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DEALING WITH OPPRESSIVE REGIMES

Statement by Senator Edmund S. Muskie (D-Maine)
for the New Democrat, September 15, 1971

How should our nation deal with oppressive regimes? As a nation committed to the principles of national self-determination and individual rights, for ourselves and for other peoples of the world, we must abhor repression wherever it occurs, be firm in our disapproval of political repression, and do what we can to help end such repression, recognizing that our actions must be tempered by an understanding of our proper role in the affairs of other peoples and by a recognition of the limitations we must apply to the use of our power.

One step we can certainly take is the curtailment of military assistance, including export sale license for military equipment, when it may be used in internal political struggles or to repress colonial people.

In the case of Pakistan, American arms have been used to slaughter East Pakistanis. On April 15, I called for an "immediate suspension of all military assistance to the Pakistani government." To this date, our policy has been extremely ambiguous. We have announced the suspension of arms shipments, but allowed arms to slip through our own embargo. America's policy towards Greece has been less ambiguous. Despite our verbal support for democratic government there, we have resumed major arms shipments, knowing full well that the junta has made negligible efforts to restore

constitutional rule to Greece and continues to employ terror and torture against its citizens. And we are probably sacrificing long-term interests in Greece, Pakistan and the Portugese territories of Africa in favor of cooperation with their present governments.

In Africa, the Administration has given verbal support to the struggle for African independence and racial justice, but approved the sale of two Boeing 707's to Portugal -- despite the fact that these jets can certainly be used to ferry troops to Portugal's African colonies.

This ambivalence will not serve us well. Arms embargoes must be scrupulously observed, and arms that are given to support strategic alliances or help a nation defend itself against external threats should be used solely for these purposes. To facilitate these ends we must closely monitor the flow and use of American arms throughout the world. We must also seek to negotiate international agreements on the supply and use of conventional weapons.

The curtailment of economic assistance is another available option to show our country will not cooperate with repressive governments.

For example, in Pakistan, where the government has been impervious to rational persuasion and is still pursuing its brutal repression of Bengalis, concerted action is clearly justified. On May 4, a number of us in the Senate urged the U.S. to withhold foreign exchange assistance from Pakistan unless that government agreed to provide famine relief for the eastern region.

I recognize, however, that there is no easy rule of thumb to guide our actions in this regard. As a general policy I do not think that ending all economic assistance at the first sign of governmental oppression would effectively promote individual liberty or further the cause of international peace. The U.S. has a tremendous stake in the economic development of poorer countries. The automatic elimination of all economic aid serving useful social purposes would be inconsistent with our interests and the interests of the people we want to help. Furthermore, this action would fail to serve the people of a country and may not hurt the leaders responsible for their government's repressive policies. In the last analysis, economic aid rests on the humanitarian obligation to help people. We should be careful about letting our disenchantment with other governments dilute this principle. Nor should we let economic aid become a political weapon. It should be withheld only when its provision clearly would work against its humanitarian purpose.

Severing diplomatic relations should be rejected as a viable alternative for dealing with repressive regimes.

Diplomatic contacts provide a vital medium of communication between governments. We must leave open this channel of communication, not to give aid and comfort to repressive policies, but for the purpose of exerting constructive influence through continuing dialogue and persuasion. That is why I believe it is important for us to move towards establishment of diplomatic relations with the People's Republic of China. Furthermore,

it is most unlikely we could devise a formula which could guide us in recognizing particular governments and not others. We can hardly end our relations with Greece or Brazil because those governments suppress individual rights while at the same time we move toward diplomatic recognition of the People's Republic of China. The acts of each government may be repugnant to us, but we cannot end those acts by pretending that such governments do not exist.

We should also be wary about any use of our power to support local opposition groups. In certain cases, such as in East Pakistan, we should do all we can to help political refugees who have been forced to flee their country. But we must be careful not to set new precedents for direct intervention in local political struggles.

Some have suggested that we might also consider military intervention as a means of inducing oppressive governments to change their ways. But I reject this kind of solution. If the Vietnam war has taught us anything, it is the futility and tremendous cost of using force to intervene in the affairs of other nations.

As I have said elsewhere, we have too often behaved in Indochina as if the use of force should be a first alternative rather than a last resort. We have too often behaved in Indochina and elsewhere as if international politics were a simple contest between the forces of darkness and the forces of light. Intervention even by a powerful country does not often produce the results we want. We have seen too much direct interference in the affairs of other nations by so-called great powers.

These, then, are some of the considerations that should guide us in dealing with political oppression abroad. Above all, we must not allow ourselves in our foreign policy to become insensitive to the values of self-determination and individual rights. A nation cannot callously sacrifice in its external relations values which are at the heart of its own political system. The requirements of "pragmatism" in foreign policy, so piously articulated by some self-styled realists, must not become rationalizations for an amoral foreign policy in the pursuit of short-range and ephemeral interests.