

Helsinki Watch in Budapest

by David Matas

The Final Act of the Conference on Security and Cooperation in Europe signed in Helsinki in 1975, and called the Helsinki Accord, represented an innovation in East/West relations. It linked peace to human contacts and respect for human rights.

The Helsinki Accord has thirty-five signatories, thirty-three of them from Eastern and Western Europe, the US and Canada. The Accord contains three baskets of provisions. Basket 1 deals with confidence-building measures, security and disarmament. Basket 2 deals with cooperation in economics, science, technology and the environment. Basket 3 deals with human contacts, the free flow of information, cultural exchanges and education exchanges.

The Soviets entered into the Helsinki Accord because they sought recognition of the postwar boundaries of Europe. There was never a postwar treaty recognizing current boundaries. The Final Act of Helsinki committed the signatories to respect the territorial integrity of each of the participating states. The West saw the Accord as a vehicle for promoting human rights in Europe. The Act is viewed by the signatories as a political commitment, rather than a legally-binding instrument. It states that it is not eligible for registration as a treaty under the Charter of the United Nations.

Following up Helsinki

The Accord, in a section called "Follow up to the Conference," provides for review meetings on the implementation of the provisions of the Final Act, as well as for specialized meetings of experts. To date there have been two General Review Conferences — the Belgrade Conference of 1977-78 and the Madrid Conference of 1980-83.

Madrid was a disaster. It was not scheduled to last three years. It went on that long because the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan and martial law in Poland made unanimity impossible. The rules of the Conference required that all participants agreed before the final document was adopted. The Madrid Concluding Document did propose a number of specialized follow-up meetings. It proposed a human rights experts' meeting in Ottawa beginning on May 7, 1985. It proposed a meeting on the peaceful settlement of disputes, commencing on March 21, 1984, in Athens. It provided for a conference on confidence and security building measures for Europe in Stockholm commencing

January 17, 1984. The participating states agreed to a seminar on security and cooperation in the Mediterranean, commencing October 16, 1984, in Venice. The Madrid Concluding Document also provided for a cultural forum in Budapest for October 15, 1986. Finally the next General Review Conference was scheduled for Vienna commencing on September 23, 1986.

"Helsinki Watch" groups

With the advent of the Helsinki Accord there sprang up in Eastern Europe "Helsinki Watch" groups. The Final Act, as an introduction to the three baskets of provisions, set out a declaration on principles guiding relations among participating states. One of those points — Principle VII — is respect for human rights and fundamental freedoms. Principle VII says, among other things, that the participating states "confirm the right of the individual to know and act upon his rights and duties in this field." The Helsinki Watch groups of Eastern Europe attempted to assert this right to know and act upon their rights. For this effort, they were boycotted, blacklisted and imprisoned by their own governments. The most notable Eastern European dissidents of today, like Sakharov and Shcharansky, were founders of the Helsinki Watch groups in their countries.

For Western Europe and North America, a parallel movement was founded at a conference in Bellagio, Italy, in 1982 — the International Helsinki Human Rights Federation. The IHF is a federation of Helsinki Watch groups in democratic countries established to monitor the signatories' compliance with the human rights commitments under the Helsinki Accord. The Helsinki Watch groups of the IHF do openly and above ground what the Eastern European Helsinki Watch groups have been forced to do underground. The IHF has ten member Helsinki Watch groups from ten countries including Canada. The Federation and its member Watch groups are nongovernmental organizations.

The IHF engages in conferences and meetings. It sends out fact-finding missions. It publishes reports. The

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