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Contact:

Radhika Balakrishnan, Mobile: +1(646) 330-3312

Kevin Donegan, kdonegan@cesr.org, Mobile: +34 622-229307

Margot Baruch, mbaruch@rci.rutgers.edu,

Human Rights Groups Urge the United States to Place Greater Focus on Achieving Freedom from Want

Call Comes as the United States Appears Before the United Nations to Report on Human Rights Compliance

[Wednesday, November 3, 2010, New York/Atlanta/Madrid] A group of U.S. and international human rights organizations today called on the U.S. government to put a greater focus on achieving freedom from want by implementing its obligation to protect, respect, and fulfill economic and social rights. The Center for Economic and Social Rights, Center for Women's Global Leadership, International Network for Economic, Social and Cultural Rights, Political Economy Research Institute, US Human Rights Network, and Urban Justice Center are among the groups urging the government to take specific action to prioritize social and economic rights as a primary goal behind financial regulations and reforms and other areas of economic and social policy. Their call comes as the United States prepares to defend its human rights record before the United Nations Human Rights Council for the first time this week.

The inclusion of economic and social rights in the 1948 Universal Declaration of Human Rights illustrates the indivisibility of all human rights. The United States, however, is one of only six countries that has not ratified the principal UN treaty on economic, social and cultural rights. The United States' traditional resistance to economic and social rights arises from the fact that health, education, housing and other social goods are regarded as market commodities rather than as rights. "Solving the deep-seated economic and social problems of this country would offer the United States an opportunity to once again champion 'freedom from want' as a basic human right and as a goal of economic and social policy," said Radhika Balakrishnan, executive director of the Center for Women's Leadership.

In the United States, the ability to meet basic needs is directly connected to access to employment. Consequently, an analysis of the human rights situation in the United States must take into account the severity of the current recession and its impact on the most vulnerable sectors of the population. The U.S. Universal Periodic Review (UPR) Report notes dissatisfaction with current racial and ethnic disparities in unemployment rates, yet the government has not taken specific steps to address these disparities in its economic recovery efforts. "We hope that the Obama Administration will take advantage of the UPR to announce steps it intends to take to protect the basic economic rights of individuals who are already marginalized including women and people of color," said Ejim Dike, director of the Human Rights Project at the Urban Justice Center.

The human rights groups also urged the United States to fulfill its obligation to protect individual rights by ensuring that third-party behavior, such as that of corporations and financial institutions, does not compromise basic rights including the freedom from want. U.S. civil society groups are encouraged by new

financial regulatory reforms and the creation of new oversight committees and other instruments for regulating finance. Unfortunately, the details have been left to the discretion of regulatory bodies which are susceptible to corporate pressure through lobbying efforts and other channels of political influence.

A recent analysis by the Center for Economic and Social Rights revealed that despite being the world's wealthiest economy, the United States has one the poorest records of economic and social rights achievement of all high-income countries. The analysis found that child poverty and infant mortality rates are far higher than in other comparable countries. Health and education disparities, particularly between racial and ethnic groups, are extremely wide: African American women are almost four times more likely to die in childbirth than white women. The United States ranks bottom of 24 OECD countries in the [Economic and Social Rights Fulfillment Index](#), developed by academics at the University of Connecticut and the New School, N.Y., which compares states' achievements in light of their resources.

During the UPR at the United Nations in Geneva this week, the groups are hosting a side event, "Human Rights in the United States: Building Foundations for Freedom from Want in the Land of Plenty," on Friday, November 5, at the Palais des Nations, Room XXII at 13:00.

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