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## African Union Should Spotlight Human Rights

(New York, July 10, 2002) -- The African Union must strengthen the region's human rights institutions if its promise is to become reality, Human Rights Watch said today. The new regional grouping is being launched this week in Durban.

The African Union's Constitutive Act pledges respect for human rights and rejects the widespread impunity that has characterized armed conflict and political repression in many African countries. In "grave circumstances" such as occurred during the Rwandan genocide, the Constitutive Act authorizes the African Union to intervene. But the existing regional human rights institutions the African Union will inherit have been crippled by a lack of resources and political will.

Leading African states in the African Union have also adopted a New Partnership for Africa's Development (NEPAD), a program to lift Africa out of poverty that explicitly recognizes the importance of democracy, human rights, and the rule of law for economic development. NEPAD has also developed its own code of governance and system for "peer review," but its pledges on human rights remain vague.

"The African Union will only succeed if it replaces the culture of impunity with the culture of accountability," said Peter Takirambudde, director of Human Rights Watch's Africa division. "That means making sure the nice words of its Constitutive Act and of NEPAD come to life and that there are consequences if states don't live up to what they say they will do."

Human Rights Watch called on African Union members to follow through on human rights pledges they have already made. For a start, they should:

- urgently finalize a strong protocol to the African Charter on women's rights, negotiations on which have been stalled for months;
- ratify the protocol establishing an African Court on Human and People's Rights, which could award judgments against states for human rights abuse;
- give Africa's existing human rights body, the African Commission on Human and People's Rights, the resources and political backing needed to carry out its mandate.

At the G8 summit last month in Kananaskis, G8 leaders committed support for the NEPAD initiative, but adopted a wait-and-see approach to the system of peer review. The G8 leaders said they would make their own assessments in deciding whether to develop partnerships with particular countries.

"Peer review is a positive step, but only if the process is transparent and given teeth," said Takirambudde. "It must be backed up by institutions that can ensure proper scrutiny and enforcement of human rights."

South Africa will be the first chair of the African Union, and Human Rights Watch urged President Thabo Mbeki to take a lead in ensuring human rights are at the core of the new body's activities over the next year.