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ARMS TO RWANDA: LIBEL SUIT AGAINST HUMAN RIGHTS WATCH WITHDRAWN

On September 19, 1996, a libel suit brought against a Human Rights Watch staff member in a Paris court was withdrawn by the plaintiff minutes before a judge was to hear arguments in the case. The suit was brought by Mr. Jean-Claude Urbano, a former honorary vice-consul of France in Goma, Zaire, who had provided a Human Rights Watch researcher with information implicating the French government in arms transfers to the authors of the Rwandan genocide in 1994.

In May 1995, the Human Rights Watch Arms Project published a report accusing a number of governments of directly or indirectly having provided weapons support to the Government of Rwanda in the spring of 1994 as it was engaged in a wholesale slaughter of its Tutsi citizens as well as members of the Hutu opposition. The arms supplies occurred despite the existence of a United Nations arms embargo against Rwanda. The report was researched and written by Ms. Kathi Austin, a consultant with the Human Rights Watch Arms Project.

Our report included information obtained from Mr. Urbano who, in Goma in February 1995, had acknowledged to our researcher that the Government of France had sent five shipments of arms to the Rwandan government via Goma in May and June of 1994, and who justified these shipments as having been in fulfillment of a contract concluded prior to the imposition of the U.N. arms embargo. Mr. Urbano moreover expressed knowledge of several shipments of arms that had arrived in Goma from other sources around that time, which were also destined for the extremist forces in Kigali. To our knowledge, the Government of France did not inform the U.N. sanctions committee about these shipments despite the fact that its official in Goma was fully aware of them.

In September 1995, the U.N. Security Council set up an International Commission of Inquiry to investigate allegations of international weapons support of the perpetrators of the Rwandan genocide allegations first made by Human Rights Watch. Human Rights Watch supported the establishment of the Commission and, when so requested, we have actively assisted it in its inquiry.

In November 1995, Mr. Urbano brought a libel suit against Joost R. Hiltermann, the director of the Human Rights Watch Arms Project, in the 17th chamber of the Tribunal Correctionnel in Paris. The suit was based on the claim that Mr. Urbano had never made the remarks that Human Rights Watch attributed to him and that Mr. Urbano's "honor and respect were undermined by the alleged remarks... precisely because, in his capacity as Honorary Vice Consul, he could only remain silent regarding realities which involved the French Republic of which he had once been the official spokesman."

In withdrawing the suit, Mr. Urbano has now acknowledged that there is no legal basis to accuse Human Rights Watch and its staff of libel in the case of the French arms shipments to genocidal forces which he reported.