# U.N. Secretary General Holds His Tongue on Human Rights Violations

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Last February, U.N. Secretary General Antonio Guterres traveled to Cairo to outline his vision for peace in the Arab world in a major speech. His advisors privately urged him to signal U.N. concerns about rampant human rights violations by the Egyptian government, and included a brief passage in his speech highlighting the importance of civil liberties.

It never got uttered.

The omission provided early insight into a U.N. leader who has chosen to tread lightly on human rights issues as he seeks to carve out a role for himself as a potential peacemaker around the world. In meetings with influential foreign autocrats, from Egyptian President Abdel Fattah el-Sisi to Saudi King Salman bin Abdulaziz al Saud, Guterres has shown an aversion to delivering stern lectures about crackdowns on journalists and human rights advocates.

“He doesn’t talk about these things; he doesn’t like bringing them up,” said one European ambassador based at the United Nations. “It’s part of his overall approach of trying to position himself as the big mediator. You have to be on equally good footing with all parties and you don’t want to piss people off by talking about human rights.”

Indeed, Guterres has been trying to play peacemaker. He dashed to South Sudan in his first weeks as U.N. chief to try to restart a stalled peace process in a country on the brink of mass killing and famine. His staff has also has been exploring the possibility of playing a mediation role from Libya to the Middle East, where a simmering fight between Saudi Arabia and Iran threatens to further destabilize the region. Guterres has also inserted himself into the decades long standoff between Greek and Turkish Cypriots.

But the U.N. leader’s reticence about trumpeting human rights concerns from the podium has vexed some diplomats and human rights advocates, who argue that it is all the more important for the U.N. chief to confront abuses at a time when the United States under President Donald Trump, as well as some of its European allies, has downgraded the importance of human rights in its own foreign policy. The strategy marks something of a retreat from his predecessor, Ban Ki-moon, who evolved from an old-school practitioner of quiet diplomacy in his first term to a more strident critic of despotic regimes from Egypt and South Sudan in his final years on the job.

“He should not be visiting highly abusive countries like Egypt without addressing the human rights situation. It’s important for civil society, and the victims of human rights abuses, to hear that the secretary general is behind them,”  Kenneth Roth, the executive director of Human Rights Watch, said of Guterres. The U.N. chief, he added, “has not been outspoken about human rights issues in general.”

If the Trump administration’s retreat from human rights advocacy seemingly makes Guterres’ role all the more important, Washington’s animus toward the United Nations — Trump has proposed slashing U.S. funding for the U.N. — also has him watching his steps.

“The wrecking ball in Washington has led him to tread more cautiously than he might have on human rights,” Roth said.

When Trump announced a travel ban on Muslim-majority countries in January — later struck down by a federal court — Guterres left it to the U.N.’s migration and refugee agencies to issue statements, though he eventually issued a tough public rebuke of the administration five days later. Guterres has also held his tongue when U.S. forces have killed civilians in the course of fighting extremists, such as in Mosul earlier this year. U.N. High Commissioner for Human Rights Prince Zeid Ra’ad al-Hussein was left to register concern.

Guterres aides say that the U.N. chief has a long history of championing human rights, from his youth opposing dictatorship in his native Portugal, to his tenure as head of the U.N. refugee agency from 2005 to 2015. But they say he is more focused on saving lives than on standing on a soap box. They noted that Guterres this week highlighted the importance of observing human rights standards while combatting terrorism to an audience that included Russian President Vladimir Putin, Chinese President Xi Jinping, and several Central Asian autocrats.

In his Cairo speech, Guterres chose to ditch his script, delivering a partly extemporaneous address. “Did he intentionally leave out the positive words about the importance of civil society? Or did he just ad lib nearly the whole thing, and forget about civil society?,” said one U.N. diplomat. “I can’t answer that.”

Stephane Dujarric, the U.N. chief’s spokesman, said Guterres seeks to advance human rights by making progress on the underlying causes. “There is no better way to ensure the protection of the most grievous breaches of human rights than ending conflict and countering its root causes including exclusion and inequality.”

“He firmly believes that actions that will contribute to yielding positive results are more important than headlines for himself,” Dujarric said.

Dujarric said that Guterres sees Zeid as the point man for the U.N. when it comes to human rights, noting that Zeid “has a specific mandate to speak up in defense of human rights whenever and wherever they may be threatened or violated.” The role of the secretary general, he said, “is different, with broader focus on all three pillars of the U.N.’s work and priority to support the political resolution of conflict.”

That often involves soothing autocratic governments.

In an early test, Guterres had to resolve a diplomatic standoff with Saudi Arabia over plans to place the Gulf Sheikdom on a black-list of states, armed factions, and terrorist groups that kill or maim children in conflict zones. Since the listing process was begun in 2001, it has generated intense pushback from states, who feel it unfairly tarnishes their reputation by associating them with a rogues’ gallery of bad actors.

Last year, Saudi Arabia, which leads a military coalition in Yemen, was included on the list on the grounds that more than half of the 1,953 child deaths in the conflict in Yemen, were due to the actions of the Saudi-led coalition, the U.N. found.

The Saudis reacted furiously, threatening to pull out of the U.N. and cut hundred of millions in funding to U.N. counter-terrorism and humanitarian aid programs, unless the U.N. removed it from the list.

Ban, the then U.N. secretary general, yielded to the Saudi demand, and removed the coalition from the list. But he warned that the coalition would be put back on the list unless a joint U.N.-Saudi review of the coalition’s conduct demonstrated the allegations were unjustified or that attacks on children stopped.  That never happened, despite evidence that attacks by the Saudi led coalition and the rival Houthi insurgents continued. About 600 hundred children were killed and 1,150 injured, in Yemen between March 2016 and March 2017, according to the U.N. Children’s Fund, or UNICEF.

In a closed-door meeting with his top advisers in February, Guterres suggested that the U.N. delay the release of the 2018 Children and Armed Conflict report, which is due out in August, by three to six months to allow the coalition an incentive to improve its conduct, according to the notes of an internal meeting of the secretary general’s executive committee. Gutteres argued that would give the Saudis an incentive to improve their behavior.

But the office of the U.N. advocate for children feared a delay would subject them to criticism. Instead, they suggested releasing the report on time, but freezing new additions to the black list until next year. That option faced intense criticism from human rights advocates, and the Secretary General’s executive committee acknowledged that “this option also set a precedent for including member state perspective into the decision-making process, which risks politicizing the mandate.”

“For me, this was a litmus test,” said Eva Smets, the executive director of Watchlist on Children and Armed Conflict. “Is the U.N. going to place human rights first under Guterres? In his first six months, it doesn’t look like it.”

Guterres is wrestling with the same problems that bedeviled his predecessor, Ban, during his first term in office, when he sought to use quiet diplomatic outreach to leaders in Myanmar, Sudan, and Sri Lanka to moderate their behavior. But Ban faced intense criticism for holding his tongue as atrocities mounted.

By his second term, Ban went the other way, issuing frequent condemnations of foreign governments for abusive behavior. But critics say his public shaming of foreign leaders undermined his chances to play peacemaker. In Syria, for instance, Ban wasn’t even on speaking terms with president Bashar al-Assad during most of his second term.

“In the early days, Ban absolutely prioritized quiet diplomacy,” said Richard Gowan, a U.N. expert with the European Council on Foreign Relations. After the Arab Spring, he added, he “starting talking about human rights constantly. I think that many U.N. observers thought Ban overbalanced. By the end of his time he was much more outspoken about human rights, but to no discernible effect.”

“I am inclined to think that if Guterres is to have any chance of achieving anything in places like South Sudan and Venezuela it is going to be through quiet diplomacy,” Gowan said.