

HUMAN RIGHTS ON-LINE

The next stage in the HURIDOCS network ?

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HUMAN RIGHTS ON-LINE

The next stage in the HURIDOCS network ?

by Hans Thoolen (*)

1. INTRODUCTION

1.1. information: the key to human rights work.

I will not waste any time arguing that information is the key to human rights work, as this is the sole concept that binds all participants in the HURIDOCS network together. Human rights organizations and their leaders invariably agree that what characterizes human rights work in any part of the world is: 'getting the right information at the right time to the right people'.

Neither will I try to demonstrate in general terms the corresponding importance of information technology in this respect. I will also not deal with the dangers of information technology, such as the threat to the right to privacy, although these dangers are certainly not to be ignored. This paper focuses on the idea that information technology could and should be used for instead of against human rights.

Computer use in the the non-profit sector has generally developed along the same lines - although not at the same speed and scale- as the introduction of such technology in the business sector. The spread of smaller and more affordable microcomputers started to reach the non-profit world, including human rights organizations, in the early 80's. Perhaps surprisingly, organizations in developing countries have not been excluded from this phenomenon. Although technological, financial and - to a lesser degree - cultural obstacles in developing countries should be well understood, the experience of the last years has shown that the introduction of information technology in human rights work has sometimes gone faster in the South than in the North. E.g., at a HURIDOCS meeting of 25 non-governmental human rights organizations in Latin America (Montevideo, May 1990) it turned out that the computer density averaged 2,4 personal computers per organization. Similar developments are taking place in large parts of Asia, the Middle East, and the Mahgreb; only Africa seems to not to follow with the same speed (with the exception of South Africa and Zimbabwe).

The question is therefore is not so much whether human rights organizations will use information technology, but rather how and for what purpose.

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1.2. HURIDOCS: doing the groundwork

The human rights movement as a whole seems now to have recognized the importance of systematizing information and coordinating the spread of information technology. As early as 1982 the late Martin Ennals, founding President of the HURIDOCS network, formulated the need masterly when he stated: "Information on all aspects of human rights is essential to the universal protection of human rights. The rapid increase of interest in human rights coincides with the rapid developments of information technology. Unless a common and universal system of communication is evolved, valuable information will be wasted, existing international machinery will not function, standards and codes agreed between governments and within professional bodies will not become known and their implementation will not be monitored". This has been the cornerstone of the HURIDOCS' philosophy since its start as a collaborative network at its first General Assembly in Strasbourg. It has since developed common tools for information handling and provided training to information workers in both North and South. It started with the harmonization of the way bibliographic material is treated and has recently been able to agree on a set of standard formats for the recording and exchange of information on violations of human rights. HURIDOCS has a typical network structure with an International Advisory Council, representing major human rights organizations in different parts of the world, and an executive committee of 5 persons who are willing to devote a large part of their time to managing the programme. The small Secretariat in Oslo consists of 2 to 3 full-time persons. A further description of the network is omitted here as participants will be familiar with HURIDOCS work and achievements.

In short, it is submitted that, largely as the result of HURIDOCS' work, there exists at present a set of standard tools, which are used by a critical mass of human rights organizations, ranging from small activist NGOs, to medium-sized research institutes and even the documentation centres of some of the larger organizations, at both (inter)governmental and nongovernmental level. However, in spite of this excellent record with regard to tool development and training in basic skills, there are two areas that require further action, up and above what HURIDOCS has been able to achieve.

The first is the need for a more permanent training facility for information-handling in the area of human rights, to complement ad hoc training at national or regional level as practiced since the 1986 Rome Assembly. HURIDOCS has to address this issue in cooperation with other institutions and this paper will not dwell further on the question of training.

The second is the need to enhance the coordination of database developments, ranging from data exchange among existing dataholders to the wider issue of global access to the accumulated data in the public domain. It is on this second topic that the current paper is focusing. The remedy proposed is to bring together a critical amount of data in a coherent set of publicly accessible databases: this idea is further developed below using the shorthand "Human Rights On-Line".

2. THE CURRENT STATE OF HUMAN RIGHTS DATABASE WORK

2.1. the need for on-line access

In general terms, one can say that information technology is being introduced in small and medium-sized organizations in the non-profit sector in three waves ((1)). The first wave is the use of computers at office level, and the second wave is the introduction of electronic communication. The first two waves are taken for granted in this paper, although one should not underestimate the efforts that will have to be devoted to their mainstreaming. The third wave then is the creation of databases containing human rights information; this is likely to be the most promising as well as the most difficult wave. The reason is that the most crucial factor in database developments is the availability of a critical mass of high-quality data and that this critical mass does not yet exist except in a fragmented manner. The third wave will not come about as spontaneously as the first two waves, where there is a more immediate and tangible benefit for individual organizations. The creation of databases requires considerable investment and a higher degree of co-operation than human rights organizations are used to practice. Of course, things can be left fully to the 'market', but the risk is twofold. First, that nothing happens as there is not enough profit in providing comprehensive human rights information. Second, and this is the most likely scenario, that a partial service will be put up, dominated by and serving only the needs of the powerful (yes, they do exist even in a world of solidarity) and available to only those who can afford the price.

One glance at the thousands of databases that are currently available on-line on a commercial basis will confirm this suspicion: the full text of export-subsidy legislation is much more available in commercial databases than the text of asylum procedures; statistics on sales of cars are much easier to find in electronic form than those on incidents of racial discrimination; professional literature on medical developments is far better retrievable than the latest fact-finding report on torture.

As stated above, one is still left with the somewhat incongruent situation that HURIDOCS has managed to create the preconditions for exchange of data in the human rights movement, without achieving the actual exchange of data at any significant scale and, therefore even less, providing others than the original dataholders with access to the information. It is admitted that compatibility (e.g. in standard formats and agreed terminology) is more than a simple precondition for exchange of data ((2)). Therefore, HURIDOCS' drive towards standardization remains valuable, but the real benefits of this strategy - for both the organizations involved and outside users - have still to be reaped through the creation of easily accessible and sufficiently large databases.

This and the following sections describe briefly the current state of affairs with regard to the potentially rich but very fragmented scene of human rights information and documentation.

2.2. Fragmentation and emergence of 'secondary sources'

It is impossible describe in any detail the large number of data collections that exist already in the world of human rights. An effort is made anyway, because the rationale for the Human Rights On-Line proposal is exactly that there is a tremendous amount of information available in such a fragmented manner.

The number of 'primary sources' on human rights, i.e. those groups and organizations that produce information as part of their mandate, has increased enormously over the last years and, depending on the human rights definition one prefers, is at least 5.000. As a logical consequence a number of organizations have emerged that specialize in the treatment of such human rights information, sometimes as independent institutes, sometimes as specialized units in larger organizations. These so-called 'secondary source centres' now number well over 50 (including sectors such as refugees and social justice). A preliminary listing, which mixes international and national, governmental and non-governmental resource centres, can be found in Annex 1. Below a few remarks are made with regard to database work in the area of human rights in three different sectors.

2.3. the intergovernmental sector (IGO):

In the United Nations and regional organizations there are several services and plans worth mentioning, but the overall picture remains disappointing inasmuch as there is generally a lack of long-term information policy that integrates the traditional orientation of producing documentation with the 'new' potential of information technology. General libraries in the UN, although hampered by an endemic lack of resources, have tried to bridge the gap, but substantive departments have usually failed to set up the professional information systems which would have allowed them to participate actively in the emerging forms of information networking. The United Nations in New York has put on the air the database service UNBIS (United Nations Bibliographic Information System), which has a bearing on the availability of human rights information to the extent that it provides references to all official UN documents of the last 12 years as well as access to the holding of the UN Dag Hammarskjold Library in New York. However, it covers a much wider spectre of subjects than human rights and is currently only available to the United Nations staff.

- The UN Centre for Human Rights in Geneva has hardly made a start with computerizing its information flow and it is too early to say what the outcome will be. However, most of the information of a public nature that the Centre is producing - and which it could easily make available to a wider audience - concerns information that anyway, with a certain delay, becomes public as an official UN document. A case in point is the current proposal to computerize the documentation of the so-called 'treaty bodies' ((3)). The core of this proposal is in essence to improve the access to the full text of a subset of UN-documents by putting them in electronic form. The implementation of another recommendation, to establish a United Nations research database on human right in the public domain, has yet to see action.
- The United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) has gone further in preparing itself for possible electronic publication of its holdings (containing a lot more than its own publications) by creating several databases of a public nature, covering literature, case law, legislation, international instruments and soon a directory of refugee organizations. These databases concern in the first place refugee-specific information, but expansion to cover also human rights in the narrower sense of the word is being considered under the title 'country-of-organ' information. UNHCR has also promoted the creation of an international thesaurus of refugee terminology and is actively supporting projects to establish an International Refugee

Documentation Network (IRDN) as well as a pilot project to encourage the use of e-mail among IGOs and NGOs ('IRENE').

- The ILO has a well-developed documentation system which is already on-line available through LABORDOC, but the number of specific human rights items contained in it remains limited.
- UNESCO in Paris has long been in favour of improving access to human rights information for the purpose of education and research. Its multi-annual plans regularly include references to the need to establish human rights databases, but until now these have not been realized, although in the Social Science sector of UNESCO there are computerised directories of human rights and peace institutes, and the Human Rights and Peace division recently published a guide on human rights documentation resources.
- The Council of Europe - through its small but active Human Rights Documentation Centre - embarked several years ago on the establishment of a number of databases. They concern foremost the full-text of the European instruments and the judgements and decisions of the European Court and Commission of Human Rights. Through an innovative system of national correspondents the Council of Europe is also collecting national case law concerning the Convention, legislative and administrative state practice and references to legal literature on human rights in Europe. These data are stored in computerised databases and increasingly the correspondents are obliged to deliver the data in standard formats (i.e. the HURIDOCs standards). In 1990 the Council started with an experimental form of remote on-line access to part of its databases for a small number of test sites.
- Organization of American States (OAS) and the Organization of African Unity (OAU) seem not to have embarked on special plans with regard to making their own production available in electronic form, but have both stated their need to have access to a wide range of documentary sources on human rights. It is interesting to note that the secretariat of the African Commission on Human and Peoples' Rights (which has only recently started its work) is not with the OAU in Addis Abeba, but in Banjul, the Gambia, where it is in the process of setting up its own documentation centre.

In spite of recently increased acceptability by governments of human rights 'meddling' by the intergovernmental organizations ((4)), it remains fair warning to limit expectations that the intergovernmental entities will be able to set up comprehensive databases on human rights or play a role as global clearing-house on human rights information. It has to be kept in mind that it is governments which ultimately control the IGOs and that services will normally be devised with the priorities and sensitivities of governments in mind. A simple bibliographic reference to the existence of a publication, considered 'subversive' by a particular government, may well cause considerable upheaval; the absence of such a reference, on the other hand, may well be seen as proof of political bias by another government.

2.4. the nongovernmental sector (NGO)

The non-governmental picture is more complex in terms of the number of databases and databases planned. Unlike the intergovernmental organizations mentioned above, activist human rights NGOs - with a few exceptions, such as Amnesty International - are usually not the publishers of large and systematic series of their own documents.

Their databases tend to be small and in many cases are intended for internal use, even if the ultimate purpose of the information systems is to produce material for external audiences. An example of such applications would be the use of a computerised database to systematically collect, retrieve and publicize human rights violations, a well-developed practice in some Latin American countries.

Those NGOs which do specialize in the systematic collection of information (in other words those likely to be 'secondary sources') usually maintain databases which to a large extent consist of references to material produced by others. They tend to concentrate on announcements and bibliographic descriptions, with emphasis on the human rights material that is not easily found in general libraries ('non-conventional literature' such as fact-finding reports, conference documents, working papers etc.). Human Rights Internet in Ottawa and the Norwegian Human Rights Institute in Oslo are typical examples in this category. Another characteristic is that they tend to provide references rather than the full-text of documents, unless they are unavailable from the original source (this in contrast to some of the IGO efforts described above which attempt to publish their own publications electronically).

In a study done for the UNHCR by this author in the period 1989-90 it was found that, in 10 countries in Europe and North America, approximately 15 documentation centres (2 IGOs, 1 governmental and 12 NGOs) had set up bibliographic databases focusing on human rights information. Together they held at that time approximately 130.000 records (of which about 90.000 were in HURIDOCS standard formats) and were adding approximately 13.000 records a year. What could not be studied in any detail, but would be of crucial importance in creating a single database, is the amount of overlap. A first estimate would point to an overlap which would be well in the order of 60 to 70 % for certain type of material (e.g. a recent Amnesty International report on Turkey in English), but is likely to be close to zero for other documents (e.g. a report on Suriname in Dutch)

The question of fragmentation and overlap - in particular among the secondary source centres - and the possible remedies are the main focus of this paper. I will revert to these issues later.

2.5. the governmental sector and others

Governmental documentation centres on human rights - at least those with a real public service - are rare, but also here there has been a surge of activity in recent years. In particular in newly democratic Central Europe and a number of developing countries governments have set up institutes with a specific human rights information and dissemination mandate (in Latin America examples are: Paraguay, Ecuador, Colombia and Mexico; in Asia, the Philippines and Sri Lanka; in Africa, Togo, the Gambia and Zaire). Although in some cases there can be genuine doubt about the government's motives, the potential should not be ignored inasmuch as they provide an opportunity to bring basic information about human rights to large audiences. Another sector where governmental documentation centres on human rights have come to the fore - this time mostly in Western Europe and North America - is that of refugee determination. Here human rights information about the situation in the country of origin is of crucial importance in deciding individual asylum claims as well as in the judgement whether return is feasible. As much of the information is already in the public domain (and sometimes must be in the public domain in order to provide the lawyer of the asylum seeker with equal access to information), governments in several countries are setting up documentation centres which resemble the ones discussed above in the NGO-category.

Special mention should be made of the IRBDC (the Documentation Centre of the Immigration and Refugee Board in Canada) which by law has to be open to access by the refugee claimants as well as the administration and therefore has set itself up exclusively with information already in the public domain. It has developed several databases and issues regularly country profiles and updates. In spite of its governmental status and duty to serve with priority the decisionmakers in refugee determination proceedings, the IRBDC is fairly active in nongovernmental networking on human rights information. The Refugee Information Centre (RIC) of the INS/Justice department in the USA seems to be taking a similar approach. ((5))

The International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC) is a special case, combining a prodigious knowledge of the human rights situation in many parts of the world with a constitutional reticence to speak out. Still, it has an elaborate drive to promote and disseminate humanitarian law and, to that extent, has considerable information to contribute, either on its own or in collaboration with the more non-governmental branches of the Red Cross family (such as the Ligue and the Henri Dunant Institute). The Red Cross recently issued a CD-ROM version of its databases. Another 'hybrid' organization (i.e. neither governmental nor non-governmental) with the potential and ambition to contribute to human rights documentation, is the Inter-Parliamentary Union (IPU). Over the years it has built up the Parliamentary Documentation Centre, which has a unique collection of literature and constitutions as well as parliamentary and electoral laws. Plans to make this material more easily accessible through computerization are far advanced.

2.6. existing on-line efforts

Among the databases described above, only very few are currently on-line available for remote users. UN databases are usually not (yet) 'open' to remote users outside the system, while at present only two 'secondary source centres' have made their human rights databases on-line available to outside users. These are ASYLDOC, to be reached via the host DIMDI or Geonet, and HURICAN, under the host Quicklaw. The former is set up by the documentation centre ZDWF in Bonn and contains mostly references to refugee case law and country of origin material in German. The latter is put together by the Human Rights Centre of the University of Ottawa and focuses on material relating to Canada (although with the recent move of Human Rights Internet from Harvard to Ottawa this coverage is likely to widen, unless the HRI-database would choose a different host).

One of the largest single 'producers' of human rights material is undoubtedly Amnesty International, with its large staff at headquarters in London and in some of the national sections. In recent years its regular production of bulletins, reports, updates, press releases and urgent action campaigns has been such that the organization started to produce semi-annual and monthly listings of its material in print. Quite logically the next step was to publish an electronic index to its publications, and on 12 March 1992 it announced that references to all public materials issued since 1988 are now available on the Manchester Host under Geonet. The possibility of electronic publishing the full text of its publications is under study. Several other 'dataholders' are known to be looking into the question of making their holdings available in electronic form, but usually no hard information is brought into the open until a solution has been negotiated with a particular host database. It is, of course, quite understandable that organizations have the wish to go ahead on their own - in particular when the size allows it -, but for reasons set out below it would be preferable to have a broader approach.

In the context of the increasing use of electronic communication among non-governmental organizations (e.g. the development-oriented INTERDOC network and the refugee-oriented IRENE pilot project), there are interesting possibilities to provide access to information. Although human rights is only one issue among many covered by these networks their experience is worth studying as the human rights world is inhabited by the same kind of organizations. This experience could be summarized - in simple terms - as one going from initial emphasis on (unorganized) communication among like-minded groups, to organizing electronic bulletin boards containing news in certain specific regions or sectors (women, tropical wood, refugees, human rights, etc.); with the explosion of available information in even these relatively specialized sectors, the need has been recognized to have easy access to information when one needs it rather than being subjected to an overload of perhaps interesting but not requested information. Computers and networks cannot by themselves augment the human capacity to absorb information or the number of persons with whom one can have meaningful interaction. As a consequence, a number of pilot projects have sprung up to make organizations' databases searchable, for example on Geonet/Poptel through the package NIGEL, developed as public domain software for the non-governmental community.

It is, perhaps, too early to say what definite lessons can be learned from the current efforts to make human rights information available on-line, but it can be safely stated that the direction is towards bringing databases on-line, although number of on-line users of the rare services that exist is very small. The reasons may include the general lack of on-line practice in the human rights world and the (perceived) cost of access. The major reason, however, may turn out to be the fragmentation of existing services and the use of different hosts. Even if a single 'human rights host' would finally emerge, the risk is that competing databases will bring tremendous overlap. The Human Rights On-Line proposal purports to offer an alternative to this situation.

3. STAYING WITHIN THE HUMAN RIGHTS MOVEMENT

3.1. Co-operation is a must

Theoretically a 'human rights data' service could be started as an independent, new adventure of a (quasi)commercial nature providing access to human rights data in electronic form. This would imply that one could bypass the, indeed, cumbersome process of consultation with the variety of activities as carried out by the multitude of actors described above. However, this would mean also a very considerable financial outlay as almost all desired data would have to be collected, treated and entered from scratch. The world-wide surge in interest in human rights may be encouraging, but does not necessarily reflect a willingness to pay the same for human rights information as for news, financial or sports data. Through electronic publishing some of the costs of distributing information are transferred to the users and, if a modest surcharge is included in the price of access, the additional cost of putting up an electronic service could perhaps be recuperated. It would, however, be unrealistic to expect a commercial profit.

It is therefore submitted that a new service would have to be able to count on the co-operation of, in the first place, the main dataholders in supplying the data and, secondly, of the users who in the beginning are likely to be human rights organizations. In other words there is a need to ensure that the new service situates itself squarely within the international human rights movement for the following reasons:

First, there is the question of 'control' over the content of the common databases and the conditions under which access is provided to users. If the databases are to be, and to be seen as, a collaborative enterprise of the human rights movement as a whole, there should be a governing body with a representative character. This body and its function are described below as the Producers' Coalition (PC).

Second, there is the need to promote actively the use of on-line information in order to reach the largest possible number of users including individuals and researchers; this can be achieved only through support from the human rights community as a whole for a coherent publicity drive, demonstrations and the production of good instruction material.

Third, there is a continued need to strengthen the information handling capacity of the human rights movement through regional training courses, consultancies and tool development, in particular to ensure that human rights groups from developing countries are increasingly participating directly in the establishment of and access to human rights databases.

These considerations necessitate an understanding with dataholders and users in the HURIDOCS network, which has been trying to guide this development for the last 10 years.

3.2. understanding objections

However, even if the 'on-line' proposal would be acceptable to key actors, resistance from different corners and for different motives may subsist. The resistance may be based on varying considerations, such as the still lingering general 'techno-fear' or a genuine misunderstanding of basic developments and future directions of information technology. In the non-governmental movement, where small is often beautiful, the very idea of accumulating information anywhere may be seen in a bad light. There may also be a fear of competition on the side of existing resource centres, who sometimes see themselves as central points in their own networks and - in a few cases - have their own ambition to go on-line as a 'central' database. There may be a perception of 'neocolonialism' by the information-poor South, in particular as - indeed - the majority of larger dataholders are based in the North. Finally, there are real and imagined cost of access to remote information systems.

These objections cannot and should not be brushed aside. To the contrary enough time and energy should be devoted to developing responses that can satisfy and convince the majority. These responses should emphasise that the proposal is based on the existing trust between organizations and individuals, built by like-minded networks over the years, in particular the HURIDOCS network. The Human Rights On-Line project should be presented carefully for what it is: an additional service, not a competing resource centre. The proposed creation of the Producers' Coalition, as a representative body with a control function for the project, should be of help in soliciting wider participation.

A crucial element in all of this is that it is understood from the beginning that the new service is itself NOT a documentation centre, and that it has an identity that is clearly distinct from the existing resource centres. The on-line character of the Human Rights On-Line proposal implies a limitation to references (and perhaps the full text of treaties, laws and regulations), which makes that the existing resources centres continue to play an indispensable role. They would have their own 'clients', contacts and donors. Although the physical location in an on-line context does not matter that much, it would be very advisable that the new On-Line service

is not placed with an existing resource centre that already publishes its own database in print or electronically or provides hard copy services. It would be confusing, to say the least, if the on-line service would be seen as one institution compiling the data of others and making it available to the outside world.

4. HUMAN RIGHTS ON-LINE: A FIRST OUTLINE

4.1 Key features

Although a number of more technical issues need to be investigated further (see 4.2. below), the following basic features of the Human Rights On-Line proposal are already put forward for discussion:

The public, on-line databases in this set-up would have to cover human rights material in the broad sense of the word (social, economic and cultural as well as civil and political rights) and thus include also related areas, such as refugees, minorities, women's issues and indigenous peoples. The data would be delivered on a regular basis by the dataholders in the network in electronic form (by e-mail or on diskettes), using agreed formats, such as the HURIDOCS standard formats.

An institution will have to be identified that has the vocation and capacity to receive, edit and make available the data from the network. It would have to either run itself a publicly accessible computer service or make the databases available through an arrangement with an external host.

The "Producers' Coalition" (PC) would be the representative body of the human rights organizations and dataholders; it should be at least partially elected, representing both big and small organizations. As the main organ of the Human Rights On-Line project, it would set broad policy guidelines for input and output of the system and determine policy concerning access and redistribution of possible income or 'credit'. It could have a Board of about eight members, who would communicate and meet on a regular basis. In its first composition, part of the membership could be appointed by the International Advisory Council of HURIDOCS with some seats allocated to the institution that will house the project. The PC should ensure that those (inter)governmental organizations that have databases to contribute feel sufficiently represented in a NGO-dominated project.

Technical editing and weeding out of multiple entries would have to be carried out, with guidance from the PC where necessary, by a small technical staff at the institution that accepts responsibility to put together the databases.

The data coming in from different sources could be organized essentially in three different ways: by country or subject, by issuing organization, or by type of document.

The first way, by country or topic, would at first sight seem to be the most attractive from the perspective of the end-user, but would entail considerable work as many publications straddle more than one country or subject. The costs of such an exercise would be very high, while overlap would still be considerable.

The second method of organizing the data, would be to bring the databases up as they are received from participating organizations and under their own flag. This would certainly ease the burden of work on the central point and have the additional advantage that dataholders would keep full control over

their databases and get credit for creating them. However, this solution has its own problems of which three are mentioned here:

- (1) the larger primary sources (A.I., the Watch Committees, etc.), who increasingly are publishing their own reference databases to their own material, may not want to have selected publications summarized by others;
- (2) the smaller primary or secondary sources - in particular those in developing countries - would be excluded completely from any say and participation, as their databases would be too small for independent electronic publication and they would have to continue to rely on intermediaries usually based in the North, and
- (3) the overlap in coverage among the secondary source centres is such that the normal user would retrieve (and pay for) a manifold of references, which then would need weeding out later by the same user.

In view of this it is suggested that the data should be organized according to the most common types of documents, which would give something like the following kind of databases:

- 1) bibliographic references, with keywords and, preferably, comprehensive and neutral abstracts; each entry has to contain the acronym of the originator of the entry as well as the address of publishers/distributors of the original document; audiovisual material could for the time being be treated similarly;
- 2) legislation, i.e. the full text of international instruments and national laws and regulations pertaining to human rights; where possible these texts should be available in English, French or Spanish, if not all three languages;
- 3) case law, i.e. references to and summaries of judicial and administrative decisions, with emphasis on leading cases by both national and international bodies, and possibly with excerpts of the most relevant considerations; where possible translation into at least one of the three languages;
- 4) directory of human rights organizations, providing up-to-date addresses and descriptions of activities, including research projects;
- 5) human rights 'events', i.e. systematic, short descriptions of individual cases of human rights violations, with special attention for cases of torture, disappearances and arbitrary killings;
- 6) news, full text of press items concerning human rights, refugees, etc, taken from existing (quasi)commercial databases (replacing the press cuttings collection currently practiced by many organizations).

As most of the existing databases contain literature, legislation, case law and directory type of information, it would seem to be best to start with the items 1 to 4, and leave 5 and 6 for later developments. Before an 'events' (human rights violations) database could be mounted, serious consideration should anyway be given to the question of the protection of (sensitive) personal data, while a 'news clippings' database would have to overcome first important obstacles related to copyright.

Obviously the project should be open to the wishes of the dataholders and users, and if organizations would propose to publish electronically the complete text their documents or periodicals, the On-line service should investigate whether this can be accommodated in any way.

A Bulletin Board with announcements, press releases etc. could certainly be set up, if so desired.

The question of staff and equipment for the On-line project needs also further consideration, particularly in the light of the outcome of the further studies described below. Still, the basic tenant of the project is that, by pooling data resources and sticking to standards, staff requirements could be kept to a minimum. This optimism is also based on the assumption that a sustained training programme will lead to further harmonization and upgrading of the quality of the data, which in turn would diminish the need for editing at the receiving end.

4.2. further issues to be studied

Even if an agreement could be reached on the broad policy to be pursued, a number of questions needs further clarification. It may be that the following feasibility studies need to be undertaken before the On-line project can be established (with an estimate of the time involved):

- 1) Amount of work involved in editing data. Quite a number of dataholders have already achieved a fair degree of harmonization of their data structure by using the HURIDOCS standard formats, in particular concerning bibliographic data. However, problems such as small deviations from the standard, incomplete entries, and typing errors are likely to be encountered; while the degree of overlap has to be established more exactly. Although these problems seem to be solvable, it would be important to have a more precise estimate of the amount of editing work involved. A further study on a small sub-set of data, say 200 from 5 different databases concerning the same countries or themes, should be carried out as soon as possible. Time frame: 6 weeks work, spread out over 3 or 4 months.
- 2) Choice of appropriate host database. On-line access to remote users is likely to be on an external host, although the latter could be a semi-commercial host. The choice of the host organization is crucial to the success of the project and should take into account many different parameters, such as: cost, universal and easy accessibility, 'political' environment, userfriendliness, and quality of services. A separate consultancy to provide advice based on 'market' research has to be undertaken urgently. Alternative methods of data distribution (diskettes, and in the longer run CD-ROM) should be kept in mind in this study ((6)). Special access rights or reduction of rates for data-producing organizations in the network and users in developing countries should also be studied. The time frame of the study would be approximately 10 weeks spread out over 4 to 5 months.
- 3) The extent of providing a 'hard-copy' service (hard copy meaning here print-outs of search results). The on-line project would in principle be limited to access to accumulated databases, from the where the users under certain conditions could 'download' data for printing in their own offices. However, for users who for technical reasons cannot be on-line, this would not be a solution. It could be considered to give the On-Line project the additional function of providing in those cases a hard copy service (of what is contained in the databases), rather than to refuse to reply to such requests.

However, as this activity could easily lead to a kind of 'false competition' with the dataholders who supplied the original data, the question of a hard copy service is an important issue to be discussed and agreed beforehand. This question should in principle be solved in the consultations leading up to the establishment of the service, but a separate feasibility study may be needed.

4. Human rights terminology. In the broad area of human rights there is not yet a widely accepted and commonly used, 'controlled' vocabulary. In more specialized disciplines, such as refugees or the legal aspects of human rights there exist international thesauri ((7)), but several efforts at creating a universal, multilingual thesaurus on human rights have failed in past 10 years. Still, internationally agreed terminology, if only at top-term level, would be extremely useful for any large-scale co-operation in human rights information work. A study will have to be commissioned, probably with help of the IDRC in Canada ((8)), and the long-dormant HURIDOCs Task Force on Human Rights Terminology should be revived. A consultant, specialized in thesaurus building, will have to be hired and a truly international working group has to convene several times. The time frame, therefore, would be realistically two years or more, but start of the On-line project does not have to await the result, as there is a lists of terms ((9)), which could provisionally be used.

5. CONCLUSIONS

1. The proposal to establish a common set of widely-accessible databases on human rights information in the public domain, here called the Human Rights On-Line project, is addressed to all organizations which have an interest in ensuring easier and fuller access to human rights information: intergovernmental organizations within and outside the United Nations system, governmental agencies, non-governmental organizations and the research community.
2. The place and modalities of the project, as well as the governing structure, need further discussion and clarification, but the main thrust is that there is a need for a pro-active attitude in order to prevent that the current process of fragmentation will deny all users, and in particular smaller organizations and individuals, the benefits that could be derived from the better use of information technology.
3. Co-operation in data access would result in the long-term strengthening of the capacity of various types of information and documentation centres to provide services to a worldwide audience that is already now too large for a single institution to serve appropriately.
4. In view of the large variety of organizations present at the HURIDOCs gathering in Crete and the stated goal of setting a new agenda for the next years, this unique opportunity should be used to agree on a common marching route and set a realistic time frame for implementing such agreement.

NOTES:

(1) Graham Lane, Communication for Progress, CIIR, London, 1991, pp xix-xx: "The first is the installation of computers for tasks such as word processing, accounting and information storage. ...The second is the further exploitation of microcomputer power to improve and increase communication between like-minded organizations. This happens particularly through the development of appropriate e-mail systems and partner networks. The third wave that will break over us in the coming years is the creation of database systems aimed at the needs of noncommercial organizations. We will then witness the full potential of information technology harnessed in the cause of progress and social justice."

(2) The use of standard formats not only facilitates the exchange of data between organizations, but also permits an economy of scale in providing training and user documentation. There is value in striving for compatibility inasmuch as it gives the end-users a familiarity of "screens", and diminishes the scope for errors in data-input. In addition, it eases the rotation of staff, volunteers and stagiaires in an increasingly mobile human rights movement.

(3) see, inter alia, UN documents E/CN.4/1990/39 and E/CN.4/1991/45.

(4) the annual report by the departing Secretary General of the United Nations, Perez de Cuéllar, to the General Assembly of 1991 is telling: "It is now increasingly felt that the principle of non-intervention with the essential domestic jurisdiction of States cannot be regarded as a protective barrier behind which human rights could be massively or systematically violated with impunity".

(5) a special case is France, where the OFPRA has concluded a research contract with a nongovernmental documentation centre, Documentation Refugies, to provide regularly human rights information in the public domain.

(6) several organizations are studying alternatives to providing remote on-line access, e.g. through the distribution of diskettes or CD-ROMs. Any future human rights data service should obviously keep a watchful eye on these developments, as indeed they may provide solutions, in particular if telecommunication developments do not take off in the South. However, nothing in these possible alternative developments with regard to the distribution of data diminishes the need to first create well-organized, comprehensive and high quality data. How they are distributed most effectively is, in that that sense, of later concern.

(7) the English version of the "International Thesaurus of Refugee Terminology" was published by Martinus Nijhoff International Publishers in September 1989; the French and Spanish versions are published by la Documentation Francaise and the Inter-American Institute for Human Rights respectively. Legal human rights terminology is systematically covered in the Council of Europe's thesaurus "Human Rights Terminology in International Law", Martinus Nijhoff, 1988.

(8) IDRC stands for International Development Research Centre (Canada), which has a track record of supporting information science projects.

(9) one such agreed list was recently updated in the context of the revision of the HURIDOCS Standard Formats, to be published in 1992.

PROVISIONAL LIST OF SECONDARY SOURCES
IN HUMAN RIGHTS DOCUMENTATION WORK

1. This list serves in the first place an illustrative purpose and does not purport to be exhaustive. It does not distinguish between those who are actually engaged in building computerised databases and those who are (seriously) planning such databases. The list ignores the difference in terminology used by these centres to describe themselves (documentation centre, network, information service, etc.) and does not give addresses or details of their collection. The list is the result of a subjective selection and certainly far from complete, but it remains a powerful illustration of the kind of dataholders that nowadays exist in the area of human rights documentation.
2. It lists documentation centres or organizations with an emphasis on information/documentation services in the area of human rights and refugees. Many advocacy or research groups possess considerable information, sometimes more than those listed below. They have not been included when their reference services towards outside users have a relatively low priority and they should rather be categorized as 'primary sources'. Admittedly there are many cases in the grey zone.
3. The relatively low number of entries for centres based in developing countries can be explained in the first place by the paucity of specialized information centres in the South generally, but a lack of knowledge about their existence should also account for some of the imbalance.

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- Austria: Verwaltungs akademie (HR Doc. centreproject)
 UN-Centres (women, crime prevention, handicapped) and UNWRA
 (Palestinian refugees)
- Australia: EMC (ex-CHOMI, Clearing House on Migration Issues)
 Lawasia Human Rights Committee
- Belgium: IPIS (International Peace Information Service)
- Barbados: Caribbean Rights
- Canada: Human Rights Centre of the University of Ottawa and Human Rights
 Internet (moved from Harvard)
 CRS (Centre for Refugee Studies) York University
 IRBDC (Documentation Centre of the Immigration and Refugee
 Board)
 Carlton (Refugee Research Division)
- Chile: Academia de Humanismo Cristiano
 CIMAL
 FASIC
- Costa Rica: IIDH (Inter-American Institute for Human Rights)
 CODEHUCA (Comision de Derechos Humanos en Centro-America)

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|------------------------------|--|
| <u>Denmark:</u> | DRC (Danish Refugee Council) Danish Centre for Human Rights IWGIA (International Working Group on Indigenous Affairs) OASIS (torture, mental health) RCT |
| <u>Finland:</u> | Abo Akademi, Institute of Human Rights |
| <u>France:</u> | D.R. (Documentation Réfugiés, set up by 5 NGOs) Human Rights Documentation Centre of the Council of Europe Institut International des Droits de l'Homme (Strasbourg) |
| <u>FRG:</u> | ZDWF (Zentrale Dokumentationsstelle der Freien Wohlfahrtspflege für Flüchtlinge e. V.) Berlin Institute for Comparative Social Research |
| <u>Gambia:</u> | Centre Africain pour la Démocratie et les Etudes de Droits de l'Homme Centre of the African Commission on Human and Peoples' Rights |
| <u>Italy:</u> | IDOC (development, social justice) ISIS (women) Centre for Human Rights Studies, Padua |
| <u>Ivory Coast:</u> | INADES (Institut Africain pour le Developpement Economique et Social) |
| <u>Japan:</u> | IMADR Info and Doc Centre on HR, Kyoto (planned 1994) |
| <u>Hong Kong:</u> | AMRC |
| <u>Hungary:</u> | Hungarian Centre for Human Rights |
| <u>Kenya:</u> | AACC, All African Council of Churches |
| <u>Lesotho:</u> | ISAS (Institute of Southern African Studies) |
| <u>Nepal:</u> | INHURED |
| <u>Netherlands:</u> | SIM (Netherlands Institute for Human Rights) VVN (Dutch Refugee Council) PIOOM project |
| <u>Norway:</u> | NIHR (Norwegian Institute of Human Rights) |
| <u>Mexico:</u> | Academia Mexicana de Derechos Humanos |
| <u>Occupied Territories:</u> | Al Haq (Law in the Service of Man) |
| <u>Peru:</u> | APRODEH |
| <u>Philippines:</u> | TFDP IBON database |
| <u>Poland:</u> | Poznan Human Rights Centre |

- South Africa: Documentation centre of the Centre for Applied Legal Studies
Legal Resource Centre
LHR
- Sri Lanka: INFORM
Nadesan Centre
- Sudan: Documentation Centre of COR (Commissioner of Refugees)
- Sweden: R. Wallenberg Institute for Humanitarian Law
- Switzerland: S.O.S. Torture
OSAR/SFH (Office Suisse d'Aide aux Réfugiés)
IHRS (International Human Rights Service)
UNHCR (Centre for Documentation on Refugees)
- Thailand: (IRIC) Indochinese Refugee Information Centre
- Tunisia: Arab Institute for Human Rights
- United Kingdom: Amnesty International
BRC (British Refugee Council)
RSP (Refugee Studies Programme)
Minority Rights Group
Database Project on Emergencies (Queens Univ.)
Human Rights Centre (Essex)
- USA: TWR (Third World Resources - affiliate Data Centre)
CAR (Central American Resource Centre)
Database Project on Palestinian Human Rights
Urban Morgan Institute for HR
- Uruguay: SERPAJ (Servicio Paz y Justicia)
- Zambia: Institute of African Studies
- Zimbabwe: EDICESA (Ecumenical Documentation and Information Centre for
Eastern and Southern Africa)

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