

**Africa Faith and Justice Network – 35th Anniversary  
KAS Comments (standing in for Rep. James P. McGovern)  
September 14, 2018**

My sincerest apologies that Rep. McGovern had to cancel his appearance at the last minute. He very much regrets that he is unable to be here this morning and sends his congratulations on your 35th anniversary.

I first met Rep. McGovern in the early 2000s, when I was advocating on behalf of human rights and democracy in Latin America. The organization I was working with at the time, the Washington Office on Latin America, organized two congressional delegations to Colombia that he joined, and as a result I traveled with him for a few days each time. I learned he had been a leading advocate for human rights in Central America, especially El Salvador, in the 1980s and 1990s, and he was continuing that strong advocacy in Colombia. During the nine years I lived in Colombia (2005-2014), he was the go-to member of Congress when we needed U.S. support to protect human rights defenders and as we tried to find ways forward to end the internal armed conflict in that country and the related institutionalized violence.

Then when I came back to the United States in 2014, there was a happily unexpected opportunity to work for and with him at the Tom Lantos Human Rights Commission, and I agreed to join his team. And what I immediately learned was that, while I had known him as an advocate for human rights in Latin America, people in many other parts of the world knew him as an advocate for human rights in their countries. There are many members of Congress who take up human rights issues in one or another country, often in response to constituent concerns. But there are not many members of Congress who advocate for human rights all over the world – who are go-to members on human rights across the board. Mr. McGovern is one of those very few members of Congress. During the last four years I have had the privilege of working with him to try to find ways to respond to human rights crises in places as varied as Tibet, Bahrain, Syria, Central America – and in some countries in Sub-Saharan Africa.

Mr. McGovern is Catholic, and his approach to human rights is shaped by the Church's social justice teachings. He believes in the human dignity of each and every person, and he believes that governments everywhere should do their utmost to ensure conditions that will allow all people to fulfill their promise.

To begin with, that means ending violence, and indeed the Congressman has been a strong supporter of peace processes around the world. He knows that peace is more

than laying down arms, but he also knows that laying down arms is a first crucial step in the process of building sustainable peace wherever you are in the world.

The congressman also knows that it's very hard for people to live in dignity if they are hungry. So he dedicates a lot of his time to ending hunger here in the United States and abroad. That's a big part of the reason he sits on the Agriculture Committee in the House and chairs the Nutrition Subcommittee.

Third, Mr. McGovern understands that governments have to be pressured to do the right thing. The way things get better in this world is by people speaking up and exerting pressure – whether in the streets, or by voting, or in private meetings with officials. That's of course how democracy is supposed to work, but it's also the only way anything can ever change in countries ruled by authoritarians, although the costs for people will always be much higher in that kind of regime.

So he is a strong and constant advocate for the rights of human rights defenders and civil society organizations -- and for minority communities, because any time people find themselves in the minority, on whatever basis, they are more likely to end up needing human rights protections. Human rights defenders, civil society organizations and minority communities are always his principle concern – not a country's leaders, however wonderful they may be. He concerns himself with the well-being of people and sees government as a means to that end.

The Congressman has been co-chair of the Human Rights Commission since it was created in 2008. When you review the initiatives the Commission has taken under his leadership, you will see how these principles play out.

With regard to Africa, the Commission has been a strong supporter of efforts to end internal armed conflicts throughout the region – Sudan and South Sudan are the first to come to mind. The rapidly worsening conflict in Cameroon is the most recent example.

The Commission has advocated for the strengthening of democracy throughout the region and opposed the growing tendency of African leaders, especially elected leaders, to stay in office beyond their terms – to transform themselves into leaders for life. The Commission's attention to the situation in the Democratic Republic of the Congo is an example of work on this issue.

The Commission has supported human rights defenders and journalists, and the rights of the political opposition, throughout the region. We have met with opposition

leaders and journalists personally. We have organized activities on the closing space for civil society, such as a March 2015 briefing on Kenya. And the Commission's staff coordinates the Defending Freedoms Project which provides members of Congress with opportunities to advocate for prisoners of conscience around the world. Currently the project includes prisoners from Eritrea, Rwanda and Western Sahara. In the past there were prisoners from Ethiopia, Sudan and Swaziland who have been released.

The Commission has consistently condemned human rights violations by states as well as non-state armed groups and supported efforts to ensure accountability. These are consistent themes you will see reflected in the activities we have organized on Ethiopia, Nigeria, Cameroon, Sudan, South Sudan, Eritrea, Nigeria and the Lord's Resistance Army, among others.

And finally, the Commission has sought to highlight the consequences of human rights violations within and outside the context of armed conflict and has encouraged support for humanitarian assistance to help internally displaced persons, refugees and all affected civilians.

And we have worked on thematic issues that affect Africa, even when the focus may not always have included specific African countries, such as:

- the rights of ethnic and religious minorities
- human trafficking
- accountability for genocide
- prevention of atrocities

On behalf of Congressman McGovern, I can assure you that the Commission will continue to draw attention to human rights and governance concerns in Africa, and to support all those who seek to ensure a dignified future for African peoples.

Thank you.