Human Rights Watch (HRW), an independent non-governmental organization based in New York, investigates and reports on human rights abuses in some seventy countries, including the United States. HRW’s purpose is to hold governments accountable for violations of internationally recognized human rights and humanitarian law, and to promote respect for human rights by governments, international organizations, and civil societies to end such abuses. We address the practices of governments without regard to ideological or geopolitical orientation, and of all religious persuasions.

The organization also responds to abuses committed by armed insurgent groups. Among the major concerns of the organization are freedom of expression and association, due process and equal protection of the law, torture, arbitrary imprisonment, and disappearances. HRW recognizes the indivisibility of human rights, including economic, social, and cultural rights. We work focuses on civil and political rights, including the right of workers to exercise freedom of association and to engage in collective bargaining.

The organization began modestly in 1978 as Helsinki Watch, named after the Helsinki Accords, a 1975 agreement reached by the Conference on Security and Cooperation in Europe with the human rights provisions of the Final Act of the conference, known as the Helsinki Agreement. An Americas Watch division emerged in the early 1980s to monitor human rights developments in Central and Latin America and US human rights policy today. Today HRW also includes divisions that monitor developments in Africa, Asia, and the Middle East and North Africa. Three thematic divisions focus on Women’s Rights, Children’s Rights, and Arms (the role of arms transfers to abusive forces and particular weapons systems that are inherently cruel or indiscriminate, such as landmines). A current theme of Human Rights Watch is international justice, which includes support for the special international criminal tribunals in former Yugoslavia and Rwanda, the campaign to establish an International Criminal Court, and, following on Spain’s request to extradite former Chilean dictator Augusto Pinochet, efforts to encourage national systems to prosecute crimes of recognized international jurisdiction such as war crimes, genocide and crimes against humanity.

HRW promotes its efforts on the universality of the core rights specified in the 1948 Universal Declaration and subsequently codified as treaty law in the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights (ICCPR) and the International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights (ICESCR). From this perspective, HRW applies the same criteria when it monitors the practices of governments claiming to be Islamic as when it examines states that discriminate against its Shiites or Sunni Muslims. The organization has similarly opposed discrimination against its Christian minorities, in an effort to persuade governments to adopt policies to fulfill their responsibility to protect women’s lives and physical security.

In all these areas, HRW tracks the implementation of human rights legislation to sanction a whole range of abuses, including this one.

Human Rights Watch and the Muslim World

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