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Sexual and reproductive rights in Latin America and the Caribbean: governments of the region reach historic agreement

Amnesty International welcomes the historic agreement reached by States from the region on various issues, including gender equality, sexual rights and reproductive rights, during the First Regional Conference on Population and Development, which ended on 15 August in Montevideo, Uruguay, following four days of debate involving some 250 people from civil society organizations, including Amnesty International.

The resolution document reaffirms the main international commitments and agreements concerning human rights and in particular the Cairo Programme of Action, as well as pointing out the important advances made in the region.

The key advances made in the region, where abortion under any circumstances is criminalized in five countries, include explicit recognition that the experience of some countries shows that criminalizing abortion causes an increase in maternal mortality and morbidity and does not reduce the number of abortions, all of which holds States back from fulfilling the Millennium Development Goals.

In this regard, a strong message was sent out to States, urging them to consider amending their laws, regulations, strategies and public policies relating to the voluntary termination of pregnancy in order to safeguard the lives and health of women and adolescents, thereby improving their quality of life and reducing the number of abortions. They were also urged to ensure that, in those cases where abortion is legal or decriminalized under national legislation, safe, good-quality abortion services are available for women with unwanted and unaccepted pregnancies.

It is also significant that the region has achieved general consensus regarding recognition of respect for sexual orientation and gender identity. Also noteworthy is the fact that sexual rights were recognized as being rights that are independent of reproduction and that they were clearly stated as encompassing the right to a full and safe sex life, as well as the right for people to take free, informed, voluntary and responsible decisions on their sexuality, regardless of their sexual orientation or gender identity, without coercion, discrimination or violence.

The States also addressed the long-neglected demands of the indigenous women of the region by committing themselves to incorporating a participatory and intercultural approach into the comprehensive sex education programmes they agreed to set up, as well as into sexual and reproductive health services.

States should also ensure universal access to these sexual and reproductive health services as well as access to modern, safe and effective contraception methods, respecting the principle of confidentiality and privacy so that young people can take free, informed and responsible decisions with regard to their sex lives and reproduction and the exercise of their sexual orientation. These should also be of good quality and user-friendly for adolescents and young people; this was without doubt a major achievement for the region's young people who worked hard to mobilize

around this conference. One in every four people in Latin America and the Caribbean is a young person.

In this regard, it was explicitly reaffirmed that children, young people and adolescents are “rights holders and stakeholders in development” and their situation was one of the main topics of discussion in Montevideo. Particular concern was expressed about adolescent pregnancy, which is a growing phenomenon in the region, especially among adolescents from disadvantaged groups. In this regard, the States agreed to prioritize the prevention of unwanted pregnancies among adolescents and other measures for mitigating the possible violation of the human rights of pregnant adolescents.

In relation to violence against women, the States reaffirmed their commitment to combat and eliminate all forms of discrimination and violence against women, including domestic violence, the killing of women on gender grounds and femicide/feminicide. This is extremely important in a region where gender-based violence is reaching epidemic proportions.

The States reaffirmed that both sexual rights and reproductive rights are an integral part of human rights, and that their exercise is essential for the enjoyment of other fundamental rights and for achieving international development goals and eradicating poverty. They also stressed once again that the inequities in the region are unacceptable and recognized the multiple forms of discrimination faced by some women and girls who are also indigenous, of African descent, or living in poverty.

Similarly, the States reaffirmed that maternal mortality is an affront to human rights and recognized that the overwhelming majority of maternal deaths are preventable. They therefore committed themselves once again to eradicating preventable cases of maternal morbidity and mortality and including, within the set of integrated benefits of sexual health and reproductive health services, measures for preventing and avoiding unsafe abortion, the main ones being comprehensive sex education and timely and confidential access to information, advice, technology and good quality services, including emergency oral contraception without prescription.

The agreements were welcomed by representatives of over 50 organizations and international and national networks from 30 countries that make up the *Articulación de la Sociedad Civil de América Latina y el Caribe Cairo +20* (Cairo +20 Civil Society Coordinating Body for Latin America and the Caribbean) who were present in Montevideo. They appreciated having a regional forum for debate that had broad civil society involvement and in which no one remained in any doubt that a fundamental requirement for development in Latin America and the Caribbean was the need to put an end to gender inequality.

If these agreements are implemented, we will have a region that is much fairer and one in which human rights will be a reality for very many women and girls who at the moment feel as if they have no ownership over their bodies or decisions about their sexuality and reproduction. In this regard Amnesty International stresses the importance of this policy commitment and emphatically urges States to take the appropriate action. Particularly important is the pledge they made to allocate resources for following through on their commitments, as well as the express recognition of the importance of establishing clear monitoring and accountability mechanisms that involve civil society in all its diversity.

Background information

The First Regional Conference on Population and Development in Latin America and the Caribbean, organized by the United Nations Economic Commission for Latin America and the Caribbean (ECLAC), was a preparatory meeting for the International Conference on Population and Development (ICPD) Beyond 2014, scheduled for September 2014 in New York. Representatives

from all regions will gather there to review implementation of the goals set in the Programme of Action that was agreed at the ICPD in Cairo in 1994. The agenda of that Conference includes sexual and reproductive rights and maternal morbidity, gender equality and equity, the family and social wellbeing, urbanization and internal migration, international migration, adolescents and young people, disability and indigenous peoples.