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Preface

This book chronicles Western responses to human rights violations, summarizing what has been said and done in the name of human rights, what effects it has had, and why events have unfolded as they have. This history is unfinished and is likely to be re-written if an international equivalent of truth commissions is created. Such bodies could then scrape below the surface of the records written while foreign and international interventions in the name of human rights are occurring. All such records are likely to be amended anyway, but this will take thirty or fifty years. Much as it was necessary for full five decades to elapse before Europe could begin probing into foreign responses to Nazism and to unravel a great deal of 'aiding and abetting,' it will take a change of generation to look back at the 1946–1999 period without our blinkers.

One purpose of this book is to remedy the short attention span which has become a key feature of international human rights politics in the 1990s. Each crisis disappears into oblivion, not to be recalled if another crisis erupts in the same country a few years later. There is no institutional memory of previous crises and responses. Another is to dismantle prevalent myths about solving human rights problems of other countries, which revolve around the ease and speed with which this can be done, at low or no cost. It describes and explains the recent history of each country that has appeared on the international human rights agenda, brings to light the process of creating this agenda, and looks into the layers of appearance and reality cloaked by human rights rhetoric. My decision to write it was triggered by two students who drove me to despair with their enthusiastically naive perception of the ease with which one can solve human rights problems in other countries.

Having written a polite letter about their desire to 'do something about human rights,' as they put it, these two students specializing in international development (again, their words) came to ask me what they could do to about human rights in China. China was a highly visible political issue at the time (March 1997) because Denmark had just tabled a draft resolution before the Commission on Human Rights, seeking China's condemnation for human rights violations; newspapers were overflowing with ideas and proposals. The two girls were bitterly disappointed with our encounter. I argued, reasonably as I thought, that they had never