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Small number of countries holding UN world summit hostage on human rights, security, poverty

Joint Statement by Amnesty International, Human Rights Watch, Oxfam International and Global Call to Action Against Poverty

Amnesty International, Human Rights Watch and Oxfam International call on a small number of “spoiler” countries to stop holding the UN World Summit hostage over crucial measures on human rights, security, genocide and poverty reduction. These governments have thrown negotiations on the final outcome text into crisis just days away from the biggest meeting of world leaders in history, September 14-16 in New York.

The three organizations, alongside the Global Call to Action Against Poverty, the world’s largest anti-poverty movement, said that the actions of a small number of countries threaten to sabotage the summit. The objections of some of these states appear intended to block adoption of a meaningful agreement, rather than to strengthen the current draft or address legitimate concerns. The leading “spoilers” vary on different issues, but together their activities are seriously weakening draft agreements on the Human Rights Council, poverty-reduction and preventing genocide despite support from the majority of governments for these measures.

Oxfam is very concerned that a small number of countries are determined to block an historic draft measure on governments’ “responsibility to protect civilians” that could stop future genocides such as Rwanda from ever occurring. Countries trying to block this include India, Egypt, Algeria, Pakistan, Venezuela, Cuba, Iran, Syria and Russia. The United States is also trying to weaken the measure, and is now proposing to cut “the obligation” to protect and replacing it with “the moral responsibility”.

“African governments pressing for agreement on the measure to prevent genocide are urging the world to act,” said Nicola Reindorp, head of Oxfam’s New York Office, “Yet a few spoiler governments look set to dash hopes for agreement on this life-saving move.”

The proposal to create a new Human Rights Council with more authority and that can sit throughout the year, review human rights in all countries and address all human rights situations is intended to be a key achievement of the World Summit. It has won the endorsement of an overwhelming

majority of states from all regions of the world. Amnesty International and Human Rights Watch expressed grave concern, however, that some 15 countries, led by Cuba and including Venezuela, Myanmar, Turkmenistan, Pakistan, Belarus, Vietnam, and Syria, were blocking any movement on this important reform.

"The possibility that a small number of states with deeply troubling human rights records could block the creation of a more effective human rights body is not only ironic, it is disgraceful," said Peggy Hicks, Human Rights Watch's Global Advocacy Director.

"Millions of men, women and children are looking to this Summit for something better than a forum for horse-trading on human rights," said Yvonne Terlingen, Amnesty International's Representative at the UN, "Only strong and ambitious reform can overcome the power politics, double standards and selectivity that have tarnished the image of the current Commission on Human Rights. World leaders must be visionary and bold if they are not to squander this unique opportunity."

The United States has also proposed cutting wording on poverty reduction, including on overseas development aid, education and debt relief, and removing the term "Millennium Development Goals" -- the internationally agreed upon targets for halving world poverty. In addition, the United States wants to cut references to small arms controls from the outcome document.

"We are in real danger of seeing commitments made by all governments five years ago on poverty reduction being eroded at the UN World Summit," said Kumi Naidoo, chair of the Global Call to Action against Poverty. "We cannot allow developing countries to be bullied into agreeing to an outcome that will fail the majority of the world's people."

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Notes to editors:

Responsibility to Protect: This measure would involve governments agreeing that they share the responsibility to protect civilians at risk of genocide, crimes against humanity, ethnic cleansing and war crimes, when the government of the people concerned is unwilling or unable to do so. Countries trying to block the measure include Egypt, Algeria, Pakistan, Venezuela, India, Russia, Cuba, Iran, and Syria. The United States does not want to be obliged to act in all such cases. The majority of states, including the African Group, the European Union, Chile, Argentina, Peru, Japan, Singapore, Australia, New Zealand and Canada, support endorsement at the Summit of the "Responsibility to protect."

The Global Call to Action against Poverty (GCAP) is the world's largest anti-poverty coalition, whose organizations together represent more than 150 million people globally. The campaign is aiming to make a breakthrough on poverty in 2005 and is calling for world leaders to "wake up" and take concrete steps at the United Nations to achieve the Millennium Development Goals and end poverty once and for all.

The Millennium Development Goals are eight targets agreed by over 190 governments in 2000 to help eradicate poverty through action by developed and developing countries. They focus on eradicating extreme poverty and hunger, achieving universal primary education, promoting gender equality, reducing child mortality, improving maternal health, combating HIV/AIDS, Malaria and other preventable diseases, ensuring environmental sustainability and developing a global partnership for development. The first Millennium Development Goal, on getting an equal number of girls into school as boys by 2005, has already been missed.

Public Document

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