

# The Washington Post

## With \$100 million Soros gift, Human Rights Watch looks to expand global reach

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NEW YORK - The \$100 million gift to Human Rights Watch from billionaire George Soros announced last week will extend the overseas presence of the influential American rights champion and ensure its financial health for years to come.

But the goal of the gift is more ambitious still: to alter the way human rights are promoted in the 21st century, making rights advocacy less of an exclusively American and European cause.

The donation, the largest single gift ever from the Hungarian-born investor and philanthropist, is premised on the belief that U.S. leadership on human rights has been diminished by a decade of harsh policies in the war on terrorism. Soros said he hopes the money will cultivate a much broader constituency of foreign policymakers and philanthropists who embrace the notion that human rights should be observed universally.

"Unfortunately, we lost the moral high ground during the Bush administration and the Obama administration has not done enough to regain it," Soros said in an interview. "Therefore human rights as an American cause is often resisted because it comes from America."

"Yet the principal of human rights is a universal principal, and people in other parts of the world believe it is as strongly as we do, even more strongly," he said. "To be more efficient, Human Rights Watch has to become a truly international organization."

The rights group, which covers more than 90 countries from 45 locations, will build its research capacity, adding more than 120 employees to an organization of 300. The group will also set up regional headquarters in the capitals of emerging political and economic powers, where leaders have frequently criticized human rights advocacy as a Western tool to impose their will on small countries.

"We need to be able to shape the foreign policies of these emerging powers, much as we have traditionally done with Western powers," said Kenneth Roth, executive director of Human Rights Watch. "Our aim is to enlist places like [Brazil](#), [South Africa](#), [India](#) and [Japan](#), all governments that are democracies."

Human Rights Watch regularly comes under attack from governments around the world, including [China](#), [Russia](#), [Israel](#), [Iran](#), Syria, Rwanda, Sri Lanka and Zimbabwe.

"American organizations, including HRW, have no credibility," a Syrian minister told the Washington Post last year after the rights group issued a critical report on the government. "Let them go check the violations undertaken by the previous administration from Guantanamo to the flying prisons to the violations of human rights in Gaza before they talk about other countries."

Human Rights Watch notes that it has conducted extensive inquiries into allegations of abuses in

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Gaza and at Guantanamo.

Soros, 80, has stepped up his philanthropy, spending more than \$700 million over the past year on causes ranging from supplies for New York City schoolchildren to [Pakistan](#) flood relief efforts.

A shrewd hedge fund investor who famously helped force the devaluation of the British pound in 1990s by betting heavily against it, he has long been a stalwart supporter of Democratic causes. In 2004, he spent tens of millions of dollars on political groups including MoveOn.org in an effort to defeat President George W. Bush's reelection campaign. He also provided financial support for Barack Obama's election bid.

The Human Rights Watch gift will consist of \$10 million annual grants over the next decade. Human Rights Watch is expected to find funding to match that grant. It is also seeking to cultivate a new generation of foreign donors to fund the group's activities. Today, Human Rights Watch receives 30 percent of its funding from abroad, mostly from Europe and some from Japan. It has a target of raising 40 percent of its funding from abroad within five years and 50 percent within a decade.

The large injection of money from Soros highlights a reversal of fortune from 2008, when the recession eliminated 7 percent of the organization's funding. Last year, Human Rights Watch raised \$45 million, its most in a single year. It plans to increase its annual budget to \$80 million within five years.

"The plan is to deepen our research and broaden our advocacy," Roth said.

The United States has been at the center of human rights advocacy since the end of World War II, when Eleanor Roosevelt led efforts to draft the United Nations' Universal Declaration of Human Rights. The precursor to Human Rights Watch, Helsinki Watch, was founded in 1978 to monitor human rights abuses in the Soviet Union, and the organization subsequently set up similar branches for Latin America, Asia and Africa before placing them all under the Human Rights Watch umbrella in 1988.

"When we created Human Rights Watch, one of the main purposes at the outset was to leverage the power, the purse and the influence of the United States to try to promote human rights in other countries," said Aryeh Neier, the president of the Open Society Institute. Neier, a founder of Human Rights Watch, served as the organization's executive director for 12 years. "The United States' influence globally is much less than it was in the earlier years."

Neier and Roth said the political and economic rise of China has hindered the promotion of human rights. Beijing has provided a model of a rising economic powerhouse that has succeeded without embracing Western values of democracy and human rights, Neier said, and has also provided governments with a powerful commercial partner that does not place human rights performance as a condition on cooperation.

"I don't know that Human Rights Watch is going to be able to establish a presence in China to make China a force for promoting human rights," Neier said. But he noted that there are important human rights promoters in Brazil, South Africa and other countries that may have a greater impact on their own national debates.

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