

### Why This Report?

Despite this substantial record, much of the UN's action in the field of human rights is largely unknown outside the walls of the Palais des Nations in Geneva (where most of the human rights meetings take place) or UN headquarters in New York. There are a number of reasons for this. Until recently, UN human rights documents were difficult to obtain. If you were outside Geneva or New York, either you got the documents by attending the meeting in question, or you went to a library which served as a UN depository and requested the material, preferably by document number. Not surprisingly, accessing such material was far more difficult in countries of the developing South than it was in countries of the industrialized North.

Since December 10, 1996, when the Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights opened its Home Page on the World Wide Web, there has been a dramatic improvement in our ability to access UN human rights documentation. For example, it is now possible to get many documents of the Commission on Human Rights by going on-line and downloading them, well before the Commission begins its work in March. As well, a very substantial part of UN documentation can now be obtained by accessing the UN's Optical Disk System on the Internet for an annual subscription fee of \$1,500 US.

Nonetheless, even with access to the Internet, getting country-specific information about UN action in the field of human rights involves visiting a plethora of different Web pages to locate the critical documents needed. Thus, a key purpose of this volume is to pull together all relevant UN documents about the human rights situation in every country, so that the information is readily accessible to governments, NGOs, researchers, journalists and others. The hope is that this will facilitate informed policy-making in the area of human rights, whether by governmental, inter-governmental or non-governmental actors. In addition, the report has a thematic section which summarizes the major developments that occurred in the UN arena concerning human rights during the last calendar year (1997).

### Format

The report is produced in three formats: in hardcopy (in English and French); on the World Wide Web, with full hyperlinks to all the original documentation for the English report; and as a CD-ROM (of the Website) for dissemination in the South.

It is important to stress that, while we must of necessity summarize actions and decisions of UN bodies and mechanisms, we have striven to present the material as objectively as possible, and with no editorial comment.

The time-period covered by the report is the calendar year, from 1 January to 31 December 1997. The focus is on the main bodies that take action in the area of human rights. In concrete terms, this means that we cover the work of the Commission on Human Rights in March/April, the Sub-Commission in August, ECOSOC in July, the Third Committee of the General Assembly in November, the sessions of the

treaty-bodies whenever they meet throughout the year, and actions or decisions of the Security Council and UN field presences whenever these are relevant. In future years, we hope to expand the coverage to encompass the work of other bodies and agencies in the UN system. However, for this initial report, we have focused narrowly on the major areas of activity.

Because of its size, the report is being presented in six volumes to make it more manageable for those who will want the report close at hand when they attend relevant UN meetings. Vol. 1 (which includes this introduction) also contains: the Thematic Section of the report; an Appendix describing UN bodies and mechanisms; a calendar indicating when treaty-bodies plan to consider the reports of specific countries; and a list indicating when the different mechanisms of the Commission on Human Rights are up for renewal. The other volumes are geographically organized: Vol. 2, Africa; Vol. 3, Asia; Vol. 4, Latin America and the Caribbean; Vol. 5, Eastern Europe, and Vol. 6., Western Europe and Other.

### Partnership and Acknowledgements

The report has been produced by Human Rights Internet (HRI) — an international NGO in consultative status with ECOSOC, headquartered in Ottawa, Canada — in partnership with the Canadian Department of Foreign Affairs and International Trade (DFAIT). The research, writing and editing, as well as the development of the Website, was done by a small HRI team. The team worked closely with the Human Rights Division of DFAIT and under the guidance of an international advisory committee that included individuals knowledgeable about the Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights and the HCHR's Website, the UN Division for the Advancement of Women, the treaty bodies, DFAIT and the Canadian International Development Agency (CIDA). This notwithstanding, Human Rights Internet alone assumes responsibility for any errors in fact or judgment found in this report.

Work on this report began in August, with the bulk of it completed within a six-month period. This would not have been possible without the indefatigable Jan Bauer, who wrote the draft manuscript, and a team of three interns (Britt Elliott, Cynthia Gervais and Paul Williams, later joined by a fourth, Steve Mason) who amassed and prepared all the documentation to be summarized. Tanja Kisslinger, HRI's Website Coordinator, is responsible for the design and execution of the Website, and for supervising the HTML coding of thousands of pages of documentation.

Ross Hynes and Adele Dion, successively directors of the Human Rights Division of DFAIT, were responsible for ensuring the life of the report, while Robert Lawrence assumed the unenviable position of coordinating the project. The fact that this report has become a reality is due, in large part, to the vision and commitment of the Honourable Lloyd Axworthy, Canada's Minister of Foreign Affairs.

Laurie Wiseberg  
Executive Director  
Human Rights Internet