

Press Releases: Secretary of State Michael R. Pompeo At the International Women of Courage (IWOC) Awards Ceremony

Remarks

Michael R. Pompeo

Secretary of State

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MS PRYOR: Good morning. Welcome to the Department of State. We are honored and delighted that you have joined us today for the 13th annual Secretary of State's International Women of Courage Awards. This award has recognized more than 120 remarkable women from 65 countries since its first inception. And I

would like to extend a special welcome to the members of the diplomatic corps in the audience, ambassadors, and distinguished guests. The United States is proud to honor these leaders as part of our commitment to advancing the status of women and children around the world.

Each awardee's story is an inspiring – inspiring – reminder of how individuals can and do make a difference. Taken together, they provide a powerful message of courage and leadership. Your excellencies, ladies and gentlemen, cherished friends and colleagues, it is my distinct pleasure now to welcome the 2019 International Women of Courage Award recipients. (Applause.)

And now, please welcome the Secretary of State of the United States of America, Michael Pompeo, accompanied by the First Lady of the United States, Melania Trump. (Applause.)

SECRETARY POMPEO: Thank you. Thank you, Pam. And good morning, everyone. It's truly my honor to host this International Women of Courage Awards for the first time, and I'm glad you're all here to celebrate this incredible group of honorees.

Last year, right around this time, dozens of women across Iran took to city streets to protest the law requiring them to wear the hijab in public at all times. In an exercise of their freedom, these courageous women removed their hijabs in front of cameras, their faces clearly visible. They did so knowing the brutality of their leaders. And sure enough, a year ago tomorrow, on International Women's Day, state police swarmed their protest. Many women were arrested. Some faced torture and beatings in jail. At least one was sentenced to 20 years behind bars, and others were forced to flee abroad. The plight of these Iranian women is just one example of the danger facing many women and of the courage so often shown in the face of it.

We're here today to honor women of courage from all around the world who are standing tall in the face of extraordinary adversity. This year's recipients include an anti-terror investigator from Djibouti who has put away numerous al-Shabaab terrorists; a Bangladeshi Rohingya lawyer who fights the abuse of trafficking of the Rohingya women and girls; an investigative journalist in Montenegro exposing corruption and organized crime who has been attacked multiple times, yet still continues her work; a Tanzanian lawyer who fights for human rights for women and girls and advocates for more female candidates for public office; a nun from Ireland who helped start a girls' boarding school in South Sudan, which has become a beacon of hope for girls who might otherwise be denied education and forced to enter early marriages; a chief of the women's police department in Jordan who's been recognized for her work with victims of domestic violence and sexual abuse; a leader of a nationwide NGO in Egypt that serves the most impoverished urban slums and rural villages; an activist in Burma who has worked her entire life to support ethnic community displaced by the decades-long civil war; a crusader against child exploitation in Sri Lanka who offers pro bono legal services to child victims of crimes; and finally, Peru's national coordinator for environmental prosecutors, who fights multibillion dollar criminal enterprises that fuel corruption, human trafficking, and destruction of natural resources in the

Amazon.

Please join me again with a round of applause. (Applause.)

It's also important that we pause to recognize and honor those women who paid the ultimate price for their courageous efforts, women like Kateryna Handziuk of Ukraine, who dedicated her journalism career to uncovering and calling out corruption. Even after a brutal acid attack, which ultimately claimed her life three months later, Kateryna refused to be silenced. From her hospital bed, she demanded justice, setting a powerful example for her fellow citizens.

Here at the State Department, stories like these motivate and inspire us. Our colleagues in the Office of Global Women's Issues work to integrate women's empowerment into our foreign policy, and our Bureau of Educational and Cultural Affairs assists in the push for inclusive, quality education for girls and women all around the world. And at USAID, we're working on a new plan with the goal to empower at least 50 million women across developing countries. It's called the Women's Global Development and Prosperity Initiative. We're very proud of these efforts here at the State Department, but we acknowledge that work remains to ensure that participation of women exists in all spaces of public life and all across the world.

Women of courage exist everywhere. Most will never be honored. They face different challenges, but challenges that still matters. I've personally, of course, had this experience as well. I've witnessed women service in my time in the military and have been inspired by them in my personal life. My mother, too, was a woman of courage. She was born in rural Kansas. She helped make ends meet while raising three kids. She never managed to get to college, but made sure that each of us had enormous opportunity. You all know women like this. They're strong. She was dedicated to providing opportunity for me and my siblings, and we didn't appreciate the sacrifices that she had endured. And she also raised me to be really smart; I met another courageous woman, Susan, my wife, who's here with me today. (Laughter and applause.)

We all know – I know – from a lifetime of experience that women of courage exist everywhere and they're needed everywhere. That's one reason I've appointed women to dozens of senior leadership roles here at the place I am privileged to work. From under secretaries to assistant secretaries to non-career ambassadorships, we know here we can't succeed without empowering women worldwide, and that means we need to make sure that we have women empowered at our department worldwide.

And now it's my honor to welcome our distinguished guest speaker today, a woman of incredible power and courage, a woman who has been a powerful advocate in her own right. Since becoming First Lady, she's been increasingly outspoken against the enslavement of human trafficking and sexual abuse of women and girls all around the globe. I know she will continue to be an influential leader, an influential voice who inspires future women leaders like herself all around the world. Please join me in welcoming the First Lady of the United States of America, Melania Trump. (Applause.)

(The First Lady gives remarks.)

MS PRYOR: Thank you. And now, ladies and gentlemen, it is time for the presentation of the awards. Razia Sultana. Razia Sultana of Bangladesh is being honored for her fearless efforts to defend the Rohingya community in Burma, conducting human rights advocacy on behalf of Rohingya refugees and documenting systematic sexual violence against women and girls. (Applause.)

Naw K'nyaw Paw. Naw K'nyaw Paw of Burma is being honored for her brave efforts to condemn the military-led violence against the Rohingya people and selflessly working to improve the lives of women and children in conflict-afflicted communities. (Applause.)

Moumina Houssein Darar. Moumina Darar of Djibouti is being honored for her acute investigative skills that have led to the disruption of terrorist attacks, perseverance in committing to work in a male-dominated field despite abuse, and determination in standing up for the local community. (Applause.)

Mama Maggie. (Applause.) Mama Maggie of Egypt is being honored for her visionary commitment to serve the lives of the poor and forgotten in her community, realizing the value of those seeking vocational training in order to contribute to society, and providing economic salvation and spiritual direction for impoverished children in her country. (Applause.)

Sister Orla Treacy. Sister Treacy of Ireland is being honored for her noble efforts to address the plight of girls in a region besieged by conflict; commitment to provide school for girls being forced into early marriage and denied an education; and compassion for teaching and pastoral service. (Applause.)

Colonel Khalida al-Twal. Colonel Khalida al-Twal of Jordan is being honored for her steadfast leadership in advancing women, peace, and security; addressing a diverse range of issues on behalf of victims of domestic, physical, social, sexual violence, refugees, and family protection. (Applause.)

Olivera Lakic. Olivera Lakic of Montenegro is being honored for her dedication as an investigative journalist and a galvanizing symbol for media reform who refuses to back down in her quest to expose stories about crime and corruption, even in the face of threats to herself and her family. (Applause.)

Flor de Maria Vega Zapata. Flor de Maria Vega is from Peru and is being honored for tireless and visionary efforts to spark change in Peru's environmental enforcement efforts, defying threats aimed to derail her work, and promoting environmental stewardship to protect Peru's natural resources and the communities that depend on them. (Applause.)

Marini de Livera. Marini de Livera of Sri Lanka is being honored for her dedication and pro bono legal work on behalf of women and child victims of crime, defense of children in orphanages, and the innovative use of visual arts and street theater to promote legal literacy. (Applause.)

Anna Henga. Anna Henga from Tanzania is being honored for her groundbreaking efforts in coordinating Tanzania's anti-female genital mutilation coalition, defense of the rights of women in the Massai communities, and encouraging women's political participation. (Applause.)

MS PRYOR: Thank you, thank you. Now please join me in another round of applause, and as we bring up a speaker to speak on behalf. So you may be seated, and we will bring out Naw K'nyaw Paw. Naw K'nyaw Paw, again, from Burma, is going to speak on behalf of all of the awardees in this group. (Applause.)

MS PAW: Thank you. Excellency, ladies and gentlemen, good morning. It is an honor and privilege to be with these courageous women and the team at this event. I would like to thank the U.S. Department of State, Mrs. Trump, Secretary of State Mike Pompeo, and all who gather here for this honor.

As I stand with these amazing award recipients, I am both awed and humbled. We have many courageous women in Burma, and when I look at this group, I realize just how much we can accomplish when we are not afraid and we work together. My fellow recipients fight for and serve the neediest across the globe. Sister Orla, she is educate girls in South Sudan. Colonel Khalida helped people like me in Jordan. Olivera writes the truth in Montenegro, even though she's been threatened and attacked. Very courageous. And Flor protect environment in Peru. Marini protect women and children in Sri Lanka. Anna defends human rights in Tanzania. Sister Razia documenting human rights violation of Rohingya. And Moumina bring the rule of law to Djibouti. And finally, Mama Maggie educated the poorest in Egypt.

This group touches every part of our lives all over the world. I can only hope to carry on their images, having met them, and inspire me to do more. I want to thank every of you for what you do each day, and for showing me what unbelievable things can accomplish by courageous women, and for inspire me to reach higher and further.

I was born displaced and I spent my entire childhood either running or in refugee camps. Imagine sending your six-years-old girl in Thai village to go to school because it was not safe in your village. Imagine being an 11-year-old girl coming home, see your village empty, family gone, being fled, and then spending days wandering from settlement to settlement looking for your family. I was that six-years-old girl, and I was that 11-year-old girl as well.

At that time, the Burma army burnt and destroyed more than 3,500 villages in southeast Burma and slaughter many thousands of people. The brutalities continues today. My reality as a little Karen girl is sadly still the reality for many of the children in Burma today.

I have been working with the Karen Women's Organization, KWO, for 20 years. KWO has more than 60,000 members in refugee camps in Thailand, in internally displaced people camp in Karen State, and villages across southeast Burma. We work every day to provide protections to women who suffer from violence, and increase the voice and power to the women. We have built our capacities and

now have delivered an education to women, people with disabilities, young children, and newborn babies. We also have a variety of leadership roles and developments for the women to act on our own behalf.

It has changed our community, but of course, this work will never be complete, certainly not until we have true peace in Burma and indigenous rights over our land, our education, and our culture. Our people, including women and children, have been suffering at the hands of the Burma army for over 70 years. The Burma army continue attack us until today. In 2004, KWO release a report shattering silence, highlighting Burma army's sexual abuse to Karen women. A few years later, we released two more reports, *State of Terror*, *Walking Amongst Sharp Knives*, both documenting Burma army abuses to the Karen women.

Then in 2017, the world watched in horror as the Burmese army unleashed unspeakable crime, and this time against the Rohingya women. Thousand of rapes have been documented from one ethnic nationality to another. And still these men run the country and control the lives of our people. I beg the world to take action and to bring these men to justice. (Applause.)

Our hearts are with Rohingya women. We know what the Burma army is. We also know many other women in other ethnic areas continue to suffer at their hands. The Rohingya are not alone. All indigenous ethnic army – women are either vulnerable to attacks or currently being attacked by the Burma army. It will not end until the world take action.

The peace process has stalled. The removal of the sanctions has not brought us greater respect for human rights. It is still unsafe to return nor speak the truth in my country. We need the world to act as a united community to implement target sanctions against military and to have a body outside Burma to bring justice and to hold general accountable to these extreme human right violations.

We are very grateful to the U.S. Government for your longstanding support of refugees. We need this aid to continue and increase so people can remain safely in refugee camp until our ethnic rights and indigenous identity is being respected. We know there are needs all over the world. We hope the world does not forget us and those around us.

I want to again thank you for this wonderful honor. I'd like to close with a poem by Rupi Kaur: "I stand on the sacrifices of a million women before me, thinking what can I do to make this mountain taller so the women after me can see further." Thank you very much. (Applause.)

MS PRYOR: Thank you. Thank you, Naw K'nyaw Paw. We will not forget you.

And now, is it my pleasure to introduce Assistant Secretary Marie Royce to provide closing remarks. (Applause.)

ASSISTANT SECRETARY ROYCE: Good morning, distinguished guests. And thank you, Mrs. Trump and Secretary Pompeo for joining us today. On behalf of the Bureau of Educational and Cultural Affairs, it's my great pleasure to be with you in

celebration of this year's remarkable International Women of Courage.

To the awardees, I know I speak for everyone gathered here: You have our deepest admiration and appreciation for your commitment, passion, and sacrifice. You are making a difference. And I hope that today reflects our deepest gratitude for your contributions in your communities and beyond.

I was so pleased to meet each of you, earlier this week, and hear of your incredible impact. We have a shared commitment to your work and aspirations for the positive change you are fostering at home and around the world. As President Trump has noted, by investing in women around the world, we're investing in our families; we're investing in prosperity, and we're investing in peace.

At last year's IWOC ceremony, we acknowledged Roya Sadat for her work in Afghanistan. During an event on International Women of Courage program, she described peace not as just building a project but rather building a culture. Today, you join the illustrious ranks of courageous women from around the world who have received this recognition and who work towards building that culture every day.

And I'd like to take the opportunity to explain to our guests a little more about what lies in store after this morning's ceremony. The awardees are taking part in an International Visitor Leadership Program – an IVLP, as we call it – which is a professional program, a professional exchange program sponsored by the Bureau of Educational and Cultural Affairs. After this very exciting week in Washington, D.C., awardees will meet professionals in their respected fields and some of America's greatest towns and cities, including Atlanta, Boston, Chicago, Detroit, Los Angeles, Minneapolis, Pensacola, Portland, Seattle, and San Diego.

Since the inception of the International Women of Courage Award in 2007, the IVLP has hosted awardees in 36 cities across the United States. International Women of Courage meet and share ideas with Americans who work on similar issues, from increasing international security to advancing the rule of law and human rights, to combatting gender-based violence and promoting education, entrepreneurship, and women's economic empowerment. These new relationships with Americans will lead to ongoing cooperation in finding solutions to global challenges here in the United States and in countries around the world.

Alumna of the 2017 International Women of Courage program said, "Courage is contagious." This year's honorees are living proof that she was right. As they embark on their IVLP travels, I know they will inspire Americans. They need to be equally impacted in their endeavors. And that courage will give heart to a new generation that brings about positive change and peace.

And I'd like to conclude by saying to you, the 2019 International Women of Courage, may we each aspire to be models of courage in service to each other, in emulation of your example. You are an inspiration to us all. Thank you again for your very courageous efforts, and now, I'd like to invite you to gather for a photo on stage here with Secretary Pompeo and Mrs. Trump. Thank

you. (Applause.)

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