accountable for their actions. This segment discusses how organizations like yours strive to close the gap between a government's promises and its practices - especially the abuse of basic human rights.

Part 2. Czechoslovakia

The second part of the video (20 minutes) documents the history of the struggle for human rights in Czechoslovakia. This segment describes ways in which Czech human rights activists organized peaceful opposition to the repressive Czech regime, what they did to create the "political space" required to keep the movement alive, and what strategies they used to apply increased pressure on the Czech government to end human rights violations - until finally achieving in late 1989 a rare victory in the fight for human rights and a return to democratic rule in Czechoslovakia.

Part 3. Guatemala

The third part of the video (23 minutes) captures the tragic situation in Guatemala, where human rights violations are among the worst in the Western Hemisphere. This segment describes government repression against the indigenous people in the highlands of Guatemala, then follows the efforts of a small group of peasants who have come together to legally challenge the military's forced conscription of peasants into Civil Patrols. We witness firsthand the organizing methods of those working to gain human rights, how they use the country's new constitution as a tool, and how they monitor and report human rights violations. We see the risks they take and the price they pay. This segment also profiles the work of the international human rights community (NGO's, the UN, etc.) in rallying to the defense of the victims, shedding light on the continuing human rights nightmare in Guatemala, and demanding government accountability.



DISCUSSION

Part 1. Universal Declaration of Human Rights

Discuss the importance of having universally - agreed-to human rights standards, and the importance of your government's agreement to abide by those standards. What are the discrepancies between the words of the Universal Declaration, including the covenants and conventions, and the practices of your government? Why do human rights abuses exist in your country? To maintain political power? For economic exploitation? For racial, ethnic or religious reasons? What has been the impact of regional accords, human rights commissions and courts of law based on the principles of the Universal Declaration? Consider how you can use these to support your efforts.

Part 2. Czechoslovakia

In discussing the work of Czech human rights activists, compare the history, growth and strategies of human rights activity in Czechoslovakia with what has happened in your country - and in your organization.

The Helsinki Final Act was a regional human rights agreement based on the Universal Declaration and signed by the Czech government. Discuss how human rights activists in Czechoslovakia used this agreement to create Charter 77, a group organized to demand respect for the rights agreed to in Helsinki. Is there a parallel to how you first organized? What rights were at stake?

In Czechoslovakia, information was censored by the government, and "underground" or secret organizations formed to protect freedom of expression and freedom of information. How do you resist your government's efforts to silence you? What is the value of public protest and official denouncements in your country? Is your judicial system fair?



The Czechs were in contact with human rights movements in neighboring countries, receiving information and advice, creating solidarity, and making people inside Czechoslovakia feel less alone in their efforts. Exiles who fled Czechoslovakia also helped with information, support and supplies. International human rights NGO's like Helsinki Watch and Amnesty International monitored and reported human rights violations...and pressured for change. What human rights activity takes place in countries near you? Do you collaborate with other organizations? What is the most valuable work they do for you?

Discuss the use of improved technology (fax machines, computers, and underground video cameras) to facilitate communications in Czechoslovakia. Do you use those technologies and skills in your work? If not, how can you acquire them? How would you use them?

International press, television in particular, made a difference in Czechoslovakia. What access do you have to international press? By reporting the situation in your country, how does the international press help your efforts? Is your local press effective?

Part 3. Guatemala

In comparing the situation in Guatemala with that in your country, consider the similarities and the differences in levels of fear and violence experienced by those involved in human rights work, the nature of the struggle, the rights at stake, the kind of organizing efforts, the links with the international community, and the outcomes to date.

The history of human rights abuse in Guatemala goes back centuries. The violence experienced there takes many forms -- physical warfare, cultural repression, continued disappearances, torture, economic exploitation. How does this compare with what you have experienced in your own country?



For the indigenous people in this video who are seeking to organize, the important issue is the forced conscription into Civil Patrols. The "popular movement" also involves people from labor unions, universities (students and professors), churches, lawyers, and families of the disappeared. What groups in your country have organized? What issues have caused them to unite? Is there an indigenous effort? What are the key issues around which you have organized?



Given the hardships and customs of indigenous people in Guatemala as well as language barriers and widespread illiteracy, it is difficult to learn about human rights and create an organized movement. The peasants have overcome these obstacles. How have you overcome your unique barriers?

After the four men are "disappeared," a number of strategies are used to make the case known: official denouncements; alerting human rights groups overseas; testifying before the UN; lobbying the U.S. Congress over trade and aid. When something happens to one of your members, what are your alternatives? How are they effective?

In Guatemala, the country's new Constitution is based in part on the words of the Universal Declaration, and provide human rights standards and safeguards. What does your Constitution say about respect for human rights? What other legal documents exist that state an intention to respect human rights? What mechanisms are available to you to enforce constitutional guarantees?

CONCLUSION

In the end, you may want to discuss and consider these comments from the video:

If the Universal Declaration (of Human Rights) could be carried out in practice, it would be a tremendous accomplishment. But our people don't know about this Declaration. However, they do know that every human being is entitled to certain fundamental rights...

-- Rigoberta Menchu

Once you find you are an individual, and you don't want to be possessed by the State...then it changes all your life and you cannot go back. You just know the price and you are ready to pay it. -- Jan Urban

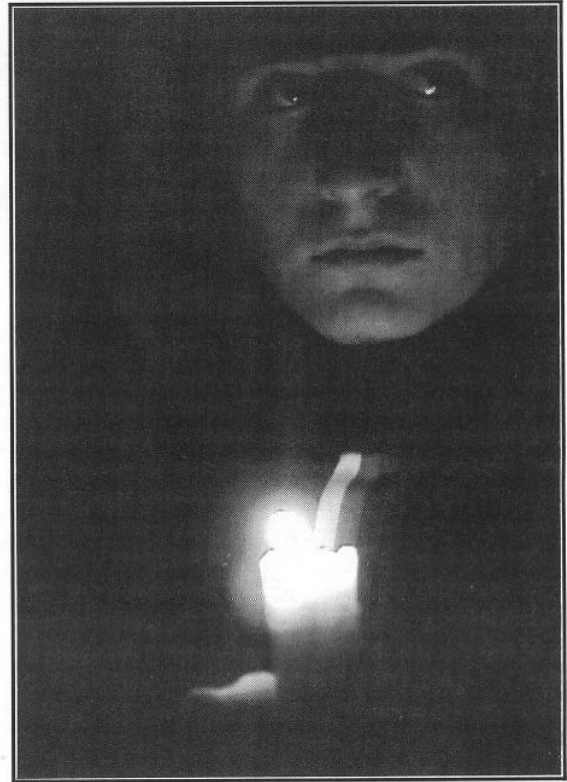
My feelings are to go on fighting to advance our struggle, so that this movement doesn't die...but rather that it become increasingly enriched. -- Justina Tzoc

The Universal Declaration reflects the hopes of every individual - hopes often unrealized - to have basic human rights respected. What will it take in your country to realize these goals?



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OUT OF THE SILENCE FIGHTING FOR HUMAN RIGHTS



BRIEFING BOOK