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Secretary Antony J. Blinken at the 16th Annual International Women of Courage (IWOC) Awards Ceremony

REMARKS

ANTONY J. BLINKEN, SECRETARY OF STATE

DEAN ACHESON AUDITORIUM

WASHINGTON, D.C.

MARCH 14, 2022

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MS FOTOVAT: Good morning, and welcome to the 16th Annual International Women of Courage awards. My name is Katrina Fotovat, and I am the senior official for the Secretary's Office of Global Women's Issues at the U.S. Department of State. I am deeply honored to join you today in recognizing the awe-inspiring achievements and contributions made by the 2022 Secretary of State's International Women of Courage.

The United States firmly believes that when women and girls are empowered and meaningfully

participate in every sector of life, we are all safer, more prosperous, and secure. Rooted in this longstanding belief, the Secretary's Office of Global Women's Issues is tasked with an important mandate: ensuring that the rights and empowerment of women and girls, in all their diversity, is integrated throughout U.S. foreign policy despite the existence of significant barriers, and especially this year with no short list of crises, from Ukraine to Afghanistan. Women and girls around the world have persisted in making massive strides in advancing human rights, gender equity and equality, peace and security, rule of law, accountability, and so much more.

For 16 years our office has proudly supported U.S. secretaries of state in recognizing more than 170 remarkable women representing over 80 countries as International Women of Courage. To this year's International Women of Courage awardees, I want to express my sincerest admiration and deepest appreciation for your tireless work and advocacy to advance the rights of women and girls in the face of serious risk and unforgettable sacrifice. Your courage, strength, and leadership are truly inspiring, and the United States is deeply committed and privileged to honor and support you, along with so many other brave women and girls determined to ensure that every person can live a dignified, secure, and fulfilling life.

Now it is my great honor to introduce Secretary of State Antony Blinken to the podium. Thank you. (Applause.)

SECRETARY BLINKEN: Thank you, and good morning, everyone, and good afternoon, good evening to those joining us from literally around the world, especially our honorees today. Kat, thank you so much for that introduction, but also and especially for the great work that everyone in the Office of Global Women's Issues does every single day to try to advance gender equity and equality around the world.

We're especially honored to be joined today by the First Lady of the United States, Dr. Jill Biden, who has been such a powerful advocate for women and girls for her entire career and is elevating these issues as our First Lady. Welcome. Thank you for being with us today.

And Ambassador Linda Thomas-Greenfield, representing the United States at the United Nations every day with skill, with integrity, with a powerful voice for these issues and virtually every other issue that is before the United Nations.

I also want to start by thanking several people for their leadership in this area:

Lee Satterfield, our assistant secretary of state for Educational and Cultural Affairs, connecting this year's honorees with people across the United States for learning and collaboration.

Jen Klein, the executive director of the White House Gender Policy Council, a true partner to the State Department.

And Rina Amiri, our new – not so new now – special envoy for Afghan Women, Girls, and Human Rights. As women and girls face continuing restrictions on their education, employment, freedom of speech, ability to move freely around their communities and country, Rina is helping lead our efforts to advocate for their rights and their freedoms.

As we meet, millions of Ukrainian women have fled their country with their families. Millions more have stayed to help their country fight against Russia's unprovoked, unjustified war. I saw many of them on the border with Poland just about a week ago, and it's something that stays embedded in your mind and memory as you see women coming across the border, children in tow, fleeing the Russian aggression. One of them is Ruslana Lyzhychko, a singer, democracy leader in Ukraine and a 2014 International Women of Courage awardee. During the EuroMaidan protests in 2013, Ruslana performed the Ukrainian national anthem every night – despite death threats – to cheer other protesters, to encourage nonviolence. She's in Ukraine now, using her voice to share information about the war.

Like Ruslana, this year's Women of Courage are making our world more peaceful, more just.

Across four continents they're tackling complex challenges, from organized crime to environmental degradation. They're advancing the rights of women, girls, LGBTQI+ people, and other marginalized groups. And despite harassment, violence, imprisonment, they persist.

Unfortunately, because of the COVID-19 pandemic, this year's awardees are joining us via video, but I am deeply honored to introduce and celebrate these remarkable women:

Simone Sibilio do Nascimento, a prosecutor in Rio de Janeiro, the first woman to lead the state's organized crime unit. She has taken on corruption, militias, drug trafficking. She's prosecuted high-profile cases of gender-based violence and attacks on activists, including the murder of a city councilwoman and her driver.

In Cape Town, South Africa, Roegchanda Pascoe is a community leader who works to reduce gang violence. She's led marches, organized safety forums, established safe zones where children can play, and in 2019, was the only witness – the only witness – willing to testify against a gang leader in a murder trial. Despite three assassination attempts, her work continues.

Rizwana Hasan is a lawyer fighting for environmental justice in Bangladesh. She has led successful campaigns against commercial shrimp farming that hurt traditional fishermen and the filling in of ecologically vital wetlands around Dhaka by unscrupulous housing corporations. In another landmark case, she got the government to commit to restoring 44,000 acres of forest that is home to the Garo Indigenous community.

After Liberia's civil wars, in which violence against women was widespread, Facia Boyenoh Harris dedicated herself to reducing gender-based violence, increasing women's political participation. She has organized marches against rape, helped free protesters from jail, conducted outreach to first-time women voters, trained democracy activists, and works with girls to make sure that they know their rights, their worth, their potential.

Ei Thinzar Maung is a democracy activist in Burma. In 2015, she was imprisoned for organizing a 400-mile march protesting a ban on student unions and teaching in ethnic minority languages. During the regime's 2021 crackdown, she led other protests; a new warrant was issued for her arrest. Today, she is in hiding, but continues to advocate against the regime's oppression.

Josefina Klinger Zúñiga promotes ecotourism among Colombia's Pacific coast – an area with a history of conflict, driven by narcotraffickers and illegal armed groups. Her NGO brings together local fisherman, laborers, entrepreneurs to support tourism that protects the environment, creates jobs, empowers Afro-Colombians and indigenous communities. A social leader who defends the land and the rights of people, Josefina has been targeted for assassination. Her education center trains young people to carry her work forward.

In Moldova, more than one in three women and girls over the age of 15 have experienced domestic violence. Though she faced powerful opposition, Doina Gherman, a member of parliament, campaigned for Moldova to ratify the Istanbul Convention, recognizing gender-based violence as a human rights violation. She also led the push for a gender quota in elections. Moldova now has one of the world's highest rates of women's political representation. I was there about ten days ago. A remarkable president, a remarkable president, prime minister

there about ten days ago. A remarkable president, a remarkable president – prime minister, excuse me – who both happen to be women, leading that country through a very challenging time.

Taif Sami Mohammed, Iraq's deputy finance minister, director general of the budget department. Because of her persistent efforts to end corruption, she has earned the nickname "Iron Woman." Despite threats, she has stopped bribes, uncovered schemes to inflate payrolls and enrich corrupt officials, redirected significant resources back to programs that serve the Iraqi people.

In December, Phạm Đoan Trang was sentenced to nine years in prison in Vietnam for her writing on democracy and human rights. She wrote about crackdowns on protestors and secretly recorded her own police interrogation; when media outlets stopped printing her work, she founded her own. Despite facing threats – constant threats – she continued educating others about their rights. We condemn her unjust imprisonment; we call for her immediate release.

In Romania, Carmen Gheorghe fights for the rights of Roma women and girls, a group subjugated to racism and sexism, social exclusion, high rates of gender-based violence, including child and forced marriage. In the face of hostility, even hatred, from authorities and communities alike, Carmen supports Roma women as they protest, petition their government, seek equal access to education, to justice, and other sectors.

As a trans woman, Bhumika Shrestha knows the indignity of official documents that fail to reflect a person's gender identity. She fought for Nepal to add a non-binary option; in 2007, the supreme court made that change, and Bhumika later became the first trans person in Nepal to travel with an updated passport. Despite harassment, she continues to fight for expanded access to medical, economic, and legal services for LGBTQI+ people in Nepal.

Najla Mangoush, someone I know well – Libya's first woman foreign minister. An expert in conflict resolution, she was part of the transitional council that governed Libya in 2011 and has worked ever since toward more unified, democratic governance. In 2021, less than a year after the ceasefire, she convened top military representatives from both sides. The next month, they agreed to the complete withdrawal of all foreign forces, fighters, and mercenaries from Libya – a work that is ongoing. I'm proud to be her counterpart and her colleague.

These twelve women are separated by thousands of miles – but they are united in their dedication to serving their countries and communities with extraordinary courage and self-

dedication to serving their countries and communities with extraordinary courage and self-

sacrifice.

The United States stands with them. We've seen the remarkable progress they've made toward building peace, building security, building equality, building justice. And through our diplomacy, we're working alongside them to advance those goals.

We also want to lift up other women like them. We know there are future Facias, and Bhumikas, and Carmens who share many of the same aspirations – and face many of the same obstacles.

That means we have to address gender inequities that often relegate women to the sidelines and combat the violence that women and girls around the world endure every single day. That's why we're incorporating women's equal rights throughout our foreign policy, with initiatives like the National Strategy on Gender Equity and Equality.

And we know policies designed with women and girls in mind are more effective and more enduring. By advancing gender equity, we can achieve greater prosperity and more lasting peace and security for all.

I'm grateful to this group for sharing their experiences with us at the State Department – and not just with us; with communities across our country. Through our International Visitor Leadership Program, this year's awardees will meet with American public servants, with activists, community leaders working on the same issues that they work on every day. And I know our American hosts will learn so much from their expertise, from their innovation, from their courage.

Thank you for being generous with your time, with your wisdom – and for bringing others along with you on the journey to a better world.

Thank you all for joining us to celebrate these truly extraordinary women. And it's wonderful to be with everyone today. Thank you. (Applause.)

(Video messages are played.)

(The First Lady gives remarks.)

(Video messages are played.)

MS FOTOVAT: Ladies and gentlemen, the representative of the United States of America to the United Nations, Ambassador Linda Thomas-Greenfield. (Applause.)

AMBASSADOR THOMAS-GREENFIELD: Good morning and thank you. It's really an honor to be here, and I'm so grateful to be here with First Lady Dr. Biden and Secretary Blinken and the State Department for hosting this inspiring event. Most of all, I am in awe of the heroines we are here today to celebrate. You are activists and journalists, peacemakers and parliament members; you are prosecutors fighting organized crime and corruption; you are community leaders bravely testifying against gang leaders; you are defenders of the environment, of indigenous rights, of LGBTQI+ rights, of human rights. You have shut down sexual harassment and lifted up the next generation of women leaders. You listen, you lead, and you show courage beyond belief.

Of course, far too many courageous women are not able to be here, and that includes one of our honorees, Phạm Đoan Trang, who is in prison in Vietnam for her work to protect human rights and promote political participation. And then there are the tens of thousands of other women, too many to count, who demonstrate unimaginable bravery in the face of impossible cruelty each and every day.

Right now I cannot stop thinking about the mothers in Ukraine – the mothers who have been forced to give birth in bomb shelters; the mothers who've been forced to pass their children alone, terrified, into crowded trains leaving the country; the mothers who've taken up arms to defend their families, their communities, their country. And then there are the women and girls in Afghanistan, who are being excluded from schools and jobs after decades of progress; or the women and girls in Ethiopia, who are being subjected to rape as a weapon of war. These are all our sisters. You are here to represent them and all the women facing such grave challenges throughout the world, and it is on us, all of us here in this room and across the world, to do right by them.

For our part, at the United Nations, today marks the opening of the 66th session of the Commission on the Status of Women. It's a massive annual session where the world's governments come together to advance gender equality and the empowerment of women, and this year we're paying particular attention to the role of women in the climate crisis, both how women and girls are acutely affected and how we are poised to lead the way forward. I was proud to announce our diverse delegation to CSW today which will champion our values and the

full, equal, and meaningful participation of – and – of girls and gender diverse people on all fronts. They understand, just as you do, how important it is that we speak up for those who are not in the room.

Our keynote speaker, Foreign Minister Dr. Najla Mangoush, is also about to do just that for us. She became the first female foreign minister of Libya almost exactly a year ago today, right around the same time I became the ambassador to the United Nations. During Libya's 2011 revolution, she headed the National Transition Council's public engagement unit, dealing directly with Libya and the world's civil society organizations. She's an expert in and a practitioner of conflict resolution, which she studied as a Fulbright scholar and then as a PhD student here in the United States before becoming an assistant professor of law at Benghazi University.

But more powerful than any degree or title, Foreign Minister Mangoush embodies stalwart bravery in the face of harassment and threats, sexism and violence. And while men make war, she seeks peace, and I know she is proud to speak on behalf of all of the IWOC recipients today.

And with that, it's my privilege to introduce our keynote speaker, Foreign Minister Najla Mangoush. Thank you. (Applause.)

FOREIGN MINISTER MANGOUSH: It is truly an honor and an enormous privilege to speak on behalf of the Women of Courage award recipients. My sisters, and the very brave and courageous women all around the globe, it is with great humility that I stand before you as an honoree for the International Women of Courage award, which has been established in the United States of America as the biggest advocate of human rights. My voice echoes for all women. We must do what is right and continue to uphold and encourage each other in advocating of the rights of all.

Madam First Lady, Secretary Blinken, and all the State Department, I say thank you for selecting the 12 recipients from around the world for their acts of courage and bravery. I realize that there are more women that should have been nominated. We all know that there are many more women from around the globe who demonstrates exceptional courage every day, women who decide to make difficult choices and take the bumpier road, not knowing where the road would lead but still take the risks. They know that their choices may cause drastic changes in their societies, and at times of adversities that they continue to follow their inner compass and take the chance to create differences within their communities.

The way that I understand courage is that there is no courage without vulnerability. Brené Brown said, "How can we be courageous without being vulnerable?" She added, "True courage comes when we decide it take [it]" – risk – "without knowing the outcome. It means showing up and letting yourself be seen, despite the risk. When you show up in this way, you open yourself up to joy and connection, but you can only do it by accepting that there could be pain."

When you show up to work the day after you got divorced; when there are young girls walking to their schools knowing that they may lose their lives because of ongoing conflict; when you decide to leave your kids for a greater cause because you decided to teach them to be brave and strong instead of being – depend on you all the time; when you decide to listen to your true self when it is hard to speak up; when you decide to be a woman in senior position, knowing that that means you'll be under the microscope all the time, being judged, criticized, and bullied – that's courage.

Women who decide to risk it all and leave their home countries, their safe havens, in search of self-fulfillment elsewhere, that is courage. Women who believe in change, no matter how small, and seek to make it happen in their families, societies, and countries, these are all courageous women – not to mention women in politics, something I also get to experience firsthand every day. When you are the only woman at the table, you are being ignored, overlooked, and not addressed, it can be very intimidating. They can make you feel invisible. Then the flame inside you ignites; your aura and your presence forces them to acknowledge and respect you. This gives you the confidence to move forward and continue to pave the way for other women in reaching their great potential.

In closing, Albert Einstein once said women who follow the crowd will usually go no farther than the crowd. Women who walk alone are likely to find herself in places no one has ever been before. We should continue to unite and build up each other in a world that often overlooks our accomplishments.

On behalf of all the 12 selected recipients of the Women of Courage award, I would like to thank you once again. (Applause.)

MS FOTOVAT: Ladies and gentlemen, the Special Envoy for Afghan Women, Girls, and Human Rights, Rina Amiri. (Applause.)

MS AMIRI: Thank you very much. I want to begin by thanking First Lady Biden, Secretary Blinken, Ambassador Thomas-Greenfield for their powerful words, and by congratulating the awardees of this year's International Women of Courage.

Sometimes I wish the world did not demand so much courage of women. They're courageous because of the daily inequities and injustices of the world. As President Franklin Delano Roosevelt said, "Courage is not the absence of fear, but rather the assessment that something else is more important than fear."

There is perhaps no place in the world where this is truer for women than in Afghanistan. On August 15th, when the Taliban took over Kabul, Afghan women from all walks of life were stripped of their rights overnight. I want the audience to imagine themselves in this situation. I often do. I'm haunted by it.

I imagine waking up and being told that I and the women and girls in my family no longer have the right to be educated, to work, to speak up, support our families, or leave our houses without fear of dire repercussions. Thousands of Afghan women and their families, including many of our IWOC awardees, were either forced to flee or now endure this reality themselves. Over 40 million Afghans face one of the worst humanitarian situations, and again, women and girls are bearing the brunt of it like they do in every conflict situation.

Nonetheless, Afghan women have responded with resilience and courage. We have witnessed these women inside Afghanistan boldly standing up for their rights. Those forced into exile, including IWOC awardee Roya Sadat, who's here with us today, and countless others continue to persevere and fight for a better Afghanistan. They do so because they must. They are fighting not only for their rights, but for the collective future of all Afghans.

Women are the entry point of inclusion everywhere, and without the inclusion of Afghans and all their diversity, Afghanistan will descend into further conflict. Their struggle is a collective struggle. Their struggle for an Afghanistan that is at peace with itself and its neighbors is our collective struggle. This is why Secretary Blinken established my office, as well as appointing Senior Advisor Stephenie Foster to address women's evacuation and resettlement needs.

Since assuming my position, I have focused on leveraging the priorities of Afghan women in discussions with the Taliban and the international community. As Afghan women have

discussions with the Taliban and the international community. As Afghan women have

emphasized, education for all women and girls must resume after March 21st. The opening of some universities to women gives hope, but it must be matched by a national decree allowing girls' education at all levels to overcome the climate of fear and uncertainty. And education on its own is not enough. Afghan women and their families are asking: Why educate our daughters if they cannot use that education to work and put food on the table?

And they must be able to work in every sector to increase the prospects of lifting their families in Afghanistan out of poverty and into sustainability. Women are the linchpin of peace everywhere, and certainly for a peaceful Afghanistan. We must support them, stand with them in solidarity, and engage them as leaders to chart a better future for Afghanistan. They know better than anyone that this is a long road, but they shouldn't walk it alone. They have risen before, and they will undoubtedly rise again. Thank you. (Applause.)

MS FOTOVAT: Ladies and gentlemen, the assistant secretary for Educational and Cultural Affairs, Lee Satterfield. (Applause.)

ASSISTANT SECRETARY SATTERFIELD: Hello and thank you again to those joining us from all around the world today. I'm honored to join you and our incredible awardees. My name is Lee Satterfield, and I lead the Bureau of Educational and Cultural Affairs here at the U.S. Department of State. Our mission is to increase mutual understanding between the people of the United States and the people of other countries. I also want to express our deepest appreciation for our First Lady Dr. Biden and Secretary Blinken for their steadfast commitment to our work in people-to-people diplomacy. And a special thank you to the Secretary's Office of Global Women's Issues, and our embassies all around the world.

I'd like to acknowledge the work of my team with the International Visitors Leadership Program, IVLP for short. We've prepared a dynamic virtual program in the days and weeks ahead for the International Women of Courage awardees. The IVLP is the Department of State's premier professional exchange program. The program connects current and emerging foreign leaders with American counterparts and communities, and it strengthens the U.S. engagement with countries all around the world.

To this year's International Women of Courage awardees, the passion and dedication you display in your work and your lives is inspiring. Through the IVLP, you'll have a chance to meet Americans with similar aspirations and engage in meaningful dialogue. You'll meet Americans from coast to

with similar aspirations and engage in meaningful dialogue. You'll meet Americans from coast to coast, from Orlando to Minneapolis, Kansas City to Portland, and many places in between. You'll also be joining a broader IVLP network of more than 200,000 current and emerging foreign leaders, including more than 500 current or former chiefs of state or heads of government. We're so excited about your engagement with IVLP.

Again, congratulations, and we wish you the best on your journey.

And now to conclude today's ceremony, we'd like to share a special presentation featuring this year's International Women of Courage. Thank you. (Applause.)

(A video is played.)

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