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Rio + 20: Outcome Document Undermined by Human Rights Opponents

(Rio de Janeiro, June 22, 2012) – Global economic troubles are being matched by a recession in human rights with worryingly minimal commitments coming out of the United Nations Rio+20 conference on Sustainable Development, Amnesty International, Human Rights Watch, and the Center for International Environment Law (CIEL) said today on the close of the conference.

Rio+20 aimed to renew political commitments to sustainable development that were made at the original conference 20 years ago, through assessing progress and implementation gaps and discussing new and emerging issues.

“The G77 countries, the Holy See, and Canada formed a shameful alliance against making a commitment to human rights, on occasion aided by the US,” said Jan Egeland, deputy executive director at Human Rights Watch. “Despite opposition, rights language has survived in the outcome document – but it does not go far enough.”

The Holy See led the charge against sexual and reproductive rights, with support of the G77, an organization of developing countries. The participating countries emphasized the need for universal access to reproductive health, including family planning and sexual health and the integration of reproductive health in national strategies and programs in the outcome document. But express reproductive rights language was deleted.

Canada, the G77, and the US united against reaffirming the responsibility of businesses to respect rights. Throughout the negotiations, governments also failed to address their human rights obligations when they sit as shareholders of international financial institutions (IFIs).

In the outcome document, governments recognized that sustainable development requires the meaningful involvement and active participation of civil society and many marginalized groups, including persons with disabilities, amongst others. However, governments struck out reference to the rights of freedom of association and assembly, said Amnesty International, Human Rights Watch, and CIEL. And the right to freedom of expression, essential for participation and accountability, never even made it into a draft of the outcome document.

Further, civil society groups have expressed dismay at the lack of opportunities for their meaningful participation in the Rio process.

“The G77 challenged the rights to freedom of assembly and association, while past champions refused to fight for these rights,” Egeland said. “It is amazing that in the wake of the Arab spring, governments did not find their voices to support free speech rights in the context of sustainable development.”

World leaders reaffirmed the importance of respect for all human rights to development, the Universal

Declaration of Human Rights and other rights instruments, and the UN Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples.

Governments recognized the importance of select economic and social rights in the outcome document, including the rights to food, health, and education. For the first time at a major UN summit meeting, the countries reaffirmed the right to safe drinking water and sanitation. Governments committed to work to progressively make access a reality for all.

“It is unfortunate that some governments attempted arbitrarily to exclude transboundary water issues from the scope of the right to water,” said Savio Carvalho, Demand Dignity program director of Amnesty International. “That these attempts were unsuccessful is a win for human rights.”

Rio+20 has also fallen short in integrating human rights and environmental protection, the rights groups said. While international, regional and national courts and human rights bodies have increasingly recognized environmental damage as a cause of human rights violations, and have firmly established state responsibility with respect to environmental protection, the Rio+20 process ignored the right to a healthy environment.

“Environmental protection is essential to the full enjoyment of all human rights,” said Dr. Marcos Orellana, human rights and environment director at CIEL. “Without the explicit recognition of the right to a healthy environment, the Rio+20 document fails to address the global ecological and poverty crisis confronting humanity and the planet.”

The 1992 Rio Declaration, which consisted of 27 principles intended to guide future sustainable development, included reference to the right to development, made reference to international law, and recognized that people should have access to information concerning the environment and the opportunity to participate in decision-making processes.

“While there has been some progress in the final outcome document, the mere fact that we have to advocate for inclusion of human rights is absurd,” Carvalho said.

To Read the Amnesty International and Human Rights Watch Joint Statement on the Rio + 20 UN Conference on Sustainable Development, please visit:

<http://www.hrw.org/news/2012/06/12/amnesty-international-and-human-rights-watch-joint-statement-rio-20-un-conference-su>

For more Human Rights Watch reporting, please visit:

<http://www.hrw.org/>

For more Amnesty International reporting, please visit:

<http://www.amnesty.org/en/demand-dignity>

For more Center for International Environmental Law reporting, please visit:

<http://www.ciel.org/>

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