

INTERNATIONAL



Report: Fear of terrorism, refugees compromise human rights

New Human Rights Watch report focuses on the loss of civil liberties in the face of increasing talk of national security

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by [Natasja Sheriff](#)

Terrorist attacks, the threat of Islamic State in Iran and the Levant (ISIL) and the large scale movement of people fleeing conflict and repression have prompted governments to adopt a politics of fear that threatens human rights and civil liberties across the world, according to the Human Rights Watch World Report 2016, released Wednesday.

"Fear stood behind many of the big human rights developments of the past year," Human Rights Watch (HRW) Executive Director Kenneth Roth says in the report.

Fear of being killed or tortured in conflict, fear of asylum seekers, fear of terrorist attacks, fear of dissent has led Western and autocratic governments alike to curtail rights and civil liberties in the name of security.

The 659-page report documents the human rights record of more than 90 countries. Among them, the report points to crackdowns in Russia and China, where the intensity of repression of civic groups, rights lawyers and activists "has not been seen in decades", according to the report.

Egypt is a country that is [still in crisis](#), according to the report.

According to the report, the government of President Abdel Fattah El Sisi has imprisoned tens of thousands of people and sentenced hundreds to death.

In July, the Interior Minister reported that roughly [12,000 people had been arrested on terrorism charges in 2015](#) alone. Sisi has also introduced sweeping counterterrorism laws and continues to suppress freedom of expression and association.

In Ethiopia, journalists, opposition politicians and protestors suffered harassment and arbitrary arrest. Detainees were tortured and ill-treated, according to the report, including U.K. citizen [Andargachew Tsige](#), who remains in prison.

Authorities in Sudan have also clamped down on the media and the activities of civil society groups and violent campaigns and abuses by government forces continue in Darfur, South Kordofan and Blue Nile states.

'Xenophobic' policies

European countries and the United States also come under scrutiny.

"Fear of terrorist attacks and mass refugee flows are driving many Western governments to roll back human rights protections," Roth said in a press release.

"These backward steps threaten the rights of all without any demonstrated effectiveness in protecting ordinary people."

Elena Crespi, western Europe Program Officer with the International Federation for Human Rights in Belgium says the events of the past year have "lead to xenophobic and nationalistic rhetoric and also sometimes to the adoption of laws and measures even in blatant disregard for international human rights."

Crespi points to [Hungary's construction of a fence along its border with Serbia](#) to prevent refugees crossing the border into the country. She told AL Jazeera America the move prevents them from exercising their right to asylum under international law and the Geneva Convention.

According to HRW, Hungary also implemented an accelerated asylum procedure, affecting due process rights, and a three-day limit for judicial review, also at odds with the rights of refugees.

EU member states have responded to the refugee crisis with a policy of closure, says Crespi.

"We saw the adoption of a series of measures and policies that confirmed a security-centered approach to migration that was already there in Europe."

Security v. rights

National security concerns have also lead to policies that curtail civil liberties, giving government authorities and law enforcement officers new powers without judicial control.

Following the [attacks in Paris in November](#), the French government declared a [state of emergency](#) that has drawn comparisons with the U.S. Patriot Act. On Tuesday, President François Hollande [sought to extend](#) the emergency measures for a further three months.

On the same day, Denmark [adopted](#) a new law allowing police to seize assets worth more than \$1450 from asylum seekers, echoing a move by Switzerland earlier this month.

In the United Kingdom, the government is seeking to expand surveillance under a [new](#) Investigatory Powers Bill.

In the United States, the report notes that law enforcement officials have sought to weaken Internet security and mobile phones to facilitate surveillance.

According to Andrew Crocker, a staff attorney with the Electronic Frontier Foundation, those efforts weren't new but they were revived after the attacks in Paris and [San Bernardino](#). The Paris attacks prompted similar calls for increased surveillance.

The United States also responded to the attacks and refugee crisis in a number of ways that are not discussed in the report. More than 40 bills were introduced in Congress since November, said Muzaffar Chishty, New York office director of the Migration Policy Institute, all related to issues of refugees or terrorism, and broadly related to the San Bernardino shooting.

Legislative efforts sought to freeze admission of refugees, particularly from Syria and Iraq, or to make screening of refugees for settlement in the U.S. more difficult. In November, 28 governors sought to block the resettlement of refugees in their states.

Last week, a bill to increase screening of refugees was [blocked](#) in the Senate while a [new law](#) came into force preventing dual citizens of Iran, Iraq, Syria or Sudan, or citizens of 38 countries who have visited those countries since 2011, from entering the U.S. using the Visa Waiver program.

The HRW report does address the U.S. human rights record on criminal justice and racial discrimination, [issues highlighted](#) during the United States Universal Periodic Review before the Human Rights Council in May last year.

Nonetheless, the HRW report notes some positive developments such as peaceful elections in Burma in November 2015 and an overwhelming victory for the opposition National League for Democracy, although how the new government will address the plight of the Rohingya people remains uncertain.

The legalization of same-sex marriage in Ireland, Mexico and the U.S., and the decriminalization of homosexuality in Mozambique represented a step forward in the rights of lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender (LGBT) people.

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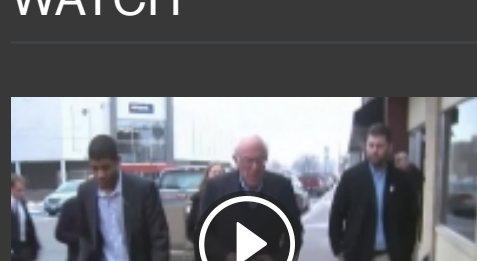
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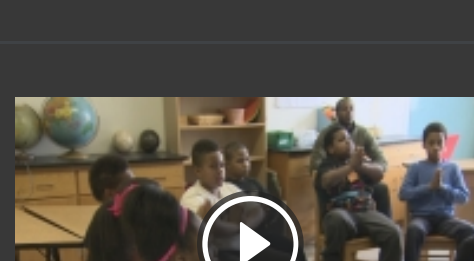
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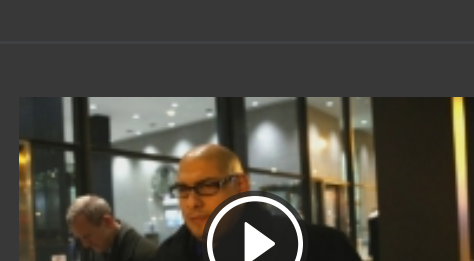
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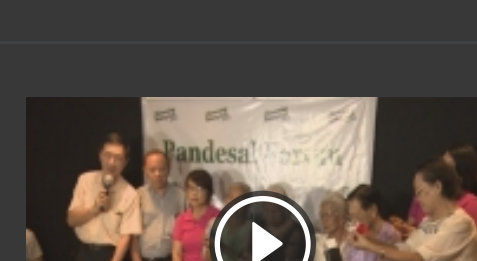
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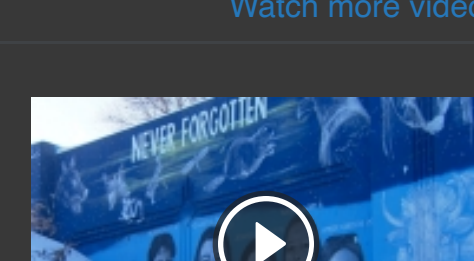
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