

Remarks by Ambassador Susan E. Rice, U.S. Permanent Representative to the United Nations, during an LGBT Core Group Event Marking Human Rights Day, ECOSOC Chamber

December 10, 2010

Thank you all very very much. It's really great to be with you here today.

Friends and colleagues, we're gathered because of a great victory for the cause of liberty. Sixty-two years ago today, on December 10, 1948, in the cold of a winter night in Paris, the ambassadors to the United Nations General Assembly voted to adopt the Universal Declaration of Human Rights. Paris was then still bruised and battered from the Nazi occupation. The world was still scarred and shaken from the bloodiest and most savage war in history. Yet, when the Declaration came before the delegates, it passed without a single dissenting vote.

Today, we do more than salute the wisdom of Eleanor Roosevelt and her fellow drafters, who added the Universal Declaration to the canon of great human rights charters. Together, we recommit ourselves to making liberty real for all human beings, regardless of race, creed, gender, or sexual orientation. We reaffirm today our common humanity. We celebrate the different ways in which we have been created. And we push ever forward towards new frontiers for human freedom, human dignity, and human rights.

I'm particularly honored that some of the brave activists on the front lines of that struggle are here with us today. The United Nation's theme for Human Rights Day this year is "human rights defenders worldwide who act to end discrimination." We're joined by determined and defiant men and women who have suffered persecution, harassment, and outright violence simply because of their sexual orientation or gender identity. You have shown great courage and conviction in the face of bigotry and intolerance, and I'm deeply moved to be here with you.

The story of my country is, in part, a story of the expanding boundaries of rights and dignity—of the way that discrimination and prejudice have been countered by acceptance and equality. I feel this deeply and I feel it very personally. Even at a time of profound challenges at home and abroad, we dare not give up on the great causes of equality and fundamental rights. And that includes the pursuit of full and equal rights for the millions of people in this country and around the world who are gay, lesbian, bisexual, or transgender.

We've made real gains in the past decades, but the pace of progress remains too slow. As President Obama has said and I quote, "There are still laws to change, and there are still hearts to open. There are still fellow citizens, perhaps neighbors, even loved ones—good and decent people—who hold fast to outworn arguments and old attitudes; who fail to see your families like their families; who would deny you the rights most Americans take for granted." But, as we can never forget, change comes from human agency. It comes from

people—like the human rights defenders with us here today—people who refuse to give up and who refuse to move to the back of the bus. It comes from the leaders, the activists, and the ordinary men and women who believe that all human beings have equal worth, equal dignity, equal consequence—and equal rights.

This conviction underpins the significant steps that the United States has taken over the past two decades to advance the human rights of all of those who are gay, lesbian, bisexual, and transgender.

First of all, I am particularly proud to say that the United States is the newest member of the LGBT Core Group here at the United Nations. That decision was long overdue, and it gives me great personal satisfaction to sit before you representing the United States today.

I'm also particularly proud that one of the very first decisions our new Administration made at the United Nations was to join the General Assembly's Statement on Sexual Orientation and Gender Identity, which condemns violence, harassment, and discrimination based on sexual orientation and gender identity.

This past July, the United States, working with other delegations, won NGO consultative status for the International Gay and Lesbian Human Rights Commission. That made it the first LGBT group from the United States to secure this status—and one of only a few LGBT groups worldwide. Some didn't want to see LGBT rights recognized at the United Nations. But with others, we rolled up our sleeves and we got it done.

The State Department's annual Human Rights Report now includes a section on how LGBT persons are treated in every country. And last summer, the State Department announced a new grant to provide emergency aid to some human rights defenders, either because they work on LGBT issues or because they are lesbian, gay, bisexual or transgender themselves.

Even as we work to support LGBT persons abroad, we are leading by example and pushing to ensure that their rights are fully realized here at home.

Last year, President Obama signed into law the Matthew Shepard and James Byrd Jr. Hate Crimes Prevention Act, which made it a federal crime to violently attack someone because of their sexual orientation or gender identity. Law enforcement officials in this country now have the tools to respond to gay-bashing and related violent acts wherever they occur in the United States. And for the first time, the words "sexual orientation" and "gender identity" became part of U.S. law to provide explicit protection to LGBT individuals.

Last summer, President Obama issued a presidential memorandum extending, to the extent permissible under current law, federal benefits to the same-sex domestic partners of U.S. government employees. Secretary of State Clinton extended benefits for overseas State

Department employees, and this act, I'm proud to say, has served as a model for similar changes for LGBT Americans working for the UN Secretariat.

The Administration renewed the Ryan White CARE Act, which provides lifesaving medical services and support to Americans living with HIV/AIDS. We've eliminated the discriminatory ban that kept people out of the United States based on their HIV status. The Department of Housing and Urban Development is opening core housing programs to all Americans, regardless of sexual orientation and gender identity. And President Obama has appointed more LGBT officials to his government than the previous two Administrations combined.

But we have got a great deal more work to do.

Around the world, laws that criminalize gay relationships don't just violate human rights. They hinder social cohesion, economic development, and public health. They reduce trust and cooperation among nations. So the United States will work together with our fellow Core Group members to urge countries that still have such laws to repeal them. And I hope we will all work together to develop a sustained, serious plan of action to decriminalize homosexuality around this world that we share.

Here at the United Nations, like many of you, I was incensed by the recent vote in the General Assembly's Third Committee, which eliminated any mention of lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender individuals from a resolution condemning extrajudicial killing of vulnerable people around the world. We fought hard for that reference when it came to a Committee vote, and we lost. But we're not done yet. The resolution now goes to the full General Assembly. For countries that voted in the Committee to keep the reference to sexual orientation, we thank you. For countries that haven't yet done so, we urge you to join us. And for countries that have supported this reference in the past but changed course this year, we urge you to stand again with us and with all vulnerable people around the world at risk of violence. We are going to fight to restore the reference to sexual orientation. We're going to stand firm on this basic principle. And we intend to win.

At home, President Obama continues to support repeal of the so-called Defense of Marriage Act, so that committed gay couples can have the same rights and responsibilities as any married couple. We must protect the rights of all families by securing their adoption rights, ending employment discrimination, and ensuring that federal LGBT employees receive equal benefits.

And then, of course, there's "Don't Ask, Don't Tell." That law violates fundamental American principles of fairness, integrity, and equality—and President Obama remains fully committed to working with Congress to repeal it. Like the President, I was extremely disappointed that yesterday, yet another filibuster prevented the Senate from moving forward with the National Defense Authorization Act. That important legislation had the bipartisan support of a clear majority of Senators, but it was blocked by a minority of Senators. This erodes our security, as well as our principles. In this time of war and

challenge, all brave and patriotic Americans who are gay or lesbian and want to serve in their country's armed forces should be able to do so openly. We only weaken our national security and diminish our military readiness by depriving ourselves of the service of patriots determined to defend the country they love. Yesterday's disappointing vote is by no means the end of our efforts, and our Administration is urging the Senate to revisit this important issue during the ongoing lame-duck session. President Obama strongly believes that it's time for this discriminatory policy to finally end.

Let me conclude by saying, as both a public official and a mother, a word about another key area: the bullying and the taunting that our gay, lesbian, bisexual, and transgender youth sometimes are forced to endure in school and elsewhere. That bullying can range from casual slurs to relentless torment—and in some tragic cases, it has even driven young people to take their own lives. Such bigotry isn't some normal part of growing up. It's vicious, and it's wrong. Every student ought to be able to go to school without fear. And so our Administration is working hard on a national anti-bullying strategy. Too many of our kids are hurting, and so we are working to ensure that for young Americans who've been picked on or singled out, that it does in fact get better.

Ladies and gentlemen, some still believe that the different ways in which we were made can be used as pretexts to divide us. But I believe deeply in what President Obama calls America's "patchwork heritage" and that it is a profound source of our strength.

Today as we celebrate the birthday of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, we must recall that its drafters insisted that it be truly universal—that its reach encompass each and every human soul. But while those rights are universally held, they are not yet universally enjoyed. We must not rest until the expanding circle of liberty and equality takes in all of us, gay and straight alike. We must all do our part, here at the United Nations and in our own countries, to ensure that no gay man need fear persecution, that no lesbian need fear discrimination, and that no transgender person need fear assault.

It's a powerful legacy that we celebrate today. And together, we renew our commitment to fight against discrimination in any guise and to embrace diversity in all of its forms. The struggle is not yet over, but I am confident that our victory is assured.

Thank you so much for your continued commitment and your extraordinary leadership.