

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

PUT AN END TO ALL ACTS OF HARASSMENT AGAINST WOMEN HUMAN RIGHTS DEFENDERS!

Celebrate International Day on Women Human Rights Defenders

Geneva-Paris, November 29, 2008. *At the occasion of the International Day on Women Human Rights Defenders, 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, urge all States to put an end to all acts of harassment against women human rights defenders. The Observatory also calls upon everyone 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.*

As we are about to celebrate the 10th anniversary of the United Nations Declaration on Human Rights Defenders and the 60th anniversary of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, the Observatory regrets that the situation of human rights defenders is increasingly deteriorating and that many States are still violating these two fundamental instruments. In that context, every day, women who defend human rights, including sexuality-related rights, continue to pay a particularly heavy toll for their work in protecting and promoting the rights of others, and face specific types of violations because of their gender.

In **Asia**, this is particularly the case in **Afghanistan**, **Iran** and **Nepal**. Thus, the Iranian authorities have pursued their harsh repression against women's rights activists involved in the One Million Signatures Petition Campaign, which primarily seeks to put pressure on the Iranian legislators in order to withdraw provisions that have adverse effects on women's human rights. The Observatory thus recalls that more than a hundred of women's rights activists have been arrested, interrogated, and/or sentenced in the past two years and that the Government has raised over one million Euros by imprisoning the activists and releasing them on high bail. In Nepal, Ms. **Laxmi Bohara**, a health volunteer and an active women's rights activist engaged in advocating for health rights of women, Secretary of the Women's Empowerment Centre and a member of the Women Human Rights Defender Network in Kanchanpur, died in June 2008 after being beaten and physically injured by her husband and mother in law, who had severely criticised Ms. Bohara because of her activities. In **China**, Mrs. **Mao Hengfeng**, a Shanghai activist who has been active in promoting women's reproductive rights, remains arbitrarily detained and subjected to acts of ill-treatment while in detention.

In **Africa**, members of the organisation Female Solidarity for Peace and Comprehensive Development (*Solidarité féminine pour la paix et le développement intégral* - SOFEPADI) were threatened at several occasions in the **Democratic Republic of Congo**. In particular, Ms. **Noella Usumange Aliswa** was violently assaulted in November after denouncing sexual violence committed against Congolese women. In **Uganda**, NGOs and human rights defenders continue to be confronted with violence and discrimination for defending the rights of sexual minorities. In **Zimbabwe**, members of Women of Zimbabwe Arise (WOZA) are also regularly subjected to arbitrary arrests and acts of reprisals because of their human rights activities.

In **Latin America**, women human rights defenders are not spared by repression. In **Cuba** for instance, members of the "Ladies in White" organisation (*Damas de Blanco*), an association of women and wives of Cuban political prisoners that campaigns for the release of political prisoners and prisoners of conscience, continue to be regularly subjected to acts of harassment and intimidation, and even physical assaults. In **Colombia**, organisations that work to defend women's rights, in particular the League of Displaced Women and the Women's Popular Organisation (*Organización Femenina Popular* - OFP), are still not safe from attacks carried out by any of the groups that participate in the conflict. In **Guatemala**, women who seek to promote and defend the rights of

women and the victims of sexual violence were also subjected to multiple acts of harassment and violence, and their aggressors had sometimes no hesitation in attacking their families. In **Honduras**, defenders of the rights of lesbians, gays, bisexuals and transgenders (LGBT) continue to be subjected to discrimination and harassment because of their activities. In **Mexico**, women who fight for women's rights and their right to justice have also experienced numerous acts of intimidation to discourage them from pursuing their activities. Members of the association "May Our Girls Go Home" (*Nuestras Hijas de Regreso a Casa*), an organisation that campaigns for justice for women abducted and murdered in Ciudad Juárez (Chihuahua), have for instance been subjected to insults, threats and harassment because of their activities. In **Nicaragua**, defenders of women's rights, in particular the right to therapeutic abortion, also confront serious difficulties designed to deter them from taking action.

In **Europe and the Commonwealth of Independent States**, women human rights defenders also face acts of reprisals or obstacles to their work, as for instance in the **Russian Federation** or **Uzbekistan**.

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. In particular, the Observatory hopes that the European Union will adopt concrete steps to protect women human rights defenders at its next Annual NGO Forum on Human Rights, which will take place on December 10 and 11, 2008 in Paris. To that extent, the Observatory recalls that 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 Defenders¹.

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.

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¹ 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.