

Past Rotary International Vice President Dean Rohrs

„The Challenges of Today“

Transcript of Dean's opening statement

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I grew up under dictatorships in Africa. Firstly, I was born South African and was part of the dictatorship of the white minority in South Africa under the apartheid eras. And I like to just mention a quote that I think to me is incredibly relevant. The name of the gentleman is Will Durant, and he says: „When liberty becomes a license, dictatorship is near.“ And I think if we think very carefully on this, we realize that across the world in many areas, we had latent dictatorships, but we also have soft dictatorship. What we consider almost democratic countries that lead the Western world and are moving now in an area where liberty is becoming a license. That is something that we have to think about as we move through our daily lives.

So I'd like to just bring up a few examples; then I will finish with South Africa. But I'd like to talk about Venezuela. Let's think about Venezuela under hard, hard circumstances. More than 20 % of the populace have left Venezuela. Speaking to Venezuelan Rotarians, they are telling me that they are struggling in more ways than one. Rotary has totally suspended use. They are not measuring clubs any more on whether they meet or not because it is dangerous to meet in some areas, They have no means to meet in other areas because there is no electricity, no restaurants, no areas where it's safe for them to eat. They are earning so little in the local currency and have to spend in US dollars. They have to line their cars up for days on end to just be able to get 40 liters of gas. They lock themselves up by four o'clock in the afternoon because there are rolling gangs of hoodlums in the streets who kill at sight. How can Rotary function in a community like that? You have to look after yourself and your family first. When it comes to human right issues, you are the primary person. Only if you are safe and you can deal with the situation, can you deal with others.

If we think of China, China is a society where Rotary is growing. But is actually growing in a strange way. There are now 27 Rotary clubs in China, but they do not have a single Chinese national member. They are clubs of foreigners doing Rotary business in a country. But the excitement about it is that although they are now 550 Rotarians, they have 15 Interact clubs and they have 10 Rotaract clubs. So here under an impressive (? or rather „suppressive“?) regime, Rotary has found a way of making Rotary relevant to the people who are interested in it.

You may know that part of my function for Rotary International is to develop Rotary in Russia. It has been a challenge, I would tell you honestly and directly: that it is a huge challenge. Rotary has been existing in Russia for more than 20 years. There are 79 clubs in Russia, but there are only 1150

Rotarians. At this particular moment, we are joining two districts together to try and strengthen them and give them the support they need to be able to develop. But the huge issue that we are dealing with is the acceptance of Rotary by the government. About four years ago, one of the Rotary clubs in the Russian Far East was declared a foreign agent. This meant that it was dangerous for the members of that club to be associated with that club. They put their businesses at jeopardy, never mind their own personal lives. Fortunately, the problem was resolved. But just for that one action of one Rotarian who appeared to be supporting a particular political party in Russia compromised the whole of Rotary in Russia, and we lost nearly 500 Rotarians. So we have to be very careful. As we are working in Russia, we have asked the government: „So tell us, what do you think of Rotary?“ And we got a soft answer. They came back to us and they said to us: „We know who you are. We know what you do. You are too small for us to bother about. So if you stick to the rules and if you walk a soft path, we will accept you.“

So again: What does Rotary do? To be hard and fast? Human rights? Peace, all the morals and issues of Rotary? And have Rotary destroyed in Russia? Or do we take the soft approach? And go anywhere we can and make the differences that we can?

I'd like now to go to Africa. Let's look to one country that actually you would consider a dictatorship even though they look themselves up into sort of quasi democracy. And that is Uganda. I love Uganda. The most incredible country you can possibly ever visit. Freedom Harps, which measures how free a country is, has upgraded Uganda, but it's still fact that while Uganda holds regular elections, the credibility has deteriorated over time, and the country has been ruled by the same party and president since 1986. The ruling party, the National Resistance Movement, retains power through the manipulation of state resources, intimidation by security forces, and persecution of opposition leaders. However, Rotary is entrenched in society in Uganda. It is vibrant, it is growing, and it's effective. And I think the fact that Uganda is being upgraded is because of the influence of the Rotarians that are so integrated into society there. This past year, this country added more than 27 new Rotary clubs. It has done millions of dollars in grant projects, and has a very vibrant Rotaract society. It's also developing significant Rotary leadership.

So what has gone before? What conclusions can be reached? In all those negative examples, including Russia, Rotary does not have acceptance from the ruling parties. If we work against a political party, we are in jeopardy, because there is always the other side of the coin. Not every single Rotarian supports a single political party. A Rotarian has a right to do so. So Rotary International is apolitical. My own personal negotiations with the Canadian government was not with the *Canadian* government, it was with the Liberal Party of the Canadian government to get the last Canadian donation of funds for Polio, the 30 million dollars that Rotary gave. If I had deceived as an organization that supported one of the opposition parties, it might very well be the next ruling party, do you think I would have got the money for Rotary? I don't think so.

So where I said before the cash-22-situation, and we're damned if we do, and we're damned if we don't. Rotary needs to take the neutral stance, and we have to approach what we are looking for from a grass-root organization.

We have to keep quoting ?? our friendships, and we have these wonderful intercountry committies, relationships from one country to another that are doing amazing work. We have friendship exchanges, we have partnering in global grants. The reality is that Rotary has to keep legal under the laws of the country. We cannot go against a government. We always give the local and federal authorities the opportunity to be educated and participate in Rotary programs and projects. And we make them shine in the eyes of their constituents, and then Rotary can do what Rotary needs to do.