

## THE CALIFORNIA COMMITTEE OF HUMAN RIGHTS WATCH

The California Committee of Human Rights Watch was formed in April 1987. During its first two years, the Committee held periodic meetings to consider human rights conditions in other countries. As members began to participate in and report on Watch Committee missions to investigate human rights conditions abroad, the group's desire to become active at a professional level increased. In April 1989, in cooperation with the national office, the Committee opened an office in Los Angeles and hired Ellen Lutz, an experienced human rights attorney, as Director.

The purposes of the California Committee are: to support the work of all of the Watch Committees by carrying out tasks that are best undertaken from California; to assume responsibility for Americas Watch's research on Mexico<sup>1</sup>; and to develop an education and outreach program that will enhance awareness of and support for international human rights in the region.

On behalf of Americas Watch, the California Committee has sent delegates on missions to Chile, Guatemala and Mexico. The mission to Chile occurred in September 1988, in advance of the October 5 plebiscite when Chileans resoundingly voted to end the presidency of General Augusto Pinochet. California Committee participants, Abraham Lowenthal and Clara A. "Zazi" Pope, contributed Op Ed articles on Chile to several newspapers.

In April 1989, Raquel Ackerman of the California Committee participated in an Americas Watch delegation to Guatemala to investigate recent killings and death threats directed at Guatemalan human rights monitors. Following her trip, the California Committee participated in Americas Watch efforts to cut-off U.S. military aid to Guatemala until human rights conditions improve. The Committee also enlisted theater and film artists in protesting the killing of a Guatemalan actor and union activist and seeking protection for his colleagues who have received death threats.

Members of the California Committee have been active in litigation on behalf of family members of individuals who were tortured, "disappeared," or murdered by security forces during Argentina's "dirty war." On behalf of Americas Watch and the ACLU of Southern California, they represented the plaintiffs in Rapaport v. Suarez Mason, one of three civil lawsuits against former Argentine General Suarez Mason, commander of the Armed Forces in the Buenos Aires region from 1977-79. Suarez Mason, who lived clandestinely in the U.S. from 1984-88 was extradited to Argentina where he awaits trial for human rights atrocities. Plaintiffs in the Rapaport action were awarded a default judgment of \$60 million. Counsel in the Rapaport action and the two related cases were nominated by the Trial Lawyers for Public Justice for 1989 Trial Lawyer of the Year.

The California Committee's primary activities on behalf of Asia Watch focused on China. In June, San Francisco-based Committee members helped organize a benefit concert at Davies Symphony Hall

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<sup>1</sup> A description of this work may be found in the Americas Watch section of this report.

at which internationally recognized musicians performed. The Committee also formed a China sub-group that worked closely with Asia Watch's China researcher, Robin Munro, to develop a set of principles to guide U.S. businesses active in China. San Francisco-based Committee member Dolores Donovan, an expert on the Chinese penal system, testified at hearings held by U.S. Representatives Tom Lantos and Nancy Pelosi on the human rights situation in China and on measures to protect the rights of Chinese students in the United States.

The California Committee has also worked with Helsinki Watch. In September and October, California Committee member Frank Wheat visited Turkey where he met with human rights monitors and leading members of the Bar. Members of the California Committee subsequently took part in a campaign on behalf of Fatma Yazici, the Turkish magazine editor who was sentenced to six years and three months imprisonment for publishing an article that summarized Helsinki Watch's report Destroying Ethnic Identity: The Kurds of Turkey.

In April, several members participated in a meeting of U.S.-based public interest lawyers and Soviet lawyers interested in human rights. The Soviet lawyers expressed interest in receiving reference and training materials used by U.S., state and local prosecutors and public defenders regarding proper arrest, search and seizure, detention, and other pre-trial procedures to aid in their efforts to press for strengthened legislation to protect the rights of the accused. The Committee is compiling materials for use by lawyers throughout the world interested in learning more about U.S. criminal justice procedures.

Since its inception the California Committee has presented frequent public programs on various human rights issues. In September the California Committee hosted a special gallery premiere of Forced Out, a photo exhibition at the Los Angeles Municipal Art Gallery featuring photographs from Carole Kismaric's acclaimed photojournalistic account of the plight of refugees worldwide. Kismaric's work was sponsored by Human Rights Watch. A meeting with public interest immigration lawyers was held in December to discuss ways that Human Rights Watch can better serve the needs of refugees seeking asylum in the United States.

The forty-member California Committee meets bi-monthly. Meetings combine presentations about human rights conditions in countries throughout the world with oversight of the work of the California office. The Co-Chairmen of the California Committee are Stanley Sheinbaum and Jane Olson.