

Human Rights Watch blasts U.S. on Kenya violence

February 14, 2008

Posted: 2/14/08

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By Greg Trotter

Religion News Service

WASHINGTON (RNS)—As blood continues to be spilled on Kenyan streets in fierce protest of the disputed presidential elections in late December, the head of Human Rights Watch demanded that the U.S. government take more responsibility for that violence.

“It’s easy to see why every two-bit tyrant around the world thinks he may qualify as a democrat,” Kenneth Roth said in releasing the group’s annual report on human rights. “Kenya is the latest example of that.”

Mothers hold
their children as
they wait for
distribution of
food aid at a
church in
Nairobi's Kibera
slum. U.N.
Secretary-General
Ban Ki-moon
urged Kenyans to
stop violence that
has killed at least
850 people and
left more than
300,000 as
refugees.
(REUTERS/Photo
by Zohra
Bensemra)

The dominant theme of the group's 2008 report is that the United States and other influential Western democracies undermine human rights by allowing countries, such as Kenya and Pakistan, to pose as democracies while holding flawed elections and violating other civil rights.

The yearly report is the culmination of researchers' opinions based on interviews with citizens and officials in more than 75 countries. Human Rights Watch is an independent, nonprofit organization that started in 1978.

Though the presidential elections sent Kenya into political turmoil, Chris

Albin-Lackey, senior researcher for Human Rights Watch in Kenya, said the U.S. government could be doing much more to end the violent revolt.

“The U.S. cannot just simply turn away from a crisis like this while still trying to cultivate the relationship (between the U.S. and Kenyan governments) and influence events,” Albin-Lackey said.

The U.S. government has substantial leverage over the Kenyan government because of the amount of aid money it contributes to Kenya, Albin-Lackey said. The two countries also have a close relationship because of shared counterterrorism objectives, he said.

Sean McCormack, spokesman for the State Department, said in a briefing that Washington is monitoring the situation. Though most humanitarian money will continue to be sent to Kenya, he said, there are some counterterrorism funds that are being reviewed and may be withheld.

“It will be an issue that is dealt with down the road,” McCormack said.

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