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Andrei Sakharov Prize: Human Rights and Peace - A Personal Odyssey

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For more than 30 years, I have devoted my life to promoting scientific freedom and human rights around the world. This devotion led me to put pressure on the American Chemical Society (ACS) to become active in the fight for human rights. Due to this pressure, in 1986, ACS established the Subcommittee on Scientific Freedom and Human Rights, which I chaired since its inception for over 25 years. In 1988, I met with Andrei Sakharov who advised me to never stop pressuring governments or organizations that abuse human rights. Based on his council, I took a crash course in Russian before traveling to the Soviet Union several times to meet with dissidents, despite the risk to my own safety. After the Tiananmen Square incident in 1989, I worked diligently on the issue of human rights in China. Traveling often to work on the release of pro-democracy prisoners, I met with several dissidents of China, including physicist Xu Liangying who was under house arrest. In my lecture, I will discuss additional cases of my fight for human rights. After 9/11/2001, I expanded my work on scientific freedom and human rights to the Middle East by organizing the Malta Conferences, which use science for diplomacy and as a bridge to peace. These conferences bring together scientists from 15 Middle East countries including Iran, Iraq, Syria, Israel, Palestine, Jordan, etc. with 6 Nobel Laureates to work for 5 days on solving regional problems. Although acts of war and terrorism have destabilized the political and economic climate in the Middle East, the Malta Conferences have made it possible for scientists from countries that are on the opposing sides of political and cultural conflicts to meet in a politically neutral environment. There they can work to forge relationships that bridge the deep chasms of mistrust and intolerance. Scientists who normally dont have the opportunity to speak with one another are able to discuss their research and issues of mutual concern. In a time when the worlds eyes are focused on the Middle East and rhetoric, policy and media reports appear hopeless, the Malta Conferences offer a fresh approach to historic problems and political dysfunction.