

Human Rights Watch report documents attack on democratic rights in US and Europe

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1 February 2016

Last week, US-based watchdog group Human Rights Watch warned of mounting attacks on democratic rights throughout Europe and North America, which governments have justified as a response to the migrant crisis.

The group's annual report warned that the arrival of refugees fleeing war and repression in the Middle East is "driving many Western governments to roll back human rights protections," adding, "these backward steps threaten the rights of all" sections of the population, not just refugees.

In the report's lead essay, Human Rights Watch Executive Director Kenneth Roth notes, "In Europe and the United States, a polarizing us-versus-them rhetoric has moved from the political fringe to the mainstream. Blatant Islamophobia and shameless demonizing of refugees have become the currency of an increasingly assertive politics of intolerance."

"Public discourse," Roth continues, "has been filled with voices of hatred and fear of Muslims, for whom the refugees [arriving in Europe] are surrogates." This climate contributes to "the persistent discrimination, hopelessness, and despair that pervade neighborhoods on the outskirts of some European cities."

2015 saw a dramatic rollback of democratic rights throughout Europe and America. In France, the Hollande government pushed through sweeping expansions of government surveillance and curtailing freedom of speech, seizing upon the attacks in Paris this November and the *Charlie Hebdo* attacks at the beginning of the year. In the United States, the military was deployed to Baltimore to crack down on peaceful protests against police brutality at the beginning of the year, while mass government spying continued unimpeded.

The report contains comprehensive summaries for

more than 90 countries for the year of 2015. By far the largest single section, with 24 pages, is on the European Union, more than Saudi Arabia, whose absolute monarchy beheaded record numbers of people last year, including many political prisoners, and countries currently embroiled in civil wars such as Syria and Libya. The United States came in second place, with 17 pages.

The report notes that at the time of writing 850,000 people had crossed into Europe by boat in 2015, mainly from war-torn countries in the Horn of Africa and the Middle East, especially Syria. Of these, more than 3,770, one third of whom were children, drowned. By far the most common route for migrants was from mainland Turkey to Greek islands in the neighboring Aegean sea.

Previous agreements by European governments to resettle asylum seekers throughout the continent remain a dead letter as countries throughout Europe close off their borders to refugees. Only 159 asylum seekers have been relocated from Italy and Greece in spite of an agreement last year to resettle 160,000 asylum seekers from these countries.

Attacks on Muslims rose sharply last year, as far-right and neo-Nazi groups are emboldened by the discriminatory policies of European governments. Such attacks have grown by 46.7 percent in London in the first half of 2015. However, racist attacks are by no means limited solely to Muslims; reports of anti-Semitic attacks are also on the rise, and discriminatory evictions of Roma by governments throughout the EU continue. Widespread discrimination also exists in the Baltic countries against native Russian speakers.

As Roth notes, Europe is joined in its persecution of refugees by the United States. Last year 30 US governors tried to prevent Syrian refugees from

entering their states, while current Republican front-runner Donald Trump floated the idea of banning Muslims from entering the country altogether. The United States, the report declares, also “continued the dramatic expansion of detention of migrant mothers and their children from Central America,” many fleeing violence in their home countries, over the course of last year. While not mentioned in the report, the Obama administration rang in the new year last month with a new round of targeted deportations of Central American children.

The report also notes with concern the continued drive to expand state repression and surveillance in the United States and Europe, justified in the main by the supposed threat of terrorism. Citing the Paris terror attacks last November, the report warns that “past experience of major attacks in Europe raised concerns that human rights protections would again be weakened in the name of security.” According to the report, 298 people had been charged in France with the “broad and indefinite” crime of “glorification of terrorism” within less than three months after the *Charlie Hebdo* attacks last January.

In the United States, spy agency leaders seized upon the Paris attacks last year to renew their calls for a “back door” to online encryption, despite the fact that the Paris attackers did not encrypt their communications. Meanwhile, Guantanamo Bay’s detention center remains open despite years of empty promises by Obama to close it. And last year’s National Defense Authorization Act, signed into law by Obama, “tightened existing restrictions on the transfer of detainees out of Guantanamo,” making the release or transfer of detainees even more difficult.

Many of the worst human rights violations elsewhere in the report were committed by allies of the United States or the European imperialist powers. In discussing the Saudi-led invasion of Yemen, for example, in which civilian infrastructure has been deliberately targeted, the report argues that by virtue of providing “intelligence, logistical support and personnel” to the Saudis the United States would be “potentially jointly responsible for laws-of-war violations by coalition forces.” The report also cites continuing US aid to Egyptian dictator Abdel Fattah al-Sisi as well as the Obama administration’s waiving of provisions of the Child Soldier Prevention Act to

continue supporting the militaries of several African countries.

World imperialism has justified countless criminal wars over the past quarter century under the fraudulent pretext of “humanitarian interventionism.” Now, a leading human rights group is compelled to admit that these same powers are responsible for major human rights violations within their own borders. This not only exposes imperialism’s professed concern for “human rights” as a fraud, it is also an indication of the growth of police-state forms of rule within these countries, directed above all against their own working classes.



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