

MONITORING PRISON CONDITIONS

In the fall of 1988, Human Rights Watch established a special project to monitor prison conditions worldwide in an effort to make these conform to international standards and to curb cruel and abusive practices.

During 1989, Human Rights Watch published reports on prison conditions in Brazil, Czechoslovakia and Turkey; an investigation of Polish prisons was conducted to follow up a report that we published in 1988; investigations that will lead to reports were conducted in the prisons in Indonesia and Mexico; and a mission to India was undertaken to lay the groundwork for an investigation of prisons in that country to be conducted in 1990.

Somewhat surprisingly, Human Rights Watch's investigators have generally been able to secure access to the prisons and jails we sought to see. Where this has not been possible on a first visit, as happened in the case of Poland, the pressure that results from a report compiled largely on the basis of interviews with ex-prisoners has persuaded governments to allow access thereafter. Another country where we did not secure access was Turkey; efforts are underway to secure access to the prisons in a follow-up mission in 1990.

The pressure generated by these investigations has produced some discernible changes in prison conditions. It is too early to tell whether these will prove durable. Also, it is too early to tell whether the project will succeed in its effort to place the question of prison conditions on the international agenda so that a government's claims to respect human rights will be assessed in part on the basis of how it treats its prisoners.

The prison project is directed by American University Law Professor Herman Schwartz. In addition to Schwartz, participants in Human Rights Watch's investigations of prisons during 1989 included Nan Aron, Sidney Jones, Jeri Laber, Ellen Lutz, David Rothman, Ken Schoen, Betty Vorenberg, James Vorenberg and Joanna Weschler. The Prison Project's work is guided by an advisory committee which includes (in addition to some of those who took part in 1989 prison investigations) Vivien Berger, Haywood Burns, Alejandro Garro, William Hellerstein, Howard Hiatt, Edward Koren, Sheldon Krantz, Benjamin Malcolm, Robert McKay, Diane Orentlicher, Norman Rosenberg, Rita Simon, Clarence Sundram and Lynn Walker. The project is funded by a special grant from the Edna McConnell Clark Foundation.