

Speech by Minister of Foreign Affairs, Frans Timmermans, at the presentation of the Human Rights Defenders Tulip at the Spaansche Hof in The Hague on 9 January 2013

Ladies and gentlemen,

It's great to have such a large turnout this afternoon. Since I'm among friends, I feel I can tell you the human rights prize will endure. In preparing my memorandum on human rights policy, I have to take a hard look at many policy items, but I can give you my word that the prize is here to stay.

I've listened closely to what's been said this afternoon, and these words have bolstered my confidence in the path being taken by this government. Like the government of Maxime Verhagen, we will make human rights a centrepiece of our policy. Having said that, I still intend to draft a new policy memorandum, since the world around us is changing at such a furious pace. Yet our values remain the same. This means that the instruments we need to uphold those values must be adapted to changing circumstances.

Our world is a big place and for many Dutch people a threatening one. But at the same time our world is getting smaller and smaller. Who could have imagined 10 or 15 years ago that a goofy Korean with an even goofier dance could have a worldwide hit within a matter of weeks? My six- and eight-year-old children know exactly what 'Gangnam Style' is. A hit that originated in Korea and conquered the world in a flash – thanks to the internet.

A similar thing happens with human rights violations: we get reports of them every day. This increases our personal connection to the victims. It also increases the concerns of the governments of countries where the violations take place. The concern that the global response could affect them and harm the interests of the state.

Governments react in different ways – all too often in the form of repression, unfortunately. You see this reflex around the world, the tendency to shove aside human rights defenders or brand them as criminals. No continent is blameless on this count, not even Europe. Indeed, this very thing is happening less than two-and-a-half hours from here by plane. Human rights defenders may be labelled agents of foreign powers just for working with foreign human rights organisations, as is occurring in Russia right now, for example. So we have every reason to stay committed to strengthening the position of these individuals, all around the world.

This realisation entails an obligation, one that we in the Netherlands may have neglected in recent years. It is the obligation to accept criticism, as Cisca Dresselhuys rightly said. Particularly if a wealthy nation like ours seeks to call other parts of the world to account for their failings. We would be wrong to think that this country is above criticism. That we're all just one big happy family.

Which is why I'm very happy about the creation of the Netherlands Institute for Human Rights. The purpose of the body is to continually monitor the human rights situation in this country. This includes highlighting our shortcomings – which certainly exist: in the area of gender equality, respect for ethnic and religious differences, the position of people with disabilities, and the social position of children.

The Netherlands is not entirely blameless in its international dealings either. I think that we – and this includes the government – should adopt an open attitude: accepting criticism when it is justified and refuting when it is unwarranted. And modifying our policy as appropriate. We also honour older human rights instruments to which we are party. Instruments like those of the Council of Europe, including the judgments of the Court in Strasbourg. We do not question them. We do not limit them. We respect them. Indeed, this is the only way the Netherlands has the moral authority to say to India: ‘We’re concerned about the position of the Dalits. We’re concerned about the position of women. We’re concerned about social inequality.’

This brings me to India. A day or two from now, on the eleventh, there will be an important cricket match. A one-day international between England and India. These matches are major events in India. Cricket is the most popular sport there, I think it’s fair to say. And it’s encouraging to think that about 100 years ago the first Dalit was allowed to take part in a cricket match – on the strength of his bowling prowess. I’m talking about Palwankar Baloo, who started out as a groundsman before becoming a bowler. But as Ms Dresselhuys has pointed out, circumstance in India are complex: Baloo was not allowed to bat; he only could bowl. Batting would have been a step too far. It is important to bear in mind that even a century ago a person could be judged on the basis of his abilities, not his origins. This was seen as a breakthrough in the status of the Dalits, which is still quite vulnerable. We should remember this. Our view of human rights – individual rights – is essentially based on the notion that people should be judged on the basis of what they do, not who they are. But unfortunately, in many parts of the world, people are still judged by who they are – their background, their ancestry – and not by what they do. We still have a long struggle ahead to overcome this kind of prejudice.

I greatly admire the life and work of Dr Martin Luther King. A number of years ago, Jesse Jackson came to the Netherlands to give some lectures on Dr King’s work. At the time he said: the struggle for equal rights is not effortless; it will be met with resistance. You don’t get equal rights for free; if you did, there wouldn’t be a struggle. There are vested interests that will fight against you. He also made the point that even if government has become colour-blind, society is still often far from being so. This is reflected clearly in Dr King’s work. And I think we should realise that in a country like India – where the government is making an effort to ensure equality by law and in other ways – social resistance is strong. So strong, in fact, that the government that has amended the country’s legislation is often incapable of enforcing the new laws in practice. Highlighting these realities should spur the government to action. And also give welcome support to the people trying to change these social conditions.

As you know, Maxime Verhagen and I are also the product of an equal rights movement – in our case, that of Dutch Catholics. And this was not an effortless victory either. In the 19th century the law guaranteed many freedoms, but at that time Catholics knew there were parts of Dutch society where they weren’t welcome. Achieving that breakthrough required a lengthy struggle.

We can find similar examples among ethnic and religious groups all over the world. I had the great honour of working with Max van der Stoep in the 1990s to improve the position of minorities, principally in Europe. It was often our experience that governments would run up against age-old prejudices, even governments that started off with the best of intentions to effect positive change through legislation. Long-standing antagonisms between population groups made it virtually impossible to achieve any real change in practice.

When I was a boy of about 15, still in secondary school, I went to Spain as a volunteer. I was inspired by the transformations taking place there at the time, following the death of Franco. People in the countryside were desperately poor. At that time, corporal punishment by fathers was seen as a normal part of raising children, and domestic violence by husbands against wives was common. That was then. In today's Spain same-sex marriage is sanctioned by law. Ten or fifteen years ago that would have been unthinkable. These, too, are social conditions that have been altered through struggle, unrelenting commitment, an ongoing effort. Even though it might generate friction – like when an independent jury does things that leave the members of a government scratching their heads – it's still a step in the right direction. A step that will ensure, despite everything, that conditions will be better in the future.

The equal treatment of social minorities must remain our goal. In Europe, outside Europe and throughout the world. All people, and I'm paraphrasing Dr King here, have the right to achieve their potential, regardless of their background, skin colour, social status or religious convictions. In India, this is still not the case for Dalits.

I've already said a few words about Dutch human rights policy in a rapidly changing world. Recently, at an OSCE conference, I stressed that human rights defenders would be a priority for the Netherlands in the years ahead. This decision was prompted in part by increasing pressure on human rights defenders in OSCE countries. I took pains to call attention to the position of women and the LGBT community: lesbians, gays, bisexuals and transsexuals. There is growing pressure on these groups too, on our own continent. I believe that people should have the right to make choices that allow them to live their lives as fully as possible. That starts with the freedom to be yourself and to make choices that others – including the government – must respect. I recently took the leadership of my own church to task on that front.

I hope that our new policy memorandum will see the light of day this spring, reflecting the changing conditions I've touched upon. We cannot turn a blind eye to these changes. And in that connection I would also like to offer my sincere thanks to the jury and its chair Cisca Dresselhuys for their fantastic work over the past five years. I will keep them posted about the future of the prize. And I hope they will share their experiences with us as well, so we can organise the future human rights prize in the best possible way.

Of course, I'll see to it that Mr Bharathan, the winner of this year's Tulip, receives his award from the Dutch authorities in the near future – I listened closely to the chair of the jury. I don't have any imminent plans to travel to India myself, but that is no reason to keep our honouree waiting. I imagine the Tulip will be presented to him by the Dutch embassy in India shortly. I also hope he can use the prize money to support his efforts to improve the position of Dalits. I'm sorry Mr Bharathan could not be here today and that I can't present him with the prize myself. But I don't think it's my place to interfere in an ongoing trial in India. That isn't the role of the Dutch government.

Innocent until proven guilty is the guiding principle. In that regard I welcome the jury's decision to award the prize. But as Ms Dresselhuys quite correctly said, whether I welcome the prize or not, the jury is independent and made the selection on its own. It's the jury's job to award the prize. And my job is merely to present it. Which I would have been very happy to do today for Mr Bharathan. But we will ensure that he receives his award without delay.

Thank you.