Americas Overview

Human Rights Developments

Contrasts marked the year in the Americas. The already dire situation in Colombia deteriorated further, and the deep political and institutional crisis in Peru continued to make broad respect for human rights but a distant goal. On the other hand, in Mexico, where presidential elections in July heralded the first change of party in the presidential mansion in more than seventy years, hopes grew that the new president would undertake much-needed human rights reforms. A coup in Ecuador and a failed coup attempt in Paraguay reminded the region of the fragility of democracy. Meanwhile, Chile moved forward in its attempt to prosecute former dictator Augusto Pinochet, and an Argentine judge requested his extradition to face criminal charges for the 1974 Buenos Aires car-bombing of former Chilean army commander-in-chief general Carlos Prats and his wife. Distress signals from Haiti included electoral fraud and unchecked street violence, while in Argentina, nine people, including two members of the former military junta, remained under house arrest, under investigation for their role in the kidnapping of babies during the former military regime.

Through the year’s ups and downs, though, one thing remained constant: the everyday violation of human rights—including police abuse, torture, and lack of access to effective justice systems—required far greater attention from policy makers than they were willing to recognize or give.

Colombia constituted the region’s most urgent human rights crisis. As fighting intensified in the thirty-year conflict, human rights abuses proliferated. The victims were largely civilians caught between the parties to the conflict, all of which—the military and the paramilitaries with whom they maintained close ties, and the opposition guerrillas—committed atrocities with impunity. Despite claims to the contrary by the Colombian government, there was irrefutable evidence that the country’s armed forces continued to be implicated in human rights violations as well as in support for the paramilitary groups responsible for the majority of serious abuses. Troops attacked indiscriminately and killed civilians, among them six elementary school children on a field trip near Pueblo Rico, Antioquia, on August 15. According to witnesses, soldiers fired on the group for forty minutes.

The character of the conflict changed with the entry of the United States as a major investor, providing an infusion of U.S. $1.3 billion of mostly military aid for the government. The package included seven rigorous human rights conditions, including the need for the Colombian armed forces to demonstrate a break with the paramilitaries. The U.S. secretary of state certified that Colombia had met only one of the conditions, related to ensuring civilian, not military, jurisdiction over crimes against humanity committed by soldiers; President Bill Clinton waived the other conditions on national security grounds, effectively sending the message that U.S. policy subordinated human rights to other interests.

A burgeoning crisis in Peru did nothing to alleviate the shadow that Colombia cast over the region. In April, after manipulating the constitution to allow him to run, President Alberto Fujimori won a third presidential victory in an electoral process roundly denounced as fraudulent by Peruvian and international
observers. Then, in September, scandals involving his government’s bribery of opposition politicians and his security chief’s alleged undercover sale of arms to Colombia’s leftist Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia (Fuerzas Armadas Revolucionarias de Colombia, FARC) led to an abrupt change of plans. Fujimori dissolved the feared National Intelligence Service (Servicio de Inteligencia Nacional, SIN), and announced that he would call new elections but not stand again for the presidency. Nonetheless, ten years of Fujimori’s abusive leadership left the country’s judicial and political systems in shambles, virtually assuring that efforts to rebuild democracy would be hobbled. At this writing, Fujimori remained in the presidency, and his former security chief, Vladimiro Montesinos, had returned to the country after unsuccessfully seeking asylum in Panama.

Mexico, too, experienced the promise of political change, but with a decidedly more upbeat forecast than in Peru. After more than seventy years in power, the Institutional Revolutionary Party (Partido Revolucionario Institucional, PRI) lost presidential elections in July. The victor, Vicente Fox of the National Action Party (Partido Acción Nacional, PAN), demonstrated an openness to human rights unprecedented among Mexico’s leaders. Scheduled to take office on December 1, Fox quickly met with human rights groups in Mexico, Canada, the United States, and Germany. He announced a thorough and much-needed overhaul of the country’s justice system and called for the establishment of a “transparency commission,” to seek answers to long-standing questions about some human rights abuses and corruption under successive PRI governments.

With a few setbacks, efforts to obtain justice for past human rights violations in the region prospered. Cause for optimism in the fight against impunity surfaced in Chile, where Pinochet was stripped of his parliamentary immunity after returning home in March, following seventeen months of house arrest in the United Kingdom. Released for health reasons, Pinochet had been held for possible extradition to Spain to face human rights charges there. The former dictator faced more than sixty criminal complaints within Chile, lodged since January 1998 by relatives of victims of extrajudicial executions, “disappearances,” and torture, and by political parties, trade unions, and professional groups. In August, the country’s Supreme Court concurred with a lower court that there was enough evidence against Pinochet to warrant removing his immunity. Advances also took place in other cases against former military officers and members of the intelligence services under Pinochet’s former military government. In July, two former army majors and a cadet received life sentences for the 1982 murder of Juan Alegría Mandioca, the scapegoat for the murder of a union leader.

The same Spanish judge who had ordered Pinochet’s arrest in London, Baltasar Garzón, also sought the detention of former Argentine military officer Ricardo Miguel Cavallo in August. Living in Mexico, Cavallo was accused of genocide, terrorism, and torture stemming from his alleged role as a torturer at Argentina’s infamous Navy Mechanics School under military rule. At this writing, Cavallo fought extradition while waiting in a Mexican prison.

Argentine authorities also contributed to the fight against impunity in cases related to the kidnapping of children during the military dictatorship in the 1970s and 1980s. Nine people, including former presidents brigade general Reynaldo Bignone and general Jorge Videla, and former junta member admiral Emilio Massera, were under house arrest in relation to the alleged kidnapping of over 200 children.

The fight against impunity received a setback in Italy, though, in a case involving another accused
Argentine human rights violator. Former army Maj. Jorge Olivera was detained in Rome in August, following an extradition request from a French judge, Roger Le Loire. Olivera stood accused of torture, kidnapping, and “disappearance” in the case of French citizen Marieann (or Marie Anne) Erize in 1976, but was released after an Italian court ruled that Erize was dead, not “disappeared,” and that the statute of limitations had run out for the other crimes. The court made its finding on the basis of what later turned out to be a falsified death certificate.

The United States contributed to another serious setback to the otherwise positive worldwide trend toward the application of universal jurisdiction for crimes against humanity. In March, based on legislation obliging the United States to prosecute torturers, justice department officials detained Peruvian army intelligence agent Maj. Tomás Ricardo Anderson Kohatsu, sparking hope that he might be prosecuted for serious human rights abuses that he allegedly committed in Peru. Anderson was implicated in numerous violations, including the torture of a former intelligence agent who was left paraplegic as a result. But in a regrettable decision, the Department of State obtained Anderson’s release, claiming that he enjoyed immunity because he was brought to the U.S. to participate in a hearing before the Inter-American Commission on Human Rights.

Within the United States, two former military leaders in El Salvador faced wrongful death charges in a federal court in Florida. Former defense minister Gen. José Guillermo García and Gen. Carlos Eugenio Vides Casanova, who headed that country’s notoriously brutal National Guard, stood accused of the wrongful death of four U.S. churchwomen who were raped and murdered in El Salvador in 1980. In 1984, lower-ranking members of the National Guard were convicted in the case in El Salvador. The civil case was brought in the United States by relatives of the victims.

The cause of truth, if not justice, also received a boost in Guatemala, after the January inauguration of President Alfonso Portillo. Just months after taking office, he declared a national day in honor of the estimated 200,000 victims of Guatemala’s thirty-five-year civil conflict, ratified the Inter-American Convention on Forced Disappearances, and admitted state responsibility for past violations in many well-known cases, including the 1990 murder of anthropologist Myrna Mack and the December 1982 Dos Erres massacre of at least 162 people.

If cause for optimism was to be found in efforts to hold human rights violators to account, events in Ecuador and Paraguay underscored the fragility of democracy in the region. On January 22, the Ecuadoran military, allied with a coalition of indigenous groups, toppled elected President Jamil Mahuad, replacing him briefly with a three-man junta. Just days later, the military stepped aside for Vice-President Gustavo Noboa. In Paraguay in May, army officers failed in an attempt to oust President Luis González Macchi.

A host of other human rights violations also took place during the year. In countries including Argentina, Brazil, Guatemala, Haiti, Mexico, and Venezuela, abuses by security forces and impunity remained serious problems. A common denominator was the failure of these countries’ justice systems to provide effective remedies for victims of human rights violations. The case of Teodoro Cabrera García and Rodolfo Montiel Flores in Mexico highlighted the problem. Environmental activists from Pizotla, Guerrero, they were accused by authorities of drug- and weapons-related offenses. Despite evidence that soldiers planted the evidence used against them, and that the defendants were forced to sign incriminating statements, they were found guilty, demonstrating the abysmal failure of Mexico’s justice system. In Guatemala, where United Nations officials documented more than two dozen extrajudicial executions, the weak justice system led to a climate of
insecurity and lynchings of alleged criminals by vigilantes.

The case of Sandro do Nascimento demonstrated the problem in Brazil. Nascimento’s attempt at armed robbery in Rio de Janeiro ultimately led to kidnapping and murder. Deserving of a trial for his serious offenses, police strangled him to death instead, shortly after his arrest. In São Paulo state, police killings of civilians surged from 525 in 1998 to 664 in 1999, the highest total since 1992, when police killed 111 inmates in a massacre at Carandiru prison. This violent trend intensified over the first six months of 2000, as police in the nation’s most populous state killed 489 civilians, an increase of 77.2 percent over the comparable 1999 figure. A study released in July by the police ombudsman shed light on these shockingly high figures. Analyzing the autopsy reports of 222 persons killed by police gunfire in 1999—one-third of the victims of fatal police actions—it reported that 51 percent had been shot in the back and 23 percent had been shot five or more times. The findings suggested that many had been summarily executed, and not killed as a result of legitimate use of lethal force in shootouts, as authorities routinely reported.

In Haiti, electoral fraud and unchecked politically motivated street violence raised serious concerns about the government’s willingness and ability to apply the law. Much of the violence was carried out by supporters of Fanmi Lavalas, the party of former President Jean-Bertrand Aristide, in the context of parliamentary elections held in May.

Human rights violations in Venezuela also continued. Following flooding and mud slides in December 1999, the armed forces murdered suspected looters in Vargas state. Army paratroopers, police, and members of the National Guard were blamed for the execution-style killing of what the state ombudsman said were more than sixty people. The number of extrajudicial executions of criminal suspects elsewhere in the country also increased over the prior year; the nongovernmental Venezuelan Program for Education and Action on Human Rights (Programa Venezolano de Educación-Acción en Derechos Humanos, PROVEA) said it knew of seventy-six reports of violations of the right to life by police during the first six months of the year alone.

Press freedom also remained precarious in the region, most severely in Cuba, where authorities maintained almost total control over the flow of news within the island. In Haiti, Radio Haïti-Inter journalist Jean Dominique was ambushed and killed on April 3, along with station bodyguard Jean-Claude Loiusant. Dominique was an outspoken proponent of the rule of law. In Chile, too, journalists suffered restrictions. José Ale Aravena, court reporter for the daily La Tercera, was convicted in February of “insulting” former chief justice Servando Jordán in an article summarizing the judge’s controversial career. The journalist’s 541-day suspended sentence reminded the country of the authoritarian mentality of some Chilean judges and the weak free speech protections offered under the law. A new law to regulate the press was pending in Congress at this writing. If passed, as expected, the law would provide greater and much-needed protection in several important areas, including by removing jurisdiction from military courts over cases of journalists accused of sedition or espionage under military laws, and by repealing the crime of “contempt of authority” from the State Security Law.

Inhumane conditions of detention remained a common feature throughout the region, with particularly abusive situations found in Venezuela, Brazil, Haiti, Panama, and El Salvador. The continued growth of inmate populations exacerbated overcrowding, at the root of a host of other problems. Yet, all over the region, prisons and jails were not crammed with convicted prisoners, but instead with pretrial detainees, turning the presumption of innocence on its head.
Defending Human Rights

The burgeoning of the human rights movement, even in countries with environments hostile to activism, remained a regional highlight. In addition to groups focusing on the traditional array of civil and political rights, nongovernmental organizations (NGOs) emerged over the last decade in the defense of women’s rights, children’s rights, the rights of indigenous populations, refugee rights, and in some countries gay and lesbian rights. With increasingly sophisticated methods of documentation and advocacy, these groups played an indispensable role in monitoring and reporting on human rights developments in the region.

Yet, even in countries where human rights defenders could work with no apparent personal risk, they frequently faced an unsympathetic public, suspicious of their defense of criminal suspects and other despised groups. Worse, in a number of countries they were the subject of threats, harassment and physical violence.

Colombia remained the most dangerous country in which to monitor human rights, with four defenders killed and three “dissappeared” during the first ten months of 2000. Elizabeth Cañas, a member of the Association of Family Members of the Detained and Disappeared (Asociación de Familiares de Desaparecidos-Colombia, ASFADDES), was shot and killed in July. Cañas lived in Barrancabermeja, where paramilitaries systematically intimidated human rights defenders, sending dozens of death threats over the course of the year. Also slain were Demetrio Playonero, an internally displaced person (IDP) and human rights leader; Jesús Ramiro Zapata, the only remaining member of the Segovia Human Rights Committee; and Margarita María Pulgarín Trujillo, a government prosecutor who was developing cases that linked paramilitaries to the army and drug traffickers.

Civilian groups, including human rights organizations, also faced attack from the FARC, which in October 2000 characterized them as “paid killers [for the Colombian military].” In a statement on why they failed to honor an invitation to an October 2000 peace meeting in San José, Costa Rica, sponsored by a broad coalition of human rights, peace, and community groups, the FARC dismissed the effort as organized by “the enemies of Colombia and its people.” In this way, the guerrillas contributed to a general atmosphere of fear and intolerance that endangered human rights defenders.

The Colombian government’s efforts to protect threatened defenders were slow and inadequate. Moreover, recklessly endangering defenders’ lives, members of the Colombian military continued to make public statements accusing government investigators and human rights groups of guerrilla sympathies.

Failed assassination attempts were reported in Brazil. In September, a jeep carrying members of a commission that monitored rural violence and land reform issues was fired upon in the northeastern state of Paraíba, but its occupants survived. That same month, São Paulo representatives of Amnesty International and of a gay pride organization received bombs in the mail, but the police safely deactivated the devices.

In an alarming development, particularly when viewed in historical perspective, Guatemala witnessed a notable increase in threats, harassment, and targeted violence against human rights organizations and activists. In one disturbing incident in August, a representative of the Center for Legal Action in Human Rights (Centro para la acción legal en Derechos Humanos, CALDH) was detained, beaten and robbed by individuals posing as journalists but thought to have links with active and retired military officers.

Death threats, frequent in Colombia, were also reported in Guatemala, Chile, Brazil, Mexico, Argentina,
In Peru, human rights monitors, whose legitimacy the government stubbornly refused to recognize, faced harassment and criminal prosecution for their activities. In Cuba, human rights monitors, whose legitimacy the government stubbornly refused to recognize, faced harassment and criminal prosecution for their activities.

In Venezuela, the Supreme Court determined in separate decisions in June and August that human rights organizations that received funding from abroad were not members of “civil society,” thereby depriving them of the right to participate in the nomination of candidates for the Supreme Court, to be ombudsman, and for other important government posts.

Authorities continued to apply pressure to human rights monitors in Mexico, too, where they were sometimes blamed for some of the crime problems suffered in the country. Losing presidential candidate Francisco Labastida of the PRI, for example, noted during the campaign, “Let it be known that the law was made to protect the human rights of citizens, not criminals.” This anti-human rights rhetoric contributed to a hostile environment for human rights defenders. According to the nongovernmental All Rights for All Network of Human Rights Organization (Red de Derechos Humanos Todos los Derechos para Todo, known as the Red), its offices in Mexico City were under surveillance by agents of the federal National Security System (Sistema Nacional de Seguridad, SISEN) in June.

The Role of the International Community

Organization of American States

The OAS’s electoral observation capacities were severely tested this year in both Peru and Haiti, where election monitoring missions nevertheless successfully avoided the shortcomings of past such teams. In Peru, a mission led by former Guatemalan minister of foreign affairs Eduardo Stein conducted a forthright, transparent, and proactive observation of the electoral process. In Haiti, Barbadian Ambassador Orlando Marville led a team of observers that were the first to discover the fraudulent calculation method that tainted the results of senatorial elections. Both bodies ended up deciding to quit their host countries prior to the completion of the elections, after it had become clear that electoral abuses would not be remedied.

But the OAS showed less initiative in dealing with the results of its monitoring efforts. With regard to Peru, in particular, the OAS Permanent Council rejected a proposal by the United States and Costa Rica for an ad hoc meeting of foreign ministers under Resolution 1080—the provision appropriate to responding to interruptions of democracy—to discuss sanctions against Peru. By a substantial majority, member states showed themselves to be unwilling to take strong measures to respond to unfair elections. This consensus revealed the limits of the OAS’s effectiveness in managing interruptions of the democratic process that fall short of a coup d’etat. The limits of Resolution 1080 were also on display in the case of the coup in Ecuador. Despite the ouster of the president, the OAS failed to take action.

Nor did the OAS take concrete actions with regard to Haiti. At this writing, OAS Deputy Secretary General Luigi Enaudi was engaged in negotiations with the Haitian authorities to try to alleviate the worst aspects of the summer’s elections, but no reforms had yet been announced.

The Inter-American Commission on Human Rights sent multiple death penalty cases against Trinidad and Tobago to the Inter-American Court. In 1998, the country announced that it would withdraw from the American Convention on Human Rights so as to eliminate the inter-American human rights system as an avenue of appeal for death row inmates. The withdrawal became effective in 1999, but the cases referred by
the commission to the court involved incidents that had occurred when Trinidad and Tobago was still bound by the convention.

In a contrary and positive direction in the Caribbean, Barbados recognized this year the jurisdiction of the court.

**United Nations**

The United Nations maintained a permanent human rights presence in Colombia and Guatemala, and to a lesser extent in Haiti. In other countries, visiting special rapporteurs and other mechanisms lent their expertise to efforts to address human rights problems. The August-September mission of the U.N. special rapporteur on torture to Brazil, for example, drew public attention to prison abuses and strengthened the credibility of local monitoring groups. Earlier in the year, at the April meeting of the U.N. Commission on Human Rights, a resolution censuring the Cuban government for its intolerance of peaceful dissent, among other problems, was instrumental in maintaining pressure for reform.

The Bogotá office of the U.N. High Commissioner for Human Rights continued its invaluable work in 2000, visiting regions shaken by war and pressing the Colombian authorities to implement needed reforms. The office’s annual report was an accurate and compelling portrayal of the dire state of human rights in Colombia. In a wise decision, the Colombian government agreed to maintain the office until April 2002. Yet, disturbingly, U.N. staff noted a marked drop in cooperation from Colombian officials.

The United Nations Verification Mission in Guatemala (Misión de Verificación de las Naciones Unidas en Guatemala, MINUGUA), established after the 1996 peace accords, published reports on the peace process that included detailed analyses of human rights issues. Under the 1996 peace accords, the mandate of MINUGUA was due to expire at year’s end. Although President Portillo had requested that MINUGUA extend its stay, at this writing the U.N. General Assembly had not yet decided on the extension.


High Commissioner for Human Rights Mary Robinson visited Mexico in November 1999, signing an agreement with the government to undertake a human rights technical cooperation program. At this writing, the U.N. and Mexican government had not agreed on the exact nature of the program. Following the high commissioner’s visit, the special rapporteur on extrajudicial, summary, or arbitrary executions released a report on Mexico. Although it noted that the government had taken some positive steps, the report concluded: “Unfortunately, these positive undertakings have not been sufficient to correct the situation.”

**United States**

The year 2000 marked the emergence of the United States as a major player in the armed conflict in Colombia, with the approval of the U.S. $1.3 billion aid plan. Debated heatedly yet passed overwhelmingly by the U.S. Congress, the Colombia aid package was the largest ever approved for a Latin American country. Although the aid was conditioned on Colombia’s compliance with strict human rights conditions, President Clinton waived six of the seven conditions for reasons of U.S. national security on August 22.
Clinton’s use of the waiver, made just prior to his visit to Colombia, allowed aid to go forward even as U.S. officials acknowledged that the forces they were funding maintained ties to paramilitary groups, had failed to suspend or prosecute implicated officers, engaged in human rights abuses, and refused to enforce civilian jurisdiction over human rights crimes. With brutal candor, a spokesperson for the office of White House adviser and drug czar retired Gen. Barry McCaffrey explained the president’s decision: “You don’t hold up the major objective to achieve the minor.”

In December 1999, the first U.S.-trained Colombian army battalion completed its training and was deployed. A second battalion began to train the following August. U.S. law mandated that fewer than 500 U.S. troops be in-country at any one time barring an emergency. But reflecting a global trend to “out-source” war, some analysts projected that as many as 1,000 U.S.-related personnel could be in Colombia on any given day, many of them working for private companies under contract to the U.S. military.

The southern Colombian department of Putumayo, home to 50 percent of Colombia’s illegal coca crop, was to be the first target of the U.S. eradication strategy. Officials acknowledged that forced population displacement was a likely outcome of the eradication effort, and proposed to set up government-controlled “temporary” camps to distribute assistance. Groups working with the internally displaced protested, saying that the planned activities risked “fomenting the conflict, targeting innocent civilians, and substantially increasing internal displacement in Colombia.”

The Clinton Administration, backed by Congress, initially took a strong line against the manipulation of the electoral process in Peru that led to Fujimori’s third term. President Clinton directly suggested that the U.S. relationship with Peru would be damaged if democracy was not respected. Yet, when other OAS members states failed to rally to the U.S. call for an ad hoc meeting of ministers under Resolution 1080, the U.S. did not appear to push hard for the measure.

Behind-the-scenes negotiations of U.S. officials during the September video scandal were said to be critical in convincing Fujimori to agree to leave office and to dismantle his hated intelligence apparatus. Yet instead of promoting full accountability in Peru’s return to democratic rule, the United States threw its weight behind a scheme by which intelligence chief Vladimiro Montesinos escaped to Panama to seek political asylum. In October, Montesinos returned to Peru after unsuccessfully seeking asylum in Panama.

On the positive side, important progress was made in the declassification of U.S. documents relating to human rights violations in Chile under military rule. By mid-year, in accordance with a 1999 declassification directive, thousands of documents from the State and Defense Departments and other U.S. agencies, including the Central Intelligence Agency (CIA), were released. Some files were held back on the order of the CIA’s director, George Tenet, supposedly to conceal sensitive information about intelligence-gathering methods. At this writing, the CIA and other government agencies were preparing for another massive release of documents.

A breakthrough in understanding the role of the CIA in Chile came in September, in response to a 1999 amendment to the fiscal 2000 Intelligence Authorization Act authored by member of the House of Representatives Maurice Hinchey. It required the CIA to submit a report to Congress on its relations with Pinochet’s military government, among other aspects of CIA involvement in Chile. In the report, the CIA revealed that it had maintained a liaison with Manuel Contreras, the infamous director of Chile’s security agency from 1974 to 1977. The relationship lasted throughout the period in which human rights were grossly
and systematically abused in Chile, and it ended a year after the car-bomb murder in Washington, D.C. of Allende’s former foreign minister, Orlando Letelier, and his colleague Ronni Moffitt, for which Contreras had been indicted in the United States and convicted in Chile.

Small but symbolic steps were also taken toward easing the decades-old U.S. economic embargo on Cuba, an outmoded policy instrument that Human Rights Watch and many other observers believed to be counterproductive to the human rights cause. After months of debate in congressional committees, both houses of Congress passed legislation in October to allow limited food and medicine sales to Cuba. The measure signaled the first meaningful retreat in nearly four decades in the U.S. policy of economic sanctions against Cuba, but was unlikely to yield more than a small volume of actual business. Because of compromises with conservative lawmakers opposed to loosening the restrictions, no U.S. export credits or private financing would be allowed on food sales. And on the negative side of the balance, the legislation codified restrictions on the travel of U.S. citizens to Cuba.

The Work of Human Rights Watch

While responding to crises throughout the hemisphere, the Americas division of Human Rights Watch primarily focused attention on a core group of countries experiencing the most serious human rights problems. Human Rights Watch sought, in each country, to address the most pressing human rights issues: the Pinochet prosecution and freedom of expression in Chile; violations of international human rights and humanitarian law in Colombia; unfair election conditions, weakening of the rule of law, and impunity in Peru; deficiencies in the justice system in Mexico; political violence and electoral fraud in Haiti; accountability in Argentina; the protection of NGOs and human rights defenders in Guatemala; the use of excessive force by police and military in Bolivia; and overall human rights conditions and the U.S. embargo in Cuba.

In addition to documenting abuses through published reports, Human Rights Watch responded rapidly to breaking events by directly addressing high-level government officials and representatives of relevant regional and international bodies, and generally pressing our human rights concerns in a firm, concise, and timely way. Human Rights Watch also conveyed its views in meetings with senior government officials of Argentina, Brazil, Colombia, Chile, Haiti, Guatemala, Mexico, Panama, and Venezuela. In meetings and correspondence, we made specific recommendations for improving human rights conditions.

As the region’s gravest human rights crisis, Colombia was the division’s major focus during 2000. In February, just as the U.S. Congress was debating a massive military assistance package for Colombia, Human Rights Watch released its report, “The Ties That Bind: Colombia and Military-Paramilitary Links.” This documented the continuing close relationship between Colombian military and paramilitary forces, directly rebutting the Colombian government’s claim that the military was not responsible for paramilitary abuses. And to ensure that the message was heard, the division’s executive director and Colombia researcher both testified before the U.S. Senate as to the report’s findings, arguing that tough human rights conditionality be included in any proposed assistance to Colombia.

The report made front-page headlines in Colombia, where top military leaders tried to discredit its findings by suggesting, grotesquely, that Human Rights Watch was in the pay of drug traffickers. Not long after, Cuban government representatives facing censure at the U.N. Human Rights Commission mounted a
similar attack, alleging that Human Rights Watch received substantial funding from U.S. “special services.” But such politically motivated invective rightly carried no weight or credibility, the more so because neither source could refute the carefully documented facts that were the basis for Human Rights Watch’s conclusions.

After President Clinton invoked the Colombia aid law’s national security interest waiver—after the State Department found that Colombia had failed to meet six of the law’s seven human rights-related conditions—Human Rights Watch vigorously protested the Administration’s subjugation of human rights imperatives to counter-narcotics interests. Members of the European Union, skeptical of Plan Colombia, approved only a third of the funds requested, and dedicated all of their aid to nongovernmental organizations, as opposed to official entities.

Fujimori’s crisis of legitimacy dominated Human Rights Watch’s work on Peru. On the advocacy front, Human Rights Watch urged the OAS and others in the international community to adopt a firm posture on Peru’s democratic deficit. In early May, Human Rights Watch wrote to OAS Secretary General Cesar Gaviria, comprehensively detailing deficiencies in Peru’s electoral conditions. In June, after the election, the division’s executive director attended the OAS General Assembly in Windsor, Canada, urging member states to press Fujimori to “restore the interrupted democratic process” in Peru. In September, as the political crisis unfolded in Peru, Human Rights Watch sought to ensure that the human rights abuses committed during Fujimori’s decade in power were not left in impunity, including by directly challenging the efforts of Vladimiro Montesinos to secure immunity from potential prosecution by obtaining political asylum in Panama. In pursuit of this, Human Rights Watch wrote to the Panamanian president, setting out the reasons why any granting of asylum would be profoundly mistaken, and sent a delegation to Panama to discuss the question with relevant officials.

The historic prosecution of Pinochet was Human Rights Watch’s primary focus in Chile. In late April, the division’s executive director published an opinion piece in the Chilean daily El Mercurio that critically analyzed Pinochet’s due process arguments against prosecution. This was published shortly before the Santiago Appeals Court began hearings on stripping Pinochet of his parliamentary immunity from prosecution. Human Rights Watch’s Chile researcher attended the hearings, the only international observer permitted to do so, and closely monitored the legal developments that culminated in the lifting of Pinochet’s immunity.

The Americas division made important strides toward the broad dissemination of its human rights information by entirely revamping Human Rights Watch’s Spanish-language website. With materials arranged chronologically by country and by issue, the site presented a detailed picture of human rights conditions in the region. The goal was to be comprehensive—providing documents that ranged from letters to reports to opinion pieces on each country and issue—as well as timely—effecting the simultaneous release in electronic and traditional formats of all of the division’s public materials.