

## **2008 Report: Democracy Charade Undermines Rights** *Human Rights Watch Highlights Abuses in Pakistan, Kenya, China, Somalia*

(Washington, DC, January 31, 2008) – The established democracies are accepting flawed and unfair elections for political expediency, Human Rights Watch said today in releasing its *World Report 2008*. By allowing autocrats to pose as democrats, without demanding they uphold the civil and political rights that make democracy meaningful, the United States, the European Union and other influential democracies risk undermining human rights worldwide.

States claiming the mantle of democracy, including **Kenya** and **Pakistan**, should guarantee the human rights that are central to it, including the rights to free expression, assembly and association, as well as free and fair elections. But in 2007 too many governments, including **Bahrain, Jordan, Nigeria, Russia** and **Thailand**, acted as if simply holding a vote is enough to prove a nation “democratic,” and Washington, Brussels and European capitals played along, Human Rights Watch said. The Bush administration has spoken of its commitment to democracy abroad but often kept silent about the need for all governments to respect human rights.

“It’s now too easy for autocrats to get away with mounting a sham democracy,” said Kenneth Roth, executive director of Human Rights Watch. “That’s because too many Western governments insist on elections and leave it at that. They don’t press governments on the key human rights issues that make democracy function – a free press, peaceful assembly, and a functioning civil society that can really challenge power.”

In its *World Report 2008*, Human Rights Watch surveys the human rights situation in more than 75 countries. Human Rights Watch identified many human rights challenges in need of attention, including atrocities in Chad, Colombia, the Democratic Republic of Congo, Ethiopia’s Ogaden region, Iraq, Somalia, Sri Lanka, and Sudan’s Darfur region, as well as closed societies or severe repression in Burma, China, Cuba, Eritrea, Libya, Iran, North Korea, Saudi Arabia and Vietnam. Abuses in the “war on terror” featured in France, Pakistan, the United Kingdom, and the United States, among others.

Grave human rights abuses are fueling the worsening humanitarian crisis in **Somalia** and the **Ogaden** region of eastern **Ethiopia**. “The situation in Somalia and Ethiopia’s Ogaden region, where millions are suffering, is a forgotten tragedy,” said Roth.

**Sudan’s** government bears principal responsibility for five years of the **Darfur** crisis, Human Rights Watch said. Some 2.4 million people are displaced, and 4 million people survive on humanitarian aid. In the last weeks, villages in West Darfur have been attacked, and civilians are at great risk as all sides ignore international humanitarian law.

**Burma’s** military government, notorious for decades of abuse, used deadly force in August and September in response to peaceful protests by monks, pro-democracy activists, and ordinary civilians. Hundreds of people remain arbitrarily detained.

In **Sri Lanka**, heavy fighting between the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam and government forces led to deliberate and indiscriminate attacks on civilians. Hundreds of people have “disappeared,” and more than 20,000 have been displaced.

**Israel’s** blockade of Gaza denies 1.4 million residents the food, fuel and medicine they need to survive, a collective punishment that violates international law. **Palestinian armed groups** continue to launch indiscriminate rocket attacks on populated areas of Israel in violation of international law.

Human Rights Watch said sustained international pressure around the **2008 Olympic Games** could push Chinese leaders to better respect human rights in **China**. But Human Rights Watch warned that the staging of the Olympics is exacerbating problems of forced evictions, migrant labor rights abuses, and the use of house arrests to silence dissidents. The Chinese government is cracking down on lawyers and human rights activists.

“The 2008 Olympics are an historic opportunity for the Chinese government to show the world that it can make human rights a reality for its 1.4 billion citizens,” said Roth.

**US abuses** against so-called “war on terror” detainees are a major concern; 275 detainees are still held at Guantanamo Bay without charge. Some of those remain after being cleared by the United States for release, because they cannot be sent home and no country will resettle them.

The **United States** continues to have the highest incarceration rate in the world, with black men incarcerated at more than six times the rate of white men.

Human Rights Watch has documented a number of **elections manipulated** through: outright fraud (Chad, Jordan, Kazakhstan, Nigeria, Uzbekistan); control of electoral machinery (Azerbaijan, Bahrain, Malaysia, Thailand, Zimbabwe); blocking or discouraging opposition candidates (Belarus, Cuba, Egypt, Iran, Israel in the Occupied Palestinian Territories, Libya, Turkmenistan, Uganda); political violence (Cambodia, Democratic Republic of Congo, Ethiopia, Lebanon); stifling the media and civil society (Russia, Tunisia); and undermining the rule of law (China, Pakistan).

Many of these tactics are illegal under domestic and international law, but rarely do outside powers call governments to account for it. Human Rights Watch said established democracies are often unwilling to do so for fear of losing access to resources or commercial opportunities, or because of the perceived requirements of fighting terrorism.

Human Rights Watch said the United States and the European Union should insist governments do more than hold a vote, and demand they uphold rights guaranteed by international law, including a free media, freedom of assembly, and a secret ballot.

“It seems Washington and European governments will accept even the most dubious election so long as the ‘victor’ is a strategic or commercial ally,” Roth said.

The United States and some allies have made it harder to demand other governments uphold human rights when they are committing abuses in the fight against terrorism. And when autocratic governments deflect criticism for violating human rights by pretending to be democrats, the global defense of rights is jeopardized, Human Rights Watch said.

In **Pakistan**, where President Pervez Musharraf has tilted the electoral playing field by rewriting the constitution and firing the independent judiciary, parliamentary elections are due in February. But the United States and Britain, Islamabad's largest aid donors, have refused to condition assistance to the government on improving pre-electoral conditions.

In **Kenya**, the United States has at least expressed concern about the apparent rigging of December's presidential poll and the violence that to date has claimed more than 700 lives. But having accepted the results of oil-rich **Nigeria's** February 2007 vote, despite widespread and credible accusations of poll-rigging and electoral violence, Washington left the impression in Nairobi that fraud would be tolerated. It has not even threatened to withhold aid to push the government to negotiate with the opposition.

"Nigeria's leader came to power in a violent and fraudulent vote, yet he's been accepted on the international stage," said Roth. "It's no wonder Kenya's president felt able to rig his re-election."

Bizarrely, the Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe (OSCE), which is supposed to promote democracy, human rights, and security, agreed to give its chair in 2010 to **Kazakhstan**, which has vast oil and gas reserves coveted by both the EU and Russia. The OSCE decision came after the Kazakh ruling party "won" every seat in August parliamentary elections, in which, according to the OSCE's own monitors, the media was censored, the opposition suppressed, and the counting flawed.

Human Rights Watch noted positive developments in holding abusive leaders to account. **Alberto Fujimori** and **Charles Taylor**, the former presidents of Peru and Liberia, are on trial for human rights abuses. The International Criminal Court holds its first trial in May.

The *World Report 2008* includes essays on China's foreign policy; how activists helped create the Yogyakarta Principles for gay rights; the scourge of violence against children at school, in the home, on the streets and in institutions; and the British government's erosion of the torture ban through "diplomatic assurances" against ill-treatment.