

November 22, 2010 Monday 15 Kislev 5771 12:28 IST



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## Human Rights Watch versus human rights

By GERALD STEINBERG  
08/05/2010

Based on recent revelations, there were systematic violations in the organization, especially regarding Israel.

New York-based Human Rights Watch – once the “gold standard” of moral watchdogs – is playing a leading role in demonizing Israel through false allegations of war crimes. HRW supported the UN report condemning Israel on Jenin (2002) and the attack on the separation barrier as a violation of international law (2004), charged Israel with “deliberate” and “indiscriminate” attacks on civilians in Lebanon (2006) and issued a flood of such allegations about Gaza (2009).

HRW also claimed credit for Judge Richard Goldstone’s one-sided UN “inquiry” on the Gaza fighting. Goldstone is a close confidant of HRW’s executive director Kenneth Roth, and was a member of HRW’s board.

But HRW has been shattered following revelations of systematic factual, moral and ethical violations, particularly with respect to Israel. Marc Garlasco, HRW’s “senior military analyst,” who wrote many of the accusations about Gaza, including the white phosphorous libel, was fired. This followed discovery of his obsessive collection of Nazi war memorabilia, but the deeper issues relate to the credibility of his military analyses. (The investigation HRW promised six months ago never happened, and instead, it imposed a gag order on Garlasco.) Garlasco is a symptom, and after NGO Monitor’s systematic revelations of HRW hypocrisy, founder Robert Bernstein denounced his own organization for helping undermine the principles of human rights. Articles by Jonathan Foreman in the *Sunday Times* and Benjamin Birnbaum in *The New Republic* have further exposed the mythology.

BASED ON interviews with HRW board members, employees and others, Birnbaum documented systematic bias and factual distortions. Sarah Leah Whitson (who led a bizarre fund-raising trip to Saudi Arabia, invoking the specter of the “pro-Israel” lobby) was brought in by Roth to head the Middle East and North Africa division. Whitson is an admirer of Norman Finkelstein, who, as Birnbaum notes, is a “Hizbullah supporter who has likened Israel to Nazi Germany” and accuses Jews of exploiting the Holocaust. In an e-mail, Whitson wrote of her “tremendous respect and admiration for him, because... making Israeli abuses the focus of one’s life work is a thankless but courageous task...”

Whitson deputy, Joe Stork, has at least 30 years of experience as a virulent pro-Palestinian activist. And four other MENA staff members, past and present, have similar “solidarity” backgrounds, which accounts for the systematic bias in HRW reports on Israel.

As former HRW board member Edith Everett told Birnbaum: “There was a commitment to a point of view – that Israel’s the bad guy.” Other insiders noted “a palpable hostility toward Israel among the HRW brass,” and the attitude that “Israel’s sort of like low-hanging fruit.”

HRW’s Palestinian tilt is even reflected in the office décor.

These revelations have also exposed the façade of HRW's "research," which parrots Palestinian testimonies. Garlasco spoke of being "pushed by HRW headquarters to focus on white phosphorous... because... it was regarded as a headline-generating story."

He also confirmed the suspicion that Roth, Whitson and others deliberately ignored "necessary context when covering war" – such as war crimes committed by Yasser Arafat, Hamas and Hizbullah. HRW's rare and low-visibility reports on suicide bombers, Hamas and Hizbullah were token efforts to counter evidence of bias.

Roth fostered a culture of intimidation to hide his immoral tilt. Sid Sheinberg, vice-chairman of HRW's board, noted that "I've had staff members come to me and tell me off the record that they're not happy with the way this particular thing is being done, but they're not going to say anything."

A former board member noted HRW's "intolerance for open dialogue."

IN CONTRAST to the obsessive focus on Israel, HRW was relatively quiet on Iran and its incitement to genocide. Roth refused to join others in condemning President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad's calls for Israel to be "wiped off the map" by quibbling about the way the statement had been translated. Birnbaum cites Roth's excuse that "it was not HRW's place to render judgments on such rhetoric."

Gregory Stanton, a respected professor of genocide studies and prevention, noted that HRW also opposed the creation of the Khmer Rouge Tribunal, and "refused to call the genocide in Darfur by its • proper name."

With HRW's reputation in ruins, one might have expected Roth, Whitson, Stork and others to have resigned in embarrassment, or face removal by board members responsible for oversight. But Roth and his remaining supporters still cling to power, and to control over a \$40 million annual budget.

Indeed, board member Kathleen Peratis, a staunch Roth loyalist, issued HRW's official response to these revelations, filled with pious and patronizing slogans. After declaring her "love for Israel," Peratis announced: "There is no bias against Israel... except in the minds of those who erroneously believe Israel is harmed by honest criticism. Far from harming it, I believe this work strengthens Israel."

The best defense that HRW can produce is a collection of vacuous clichés.

HRW's abuses have damaged not only Israel, but the moral and ethical foundations of human rights and international law. Only a complete restructuring of the top management, beginning with Roth and the entire Middle East division, can restore HRW's reputation.

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