



International Campaign on Women Human Rights Defenders opens global consultation meeting in Sri Lanka

November 30, 2005: Nearly 200 women's rights and human rights activists from approximately 70 countries worldwide gathered yesterday in Colombo, Sri Lanka, to begin an historic global gathering on women human rights defenders. The consultation was attended by the First Lady of Sri Lanka, **Shiranthi Rajapakse**, and opened with a welcome address by **Nimalka Fernando**, from the Women's Alliance for Peace and Democracy in Sri Lanka. The meeting highlights experiences of women who defend a range of human rights issues, as well as women and men around the globe who defend the human rights of women. The consultation is focusing on the challenges faced by women human rights defenders in their political organizing – *challenges that are often targeted at and specific to women precisely because of their sex and gender*. Abuses include violence, harassment, and intimidation, and can take the form of rape, forced psychiatric treatment and attacks designed to discredit defenders' reputations, among other violations. The gathering marks the first time women's rights and human rights groups have come together on a global level to address gender-specific concerns and experiences of women as human rights defenders.

Conference participants will address specific risks and violations women around the world face in their work in defense of human rights, whether that work explicitly focuses on women's rights or not. Defenders face specific challenges as women addressing a global rise in fundamentalisms and militarism and a climate increasingly hostile to the work of political activists in various social movements and regions. As women, they face some of the same abuses all defenders do, yet they are also exposed to or targeted for gender-based violence and gender-specific risks.

The gathering is linked to an international campaign launched in 2004 entitled "Defending Women Defending Rights: the International Campaign on Women Human Rights Defenders (ICWHRD). ICWHRD is an international initiative for the recognition and protection of women activists who advocate the realization of human rights for all people. Formed as a coalition of women's rights and human rights organizations, the Campaign is rooted in overwhelming evidence that many women who are active in different aspects of human rights work routinely face harassment, abuse, violence, discrimination and marginalization because of their gender, sexual identity and their advocacy.

In a keynote speech, **Hina Jilani**, the UN Special Representative to the Secretary General on Human Rights Defenders, spoke of an urgent need to identify and consider the special issues faced by women working in the human rights field in order to ensure that their important part in the struggle for universal human rights is fully recognized and valued. She noted that women human rights defenders are particularly vulnerable to attack because they often defy

cultural norms of gender, heterosexuality and femininity in their identities and in the course of their advocacy. She pointed out that in addition to formal state structures, groups including religious movements, local communities and families are often responsible for these violations, and that it is vital for human rights strategies to take these actors into account.

Speaking on behalf of the International Coordinating Committee for the consultation, **Charlotte Bunch**, from the Center for Women's Global Leadership in the United States, outlined the primary themes of the consultation: abuses by the state, persecution perpetrated by fundamentalist groups, sexuality-based attacks, and the significant role of family and community members in creation of widespread marginalization of and discrimination and violence toward defenders. She noted that, "Promoting rights related to the family and sexuality is often seen to threaten patriarchal institutions and that can bring about heightened hostility toward those defenders. The attacks can be deeply personal, and the efforts to silence us can be experienced in emotional ways."

Ruth del Valle, from Movimiento Nacional por los Derechos Humanos in Guatemala, described a culture of governments paying lip service to the principles of human rights in many parts of Latin America, describing this as a "dialogue of the deaf." "Nobody actually hears what is being said. We complain and they listen, but there is no effective attempt to address the abuse." She also talked about the attitude of many men to the work of women human rights defenders, noting "There are many cases where men are supportive of the idea of human rights and women's rights in theory – yet they want their own women to stay at home for them and not to get involved personally."

Marieme Helie Lucas, from the network Women Living Under Muslim Laws (France/Algeria), noted that "fundamentalism is a political movement that uses religion to gain political power. When fundamentalists commit crimes against women and women's rights defenders, the victims remain invisible because violence by these actors is overlooked."

Ndeye Nafissatou Faye, from Réseau SIGGIL JIGEEN in Senegal, spoke to the conference participants about challenges to the women's movement in Africa including those related to the family. "First there is sacrifice to do the work. Our kids and families suffer – and our men sometimes threaten to divorce us. Then there is fear. Fear of social rejection, of the way people look at us and of physical aggression against us. Fear of what will happen to us if we become victims of violence in countries where there is little provision for women in that situation. And fear of the generally negative interpretation of feminism in Africa. We need to change that."

The conference continues through Thursday, and will culminate in a final session on Friday in which the International Campaign for Women Human Rights Defenders will host a public event and address its plans for the future, and will call for the protection of women human rights defenders around the world.

Ends

The Defending Women Defending Rights Campaign is sponsored by the following organizations: Amnesty International, Asian Forum for Human Rights and Development, Asia Pacific Forum on Women's Law and Development, Center for Women's Global Leadership, Front Line, Information Monitor (INFORM), International Gay and Lesbian Human Rights Commission, International Service for Human Rights, ISIS Women's International Cross-Cultural Exchange, Latin American and Caribbean Committee for the Defense of Women's Rights, Women Living Under Muslim Laws, and the World Organization Against Torture.

For more information, contact: Mary Jane Real, Secretariat of the International Campaign on Women Human Rights Defenders (ICWHRD); mobile (94) 779 526 020.

Program Agenda for Day 1 of consultation is attached below.



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Day 1

Tuesday 29 November 2005

TIME	EVENT	OBJECTIVES	SPEAKERS	LOCATION
9:00 - 10:30	Plenary 1: Opening Plenary Our Sisters, Ourselves: Defending Women Human Rights Defenders	1. To provide a brief introduction to the WHRD campaign and outline the objectives and outcomes of the international consultation; 2. To introduce the participants to the concept of WHRD and the importance of giving recognition on WHRDs and their concerns;	Video presentation: Tribute to WHRDs Nimalka Fernando , Women's Alliance for Peace and Democracy/IMADR, Sri Lanka: <i>Welcome remarks</i> Keynote Speaker: Hina Jilani , UN Special Representative to the Secretary General on Human Rights Defenders: <i>Keynote Address - Defending Women, Defending Rights</i> Charlotte Bunch , Center for Women's Global Leadership, USA: <i>Introduction to the WHRD Campaign and International Consultation</i>	

			Moderator: Mary Jane N. Real	
10:30-11:00	Coffee and Tea Break Press Conference with Hina Jilani, UN Special Representative to the Secretary General on Human Rights Defenders			Moderator: Melinda Ann Ching-Simon
11:00-12:30	Plenary 2: Panel Presentation on Problems and Obstacles Faced by WHRDs	1.To highlight the key problems and obstacles faced by WHRDs; 2. To highlight the emerging patterns of violations and abuses against WHRDs;	Dora Ruth del Valle Cobar , Movimiento Nacional por los Derechos Humanos, Guatemala: <i>State violence and repression against WHRDs</i> Marieme Helie Lucas , Women Living Under Muslim Laws, France: <i>Fundamentalisms and WHRDs</i> Ndeye Nafissatou Faye , Reseau SIGGIL JIGEEN, Senegal: <i>Obstacles faced by WHRDs in the Family/Community</i> Cynthia Rothschild CWGL/IGLHRC, USA: <i>Sexuality-based attacks against WHRDs</i>	
			Moderator: Sunila Abeyseekera	

12:30-14:30	Lunch Break Film – showing/Caucuses			
14:30-16:30	Break-out session 1: Group discussion on issues and concerns faced by WHRDs within regional contexts	1. To identify gender-based forms of human rights violations, threats, risks, and their consequences on WHRDs by region; 2. To discuss the concepts and key concerns of WHRDs within each regional context;	Regional Workshops <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Asia-Pacific ▪ Latin America and the Caribbean ▪ Middle East and North Africa ▪ Sub-Saharan Africa ▪ Europe and North America 	
By appointment	Sharing of Cases and Testimonies of Women Human Rights Defenders with Hina Jilani, UN Special Representative to the Secretary General on Human Rights Defenders			
17:00-18:30	Plenary session 3: Reporting Back	1. to synthesise the gender-based forms of human rights violations, threats, risks, and their consequences on	Report back by the rapporteurs from the regions	

		WHRDs;		
			Moderator: Immaculada Vargas	
19:30 -	Welcome Reception hosted by the WHRD-ICC			