



**Speech by Federal President Joachim Gauck
at the event "Human Rights – A Promise with a Future" on
the 65th anniversary of the Universal Declaration
of Human Rights
on 6 December 2013
at Schloss Bellevue**

Human rights – a promise with a future. I was warned about this title. For some the word "promise" seemed too non-committal, while others wanted to be shown the facts. My instinct, though, was that I wanted to describe human rights as a promise precisely because so many millions of men and women and children around the world do not yet experience these rights as a reality, but rather as a great and unfulfilled yearning.

Ratification alone does not create justice. And the bare facts on human rights on the upcoming anniversary does not offer universal cause for celebration. The 65-year history of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights is certainly a success story, but it is one in which many chapters remain to be written. I believe – no, I am certain – that I am not alone in this conviction, especially not here today.

I would like to once again extend a special welcome to our guest of honour: High Commissioner Pillay, your presence here today is a statement in itself. But of course I know that not only you, but also many here in this room look forward keenly to the later discussion. We are, after all, united in the cause of defending and demanding human rights. We are also united in the cause of Julia Duchrow of Forum Menschenrechte, who will be sitting on the podium later. Thank you both for joining us today!

I would also like to welcome Astrid Frohloff of Reporters Without Borders, who will be leading us through this event – with the objectivity that we so value in her, but also quietly most likely contributing the extensive personal experience and many personal

memories that do not remain unheeded on an occasion such as this one.

We are also joined by a special guest, the painter Wasim Ghroui, who was born in Damascus in 1981. His canvasses record moments full of pain, moments in which people are robbed of their human dignity. These are the paintings you saw downstairs in the foyer, and you will see them again when you leave.

I also welcome Manja Doering and Jens Mondalski, actors from the GRIPS Theatre in Berlin, a theatre whose productions often bring to the stage current debates about our values, and do so in a way that impressively furthers these debates.

A welcome, too, to Anano Gokieli and Frank-Immo Zichner of the Berlin University of the Arts. The pensive and hopeful tones of their piano music will resonate harmoniously with today's theme.

Altogether, more than 150 colleagues in the fight for human rights have come together in this room today. I offer my warmest welcome to all of you!

One of the registrations for this event that we received included a very trenchant comment on human rights, which I will now quote: "What 65 years of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights means to me is that we must keep fighting for a world where all people can live without fear, in peace and in respect."

Thank you to the esteemed Dr Valladares, one of Latin America's most prominent human rights advocates, who is visiting us at the moment. I could not have put this event's most important message better myself. Please bring my greetings home with you to Honduras: I also send my regards to everyone in Latin America who is fighting for human rights!

You may have noticed that this event is intended to both thank and fortify all of you, whether you are combating discrimination in Germany or torture on distant continents. You should know that you have an ally here in Schloss Bellevue.

I myself was eight years old when the United Nations adopted the Universal Declaration of Human Rights. As a child at that time, I knew nothing of the concept of state repression, but I was to learn soon enough. A short while later, I experienced what it means when a loved family member, an innocent person, is taken away, vanishes, and then after years of uncertainty finally returns with a gravely injured body and soul. Such was the man who stood on our doorstep one day, my father.

Anyone who has ever felt such powerlessness does not want to allow it ever to happen again, does not want to see it anywhere – neither in their own family nor anywhere else.

The most successful advocate for human rights is within us – it is our inner conviction. The past has taught us that the greatest progress has often come after the most atrocious transgressions. The concept of human rights dates back far further than 65 years. But it was only after the great break with civilisation that came in the Second World War bringing with it wholesale murder and the Holocaust, that an international alliance was forged in 1948 and able to agree on a common catalogue of human rights.

Consensus had not yet been reached at that point, but at least there were no opposing voices: 48 countries voted in favour of the declaration, while eight abstained.

The declaration's proponents hailed from just about every corner of the earth or – as the United Nations would put it today – “regional group”: China, Cuba, Egypt, Ethiopia, France, Iran, Pakistan, Syria, Turkey, the United States and Venezuela, to name just a few.

Walter Kälin once described the declaration as a Copernican revolution in international rights. I believe the comparison holds true to this day. The Universal Declaration of Human Rights is an expression of an altered worldview in the modern era.

After the horrors and mass murders of the Second World War, the international community needed a new foundation, not only intellectually and politically but also morally. The protection of individuals and their inalienable rights, regardless of ethnic background, religion, race or gender, had become vital.

At first the Universal Declaration of Human Rights was “only” a declaration of intent, not a binding law, but it was one of the greatest promises ever formulated in human history. And it was not long before it was incorporated into the national law of many countries. Equality and freedom, civil, political, economic, cultural and social rights: the work done in 1948 laid the foundation of so much of what we find in highly differentiated form today. That is why the history of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights is for me in part a story of the strength of human political willpower.

The 1948 document was initially a focal point of crystallisation, but it quickly became something more. It became a precious source out of which many decisions flowed. The World Conferences on Human Rights in Tehran in 1968 and Vienna in 1993 also referred to the Universal Declaration. And not least, it is thanks to this document and its ongoing development that the Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights exists – Ms Pillay, it means a great deal to me to be able to look back on this history together with you today.

We have met before during my term in office, at the United Nations Human Rights Council in Geneva. This was the first stop on the human rights-focused trip that later led me to Strasbourg and The

Hague. At every stop on this journey, I had many opportunities to hold personal conversations with men and women who had not merely thought about human rights issues and human rights violations, but had experienced such violations personally – people who were marked by these experiences. Many of their stories were difficult to endure. I am thinking of Shin Dong-hyuk, who described to me the torture he suffered in a North Korean labour camp and how he escaped from the camp. I am also thinking of the Syrian families whom I recently visited in the German town of Friedland, the first refugee families to arrive here from Syria seeking protection and survival.

On a day like today, we owe it to these people to ask why the political will to prevent human rights abuses has so often failed in the past 65 years. Where was this will entirely absent, and where was it thwarted? Why have both individual states and the international community, despite all our declarations of intent, been unable to prevent genocide, poison gas attacks and orgies of violence? Too often when it comes to human rights, our words still lie far afield of our deeds.

The reasons for this are complex. They can include ignorance, cold-bloodedness, inability to cope – all of this has been seen in many conflicts around the world, and sometimes also at negotiating tables when the implementation of human rights is debated.

One of the most difficult controversies is that which continues to surround the concept of cultural relativism and the accusation that a claim to the encompassing validity of human rights is a gateway to the erosion of global diversity. When such arguments are made, the activists of Terre des Femmes retort that genital mutilation and forced marriage are not an expression of diversity. – Standing before you today at Schloss Bellevue, I want to express what I was deeply convinced of even in times of repression: the universality of human rights, the guiding principle of the 1948 Declaration, must be defended in and for every culture!

The past few decades have shown us especially emphatically that human rights develop a dynamic strength in the most divergent of cultural contexts.

Everywhere where human dignity is wounded, where injustice, persecution, violence, and abasement constrict or even destroy the bodies and souls of human beings, in all of these places human rights become the object of hope and longing. Udo Di Fabio recently put it cogently: “Either human rights are universal, or they don’t exist.”

What exactly the constitutive elements of human rights are is a question that we cannot answer completely or conclusively or without any contradictions. Certainly, both religious convictions and those rooted in the Enlightenment have fed into their development, including

ideas of natural law as well as an awareness of the constantly increasing role and dignity of the individual. Irrespective of these different grounds, however, we agree on one thing: there is no other prerequisite for these rights than being human. Everyone who is human has human rights. This conviction continues to prove itself as a powerful benchmark for the humanisation of our world.

Article 1 of the 1948 Declaration states: "All human beings are born free and equal in dignity and rights."

Today in 2013, is there a strong enough political will to stand up for this conviction? Or is its force dwindling amidst the broad spectrum of various special interests?

By the way, I am not an uncompromising moralist. I know that strategic considerations can make compromises necessary and sensible at times. But if we do not want policy to be seen as duplicitous or even cynical, these compromises must be justified, they must be weighed carefully, they must be communicated to the public and they must be answered for.

We know how human rights can be slighted and marginalised when, for example, economic interests are at stake. We are also familiar with attempts to limit or deny human rights for ostensibly religious, cultural, ideological, ethical, national or nationalistic reasons. And we have seen that foreign policy frequently grants national interests precedence over human rights policy.

These days, as we gaze spellbound at Kyiv, we can see the huge relevance of the right to freedom of opinion and assembly right here in Europe. One thing is clear: only a political solution can resolve the present confrontation – violence certainly cannot. Only through dialogue can this society, however divided it may currently appear to be, find its own independent path.

When realpolitik stands in relation to human rights, agreement about solutions will not always be achieved, it will perhaps not always be possible to achieve it, neither within one's own country nor internationally. Answers to complex questions of international law such as humanitarian intervention or the responsibility to protect do not always meet with consensus. And it is not only between democracies and authoritarian regimes that differences emerge. Recently we have also witnessed profound differences of opinion among friends and close allies. On the one hand, it is in our preeminent interest for our security architecture to be firmly connected with the United States. On the other hand, we cannot and do not want to remain silent when human rights are violated by our friends – even knowing, as we do, that far graver human rights violations are occurring elsewhere.

When Amnesty International start their annual international letter-writing marathon today, there will probably once again be voices

of disbelief: what can one little letter do, how can it change the world? Others will look on the Internet at previous years' examples and recognise that protests in which many individuals join together to focus on one moment and one issue can indeed act as a lever.

Jean-Claude Roger Mbede of Cameroon, who was sentenced to three years' imprisonment for homosexuality, has such a campaign to thank for his early release from prison. And even in cases where expressions of solidarity cannot remedy the situation, they still often have an impact. Ana Montilla, the wife of human rights activist Juan Herrera of the Dominican Republic, is quoted on the Amnesty website saying, "I received the best Christmas present in three years since the loss of my husband, with all these cards, notes and Christmas postcards."

Ms Çaliskan, I hope that your project will achieve such moments once again in 2013. Perhaps some of the members of the press here in this room today can help spread the word about the letter-writing marathon.

As you know, empathy cannot be decreed in clauses. But for those who are alert and sensitive, it opens up a path to their fellow human beings.

Have you heard of a Saudi girl named Wadjda? Her determined quest for a green bicycle may have set into motion more change than many a conference resolution. Her bicycle from the film 'Wadjda' has become a vehicle of freedom, an embodiment of independence, a symbol of the happiness of self-determination.

I am of course familiar with the reasonable question of how we can provide leverage for freedoms great and small – and for what cause citizen Gauck would venture action. My banner might, for example, read: "Credible human rights policy includes sanctions!"

That is why I emphatically praise the work of the European Court of Human Rights in Strasbourg. The fact that it is already virtually drowning in a flood of applications reflects just how sorely necessary its existence is.

It would be wonderful if everybody around the world had such a place to turn to when they were denied justice at home! We hope that such a time will come, that people in every country will someday have available such a point of contact, decreasing the significance of an international court of human rights. That would be a tremendous gain for all of us.

Now on to another topic: the creation of the International Criminal Court has shown us that the gravest crimes, those which concern the international community as a whole, are now also being taken up by the international community. Those responsible are being held accountable. I am confident that the same fundamental principle

applies to human rights abuses which lie below the thresholds of genocide, war crimes and crimes against humanity: they must no longer be passively accepted.

Germany must rise to meet its own demands. What I mean here is values-guided policy which treats respect for, protection of, and ensurance of human rights not as negotiable goods, but as the very goal of policy.

When we discuss demands later, I will listen to your concrete proposals very closely. Raising awareness of abuses is one thing; developing concepts and organising majorities is quite another thing, and a highly significant one.

Bellevue, where we are meeting, is neither a parliamentary nor a government building. But I hope that what we have here is nonetheless a critical – where necessary, self-critical – and constructive forum for human rights.

Long-term experience has shown us that it is helpful and necessary for governments not to stand alone as they weigh up choices between the demands of realpolitik and the principles of ethics and human rights. I am pleased that our civil society has produced so many engaged individuals and NGOs who can help ensure that we never forget the perspective of the victims, of the disadvantaged.

The extent to which human rights can be implemented also depends on the attention, advice and persistence of civil society. Without the brave, sometimes utterly fearless women and allies of NGOs, the implementation of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights would not be where it is today. All of you who work with NGOs remain indispensable as a corrective and as providers of impetus. Thank you for this achievement. Whatever project you are engaged with, I encourage you to pursue your work tirelessly. Remain unrelenting, and if necessary uncomfortable! And if your contemporaries say, "human rights aren't my problem", insist on an end to their complacency. This is a fallacy, as history shows.

As our future is debated, you will always have me standing by your side.

That is my promise to you today.