

Notes on *Human Rights Watch*

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The organization Human Rights Watch (HRW), much like counterpart Amnesty International (AI), is cited often by individuals and organizations of all political creeds and persuasions. Whether it is far-right opponents of Venezuelan president Hugo Chavez or leftist solidarity activists working on helping the beleaguered Palestinian people, it seems a citation from HRW is so respected that it takes on the air of non-ideological and non-partisan, making it so that they stand above the fray of politics. But is this really the case? Well, one of the main issues that can be brought up is simply how the organization pigeonholes these matters. To deal with this point, I found simply one article on the HRW main webpage (hrw.org) and dissected from there. The article in question is available at:

<http://hrw.org/editorials/2003/nigeria120403.htm>

And right from the start, it is too deeply woven with imperialist ideology to simply take apart when a line appears that is in favour of Western imperial interests. The White Man's burden approach to the "Human Rights" and International law implications implied therein are simply astounding. It is not so much what is said but rather how things are framed. The *ideology* of HRW, much like the major bourgeois media, as has often been said, is like the pane of glass you don't see, but which really determines the appearance of what you are looking at.

Let me first digress. International law since WWII, and more particularly the Geneva conventions of 1948, are not at all ambiguous. The first examples of precedents for today's law were the Nuremberg trials. There, the court detailed, the greatest threat one could put upon the rights of the world was to launch illegal aggressive war. These, in fact, were the primary charges that

brought convictions to men like Herman Goering. Does HRW still even mention this illegal act? After all, it was these charges—against the peace of humankind—that saw the Nazis get hanged (or swallow capsules). As Nuremberg saw it, all other crimes stemmed from the one basic crime against the peace of humanity.

HRW's front page recently had a 'special section' on Iraq. Seems promising, too. A picture of an Iraqi woman beside the title: "Off Target: The conduct of the war and civilian casualties in Iraq". Then the list of articles includes demanding a fair trial for Saddam; that civilian deaths were preventable; the creation of the war crimes tribunal is not being done properly; and Q & A on Iraq. This last one starts with what should be sufficient to dismiss it:

Question: What are the basic principles of international humanitarian law underlying military occupation?

HRW: International humanitarian law provides that once an occupying power has assumed authority over a territory, it is obliged to restore and maintain, as far as possible, public order and safety.

No, what International Law provides is not a human rights veneer for complaining about the insufficiencies in the American-appointed police force, that is to twist the precedents of WWII on their head. The implication, again this is the key area that HRW tap dances within, is that there was a legitimacy to the establishment of the Occupation itself, much like the administered regions of a defeated Germany in 1945. However, Germany had launched an all-out aggressive war, had invaded multiple countries, and had never

even contemplated a surrender until the state built by the Nazis was vanquished. Today, rather than Saddam's Iraq, those who are guilty of aggressive war, war crimes, illegal occupations et al are members of "the coalition of the willing". A human rights argument based on an honest interpretation of human rights law must simply call for the dismissal of the Occupation period, as a violation of the most elementary human rights: self-determination and popular sovereignty, and peace.

There is no international law that upholds the American presence or the legitimacy of it for anyone. For that, Human Rights Watch is needed. Again, what is not said is the real issue: Fair trial for Saddam Hussein? Okay. Arrest Bush and Blair as well. The law is very clear and could indict any coalition member without even trying. You don't need a law degree nor special rulings: just the face of it ought to be clear. By not raising this even peripherally, it is assumed this is 'ridiculous' or ideological. It reinforces, excuse the academic banter, the imperialist ideological paradigm. Subvert, First World liberals! Subvert! Civilian deaths were preventable? So the bombing now needs, what: a departmental review? This is like taking issue

not with the invasion of Poland or France *per se*, but rather simply the brutality of the Blitzkrieg. Such a discussion would make the entire article appear like not condemnation, but rather advice to the coalition. It establishes a seeming coziness with the brutal (and murderous) occupiers that should make any human rights analysis (or analyst) queasy.

Let me now return to the HRW document on Africa. The article on the recently held Commonwealth meetings was brutal as well. Again, it is what is not said that really needs to be flushed and fleshed out. This article was written (in Australia) for *The Australian* by Rory Mungoven, global advocacy director for Human Rights Watch in New York. It opens with this gem:

"When John Howard goes to the Commonwealth Heads of Government Meeting in Abuja today, he will at least be spared having to deal with some of the Commonwealth's more embarrassing relatives."

The sheer racism of this, never mind the imperialist ideology it is shot through with, are what is truly embarrassing. Of course, those that are so nasty to HRW's Mungoven are Robert Mugabe and Pervez Musharraf. That this is addressed to how Howard—a Prime Minister who is only second to Tony Blair in supplying military help to the illegal invasion of Iraq—should intervene more in other countries is as clear a statement about where HRW sees itself in today's world. That John Howard is not called on this ongoing massive violation of human rights, international law and a crime against peace—but instead is seen as the 'upholder of human rights'—is not something that can be overlooked. The greatest war criminals of this short millennium are touted as their defenders. Orwell as human rights advocate.

The article is about the leader of Nigeria, President Olusegun Obasanjo. He has granted asylum to Charles Taylor of Liberia, and apparently ran less than squeaky clean elections in 1999. Never mind suspicions about why Nigeria and why now? Talking about oil in these discussions does get repetitive—leading a campaign into Iraq that removes popular sovereignty, kills upwards of ten thousand from bombs and guns and hundreds of thousands more through blockades and intermittent bombings for twelve years in non-sanctioned 'no fly zones', denying medicines, and ultimately taking control of the oil of the people in order to suit the needs of Empire: What does a human rights advocate do about all of this? We must express our deep felt hope that these white men from colonial states will uphold 'international humanitarian law'.

Today, anywhere in the world, when a group like HRW starts talking about 'human rights', it is important to try one little trick. It will get you through 95% of those articles with a better understanding then if it is taken without deep, deep cynicism. Try substituting 'property rights' for human rights. Then it becomes easy to see why Blair is 'democratic' and Robert Mugabe, Hugo Chavez and Fidel Castro are lumped together, no matter how different they might be from one another. The same, of course, was true of Slobodan Milosevic. And today, the government of Yugoslavia has just started (in full imperialist occupation) to lift what amounted to martial law after Zoran Djindjic—the expert pro-West anti-communist privatizer appointed prime minister—was assassinated. Where is the screaming and howling from HRW about that? Only a few months ago, the Libyan revolutionary leadership



announced that it was abandoning the socialist aspects of their revolution. Lo and behold, Qaddafi then is 'coming in from the cold' only months later. Weapons of mass destruction? How about diversions of mass deception.

Look to see either AI or HRW to put forward Moammar Qaddafi for this years Nobel Peace Prize. You get commended by imperialism for surrendering to imperialism. That is why Yasir Arafat was given the Nobel Peace prize for his work in establishing the Oslo settlement process (pun intended). When he was only willing to go 95% over to the side of the imperialist occupation, he was re-branded a terrorist. And HRW? I would need to write for several pages to list the things that go unsaid when one finally tracks down anything regarding the situation in Palestine. There is nothing pointing out that the Occupation of the West Bank and Gaza is illegal. Yes, they will condemn the odd "incursion" but in the same discourse as they do with the American occupiers—that they can be convinced otherwise with persuasion and letter writing. When a desperate occupied Palestinian blows herself up, HRW is on the case, condemning "crimes against humanity", the single gravest charge they can issue. HRW and AI both uphold part of the 1948 conventions: they will state that the refugees from 1948, 1967 and all other refugees and their descendants have the right (as is international law) to return to their place of birth, i.e. the right to go home. However, the only way to find this out is to search for it, the entire Palestinian conflict is kept a long way away from the front pages of the HRW website, lest it cost them the financial support of certain members. Further on Palestine: the wholesale theft of water is not mentioned; the assassination of 'militants' is never mentioned unless it involves "collateral damage"; the entire conflict itself is not even mentioned on the front page of their 'regional' link to the Middle East, in fact. One would get the impression that they are worried about the

embarrassment that such coverage might cause: exposing their absolutely breathtaking pro-imperialism (the whole section is devoted to asking America to illegally occupy Iraq less brutally) and pro-Zionism (saying nothing means saying yes). And back to the article on Africa and the commonwealth countries. What does the venerable Rory Mungoven suggest we do about the human rights violators in the commonwealth? He starts his closing paragraph (a call for sanctions and isolation of Obasanjo) with this statement, now growing beyond irony into mere farce:

"Howard, Tony Blair and other Commonwealth leaders should speak out on these issues or risk being accused of double standards, which would undermine the effectiveness of their interventions on Zimbabwe and Pakistan, and the Commonwealth's commitment to human rights itself."

Effectiveness of their interventions? Double standards? Commitment to human rights itself? No kidding, Rory! Need I spell this out?

Imperialism has had growing trouble convincing people around the world since September 11 that they are really humanitarian based imperialism. Bill Clinton, with limited success, sold such an image with his slaughter of peoples in the Balkans. George Soros, billionaire philanthropist and top financier of HRW, helped engineer the coup that recolonized Yugoslavia once and for all in October 2000. Since, the image of America the human rights crusader has been reduced dramatically. That reputation has been tattered almost out of reach with the swagger and trigger happy unilateral regime in Washington DC led by Cheney and Bush. Imperialism needs to have a veneer of pro-human rights language, a humanitarian concern for the everyman (and woman, especially in the Middle East). That ideological control over the minds of the oppressed, as Steven Biko said, is the greatest weapon in the hand of the oppressor. After 9-11, the humanitarian impulse was harder



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and harder to sell, but thank goodness groups like Amnesty International and Human Rights Watch will work overtime to rescue their image, encourage people to believe in the legitimacy of their war criminals in charge.

One might be tempted to say that without human rights discourse, the world at large would be forced to discuss the benefits and merits of militarism, racism and imperialism instead. HRW is absolutely essential in helping the modern Empire in protecting itself ideologically. Or, to use the language of pro-sports: they are not only on the team, HRW and AI are among the most valuable players game in and game out. They give it their all, and it's all the little things they do that can't be measured, but make them among imperialisms most valued assets.

Should we continue to rely on their pronouncements regarding various conflicts? Certainly, just as one should do the same with the *New York Times*. However, one would be foolish to suppose the *New York Times* is "neutral" or is telling the whole story. It is quite clear where they are coming from on these matters. Let us not be fooled by the language of Rudyard Kipling, George Soros and Human Rights Watch, either. They are merely more players on the same team, even if they are sent into the game only to "mop up" when the other players make a mess they can't clean up themselves.