

THE OBSERVATORY

for the Protection of Human Rights Defenders

L'OBSERVATOIRE
pour la Protection des Défenseurs
des Droits de l'Homme

EL OBSERVATORIO
para la Protección de los Defensores
de Derechos Humanos

PRESS RELEASE

29th November: Celebrate International Day on Women Human Rights Defenders!

Geneva-Paris, November 29, 2007. *At the occasion of the International Day on Women Human Rights Defenders, which is celebrated this year for the second time, the World Organisation Against Torture (OMCT) and the International Federation for Human Rights (FIDH), in the framework of their joint programme, the Observatory for the Protection of Human Rights Defenders, invite everyone to celebrate this day with us to raise awareness and to acknowledge the work that women are doing to defend human rights worldwide and that both women and men are doing to protect women's rights in spite of the great challenges they face.*

29 November marks the anniversary of the opening of the First International Consultation on Women Human Rights Defenders (WHRDs), organised in 2005 by several human rights organisations in Colombo, Sri Lanka, and of which participants declared 29 November as the International Day on WHRDs¹.

Every day, women who defend human rights, including sexuality-related rights, continue to pay a heavy toll for their work in protecting and promoting the rights of others, and face specific types of violations because of their gender. As the main defenders of women's rights in countries where these rights are denied on cultural, social or religious grounds, these women defenders are generally on the frontline.

In *Asia*, this is the case in countries like *Afghanistan*, *Pakistan* and *Iran*. In *Iran*, for instance, 2007 witnessed unprecedented levels of repression against WHRDs, where dozens of them have been arbitrarily detained, charged, before being released on high bail awaiting trial. In *China*, WHRDs are not spared. For instance, Mrs. Mao Hengfeng, a well-known petitioner against family planning policies and forced evictions in Shanghai, was sentenced in January 2006 to two-and-a-half years in prison. Since then, she remains detained in very poor conditions and she is regularly subjected to ill-treatments. In *Nepal*, since April 2007, threats and acts of harassment against Ms. Rita Mahato and Ms. Dev Kumari Mahara, two members of the Women's Rehabilitation Centre (WOREC), in Siraha district, have been intensifying after documenting two cases of rape victims and providing legal and medical support to the victims.

Women's rights groups are also targeted in *Latin America*. In *Colombia*, the women who dared to work for the reconstruction of the social fabric, without going through paramilitary groups who seek to control certain cities or regions and whose social rules are profoundly misogynous, were subjected to very serious reprisals. For instance, from February 13 to March 12, 2007, the sister of Mrs. Sandra Gutiérrez Torres, a member of the Popular Women's Organisation (OFP), was abducted, before being released one month later. Besides, on November 4, 2007, two men broke into the house of Mrs. Yolanda Becerra Vega, the OFP Director, in Barrancabermeja, and assaulted her physically. In *Guatemala*, the Ixqik Women's Association continues to face harassment and threats, in retaliation for its defence and legal support to the victims of gender violence. In *Mexico*, in May 2007, Ms. Lydia Cacho Ribeiro, President of the Victim's Crisis Centre - Integral Centre for Attention to Women (CIAM) in Cancun, State of Quintana Roo, was subjected to an assassination attempt. Shortly earlier, Ms. Cacho had appeared as a witness for the prosecution in the trial of an entrepreneur accused of infantile prostitution and child trafficking. In *Peru* and *Nicaragua*, the organisations committed to fighting for abortion rights confront serious difficulties.

¹ For more information, see <http://www.defendingwomen-defendingrights.org/resources.php>.

In *Africa*, members of the Organisation for Compassion and Development for Families in Distress (OCODEFAD), in the *Central African Republic*, received dire threats in reaction to their fight against impunity, in particular for sexual crimes in times of conflict. In *Uganda*, Ugandan and Kenyan defenders of lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender (LGBT) rights were prevented from taking the floor at the Commonwealth Heads of Government Meeting (CHOGM), which took place from November 23 to 25, 2007 in Kampala. In *Zimbabwe*, members of the Women of Zimbabwe Arise (WOZA) are regularly subjected to arbitrary arrests and acts of reprisals.

In *Europe and the Commonwealth of Independent States*, WHRDs also face acts of reprisals or obstacles to their work. Thus, in the *Russian Federation*, Ms. Larisa Arap, a Russian journalist and a member of the United Civil Front, an opposition movement, was arbitrarily detained from July 5 to August 20, 2007 in a psychiatric hospital 150 km outside Murmansk. She would have been forcefully injected with drugs, beaten and tied to a bed. In June 2007, she had written an article on the ill-treatment of children in psychiatric hospitals in the Murmansk region, alleging among others that patients would have been beaten and raped. In the *Vatican*, in June 2007, Cardinal Martino, the Chief of the Vatican's Justice and Peace Department, declared that Amnesty International had "betrayed its mission" over abortion, following this organisation's decision to adopt a new position on the issue of abortion, and that "the inevitable consequence of its decision will be the suspension of any financing to Amnesty on the part of catholic organisations and also individual Catholics". This statement intervenes after AI's decision to incorporate a focus on selected aspects of abortion into its policy on sexual and reproductive rights, calling for the decriminalisation of abortion in all cases, and reaffirming its support of the rights of women and girls to be free from threat, force or coercion as they manage all consequences of rape and other grave human rights violations.

The Observatory believes it is therefore imperative to devise new protection mechanisms and strengthen existing ones to provide women human rights defenders with a secure environment for their work. This is why, in November 2006, eleven women's rights and human rights organisations drafted recommendations for the gender-specific implementation of the EU Guidelines on Human Rights Defenders².

More generally, the Observatory calls upon all States to protect and to put an end to any act of harassment against women human rights defenders, and to conform with regional and international human rights instruments, in particular the United Nation Declaration on Human Rights Defenders.

For further information, please contact:

OMCT : Delphine Reculeau, + 00 41 22 809 49 39

FIDH : Gael Grilhot, + 00 33 1 43 55 25 18

Un programme de la FIDH et de l'OMCT - A FIDH and OMCT venture - Un programa de la FIDH y de la OMCT

fidh

International Federation For Human Rights
17, Passage de la Main d'Or
75 011 Paris, France

OMCT
OPERATING THE SUB-TORTURE NETWORK

World Organisation Against Torture
Case postale 21 - 8 rue du Vieux-Billard
1211 Genève 8, Switzerland

² These organisations are : AI, APWLD, Forum Asia, CWGL, Front Line, Human Rights First, FIDH, INFORM, ISHR, UAF and OMCT. The Recommendations outline concrete suggestions for EU missions to apply a gender perspective in implementing the Guidelines. It provides gender-specific recommendations for each of the articles under Section IV of the Guidelines. The Recommendations are also intended to influence the conduct of governments outside the EU regarding the protection of women human rights defenders.