

**AMERICA AS A CHAMPION OF HUMAN RIGHTS
THE DETENTION OF GAMBIAN JOURNALIST EBRIMA MANNEH
SENATOR RICHARD DURBIN**

**July 30, 2008
Prepared Remarks**

Mr./Mme President, America has long been a champion and source of hope around the world for those suffering human rights violations – those holed up in dictators’ prisons, those fighting for press and political freedoms, those bravely standing up to tyranny or injustice.

Many of those who have suffered, such as Vaclav Havel and Nelson Mandela, or continue to suffer this fate, such as Aung San Suu Kyi, are well-known to us. Sadly, for each one of them, there are many other, lesser known heroes being detained or harassed all over the world simply for wanting basic human freedoms.

Through our annual human rights reporting at the State Department, our diplomacy, and steady public pressure on basic human rights, the U.S. has traditionally been a source of hope for those being illegally detained or persecuted.

We should never forget what this kind of attention and pressure can accomplish and what kind of strength it provides for those being detained.

Take for example, Ngawang Sangdrol, a Tibetan nun who was detained and tortured for peacefully expressing her belief in Tibetan independence. She was freed after 12 years of imprisonment following immense public pressure. After her release she said,

- “I have been overwhelmed by the outpouring of love and support ... I am deeply touched to learn that many individuals, organizations, and governments ... have worked towards my release. It is very clear to me that I have been released and allowed to come out to the free world for medical treatment and to enjoy my freedom because of international concern.”

Or, Gurbandurdy Durdykuliev, a political activist from Turkmenistan who in 2004 was seized and forced into a psychiatric hospital by the country’s ruling dictator.

His crime – requesting permission for a peaceful political rally.

He was released a few years later just ten days after 54 members of Congress sent a letter to the Turkmen government about his case.

We should listen and act upon the appeal made by Aung San Suu Kyi, who has remained under house arrest in Burma for most of the last 19 years:

- “Those fortunate enough to live in societies where they are entitled to full political rights can reach out to help the less fortunate in other parts of our troubled planet.... Please use your liberty to promote ours.”

I realize we must also work to address our own recent shortcomings by unequivocally renouncing torture and by closing the detention facility in Guantanamo – and we will continue to work toward ending these shameful legacies.

At the same time, we must continue to speak out in support of those imprisoned for advocating basic freedoms around the world.

Many of us on both sides of the aisle have been arguing that America’s strength resonates not only from its military power but from the power of its ideas and inspiration, the power of its values and hope, the power of its generosity and diplomacy – its smart power.

Sadly, I worry that a measure of this leadership, of this inspiration, and of this uniquely American hope has been lost in recent years.

Accordingly, today I want focus the Senate’s attention on a tragic story from the small west African nation of The Gambia.

Chief Ebrima Manneh was a reporter for the Gambian newspaper, the Daily Observer. He was allegedly detained in July 2006 by plainclothes police officers thought to have been from the Gambian National Intelligence Agency after he tried to republish a BBC report critical of President Yahya Jammeh.

He has been held incommunicado, without charge or trial, for two long years. Amnesty International considers him a prisoner of conscience and has called for his immediate release.

I agree.

Recent reports suggest he is being held at the Fatoto Police Station in eastern Gambia. In July 2007, he was also reportedly escorted by the members of the Gambian Police Intervention Unit to the Royal Victoria hospital in the capital for high blood pressure treatment.

Yet despite repeated attempts by Manneh’s father and fellow journalists, including the Committee to Protect Journalists, to seek information on Mr. Manneh, the Gambian government continues to deny any involvement in his arrest or knowledge of his whereabouts.

My direct request to the Gambian Embassy here in Washington has also been met with shameful silence.

Last month in Nigeria, the Community Court of Justice of the Economic Community of West African States declared the arrest and detention of Mr. Manneh illegal and ordered Gambian officials to release him immediately.

And yet the Gambian government ignored this court's ruling as well – even though this court has jurisdiction for human rights cases in the Gambia.

Is the Gambian government so afraid of one of its own reporters that it cannot even acknowledge his detention?

I say to President Jammeh: Release this reporter. Let him return to his family.

Sadly, Mr. Manneh's case is not alone in the Gambia. In December 2004, a critic of President Jammeh, and press freedom advocate, Deyda Hydera was shot and killed. His murder has yet to be solved or investigated.

The government has also enacted laws muzzling the press and imposing mandatory prison sentences for media owners if convicted of publishing defamatory or seditious material – all part of a larger deterioration of basic freedoms in the Gambia.

Mr./Mme President, the United States needs to be a forceful advocate for these kinds of blatant human rights abuses. Doing so is not only the right thing to do, but it is the smart thing to do in terms of our engagement abroad and in demonstrating our American values.