

## World Report: Governments soft-talking abusers

Human Rights Watch  
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Too many governments are accepting the rationalizations and subterfuges of repressive governments, replacing pressure to respect human rights with softer approaches such as private "dialogue" and "cooperation," Human Rights Watch said today [in releasing its \*World Report 2011\*](#)

. Instead of standing up firmly against abusive leaders, many governments, including European Union member states, adopt policies that do not generate pressure for change. (...)

Dialogue and cooperation are important for addressing human rights concerns, and achieving cooperation is a key goal of human rights advocacy, Human Rights Watch said. But when there is a lack of political will to respect rights, pressure changes the cost-benefit analysis that leads a government to choose repression. (...)

Recent examples of failure to exert pressure include the EU's obsequious approach toward Uzbekistan and Turkmenistan, the West's soft reaction to certain favored African autocrats such as Paul Kagame of Rwanda and Meles Zenawi of Ethiopia, and the near-universal cowardice in confronting China's deepening crackdown on basic liberties. The most effective support for human rights in China in 2010 came from the Norwegian Nobel committee's awarding of the Nobel Peace Prize to imprisoned Chinese dissident Liu Xiaobo.

Pressure has not been abandoned, Human Rights Watch said. But it has been used primarily toward governments whose behavior is so outrageous that it overshadows other interests at stake, such as North Korea, Iran, or Zimbabwe.

The use of dialogue and cooperation in lieu of pressure has emerged with a vengeance at the United Nations, from Secretary-General Ban Ki-moon to many members of the Human Rights Council, Human Rights Watch said. In addition, leading democracies of the global South, such as South Africa, India, and Brazil, have promoted quiet demarches as a preferred response to repression. Recent illustrations include Association of Southeast Asian Nations' (ASEAN) tepid response to Burmese repression, the United Nations' deferential attitude toward Sri Lankan wartime atrocities, and India's pliant policy toward Burma and Sri Lanka, Human Rights Watch said.

US President Barack Obama increased his focus on human rights in his second year in office, but his eloquent statements have not always been followed by concrete actions. Nor has he insisted that the various US government agencies convey strong human rights messages

consistently, with the result that the Defense Department and various US embassies - in Egypt, Indonesia, and Bahrain, for example - often deliver divergent messages.

Dialogues of any sort, whether public or private, have greater impact when tied to concrete benchmarks, Human Rights Watch said. Benchmarks give a clear direction to the dialogue and make the participants accountable for concrete results. (...)

"This is a particularly bad time for proponents of human rights to lose their public voice," Roth said. "Abusive governments and their allies, trying to prevent the vigorous enforcement of human rights, have had no qualms about raising theirs."

Sri Lanka, for example, strongly pressured the UN to try to quash a UN advisory panel on accountability for war crimes committed during its armed conflict with the Tamil Tigers. China mounted a major lobbying effort to discourage governments from attending the Nobel Prize ceremony for Liu Xiaobo. And China made a similar effort to block a proposed UN commission of inquiry into war crimes committed in Burma, which had the strong support of the US and several EU member states.

The UN Human Rights Council has been especially timid, with many countries refusing to vote for resolutions aimed at a particular country. In an extreme example, rather than condemn Sri Lanka for the brutal abuses against civilians in the final months of the conflict with the Tamil Tigers, the council congratulated Sri Lanka, Human Rights Watch said.

Although the EU's partnership and cooperation agreements with other countries are routinely conditioned on basic respect for human rights, it has concluded a significant trade agreement and pursued a full-fledged partnership and cooperation agreement with Turkmenistan, a severely repressive government, without conditioning either on human rights improvements or engaging in any serious efforts to secure improvements in advance, Human Rights Watch said. And the EU opened accession discussions with Serbia despite its failure to apprehend and surrender for trial Ratko Mladic, the Bosnian Serb wartime military leader and an internationally indicted war crimes suspect, a key benchmark for beginning the discussions. The EU also lifted sanctions imposed on Uzbekistan after security forces massacred hundreds in 2005 in the city of Andijan, even though the Uzbek government took no steps to fill any of the EU criteria required for lifting the sanctions.

By the same token, the Obama administration in its first year simply ignored the human rights conditions on the transfer of military aid to Mexico under the Mérida Initiative even though Mexico failed to prosecute abusive military officials in civilian courts as required. Only in the administration's second year did it withhold some aid.

"Dialogue and cooperation have their place, but the burden should be on the abusive government to show a genuine willingness to improve," Roth said. "In the absence of the demonstrated political will by abusive governments to make change, governments of good will

need to apply pressure to end repression."

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