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NEW UN HIGH COMMISSIONER FOR HUMAN RIGHTS

GENEVA – Amnesty International today welcomed the announcement that Mary Robinson has been appointed as the new United Nations (UN) High Commissioner for Human Rights.

“Mary Robinson should seize the opportunity to make human rights a cornerstone of the UN’s work for the next millennium,” the organization said. “The challenges facing the UN over the next few years in the field of human rights are great, but with clear vision, a decisive leadership, a willingness to tackle human rights abuses head on, and an effective partnership with non-governmental organizations, these challenges could be overcome.”

“The protection of human rights is central to the UN’s work in development, peace and security. The new High Commissioner should ensure that human rights are integrated into the UN’s work in preventive action, peace-making, peace-keeping and post-conflict peace-building.”

Amnesty International is calling on Mary Robinson to take immediate action on a series of the most pressing concerns. These include ensuring the High Commissioner’s field operations notably in Colombia, Burundi, Rwanda and Zaire are given the necessary financial support and guidance, and securing the implementation of human rights in the peace processes in Sierra Leone and Angola.

The organization also urged the new High Commissioner to take a firm stance with governments who procrastinate or refuse to cooperate with the UN human rights machinery, and to challenge governments publicly where necessary, rather than allowing dialogue to become an end in itself without producing real change. Mary Robinson should also develop long term strategies on thematic and country-specific areas of human rights.

Where atrocities such as crimes against humanity and war crimes have been committed, the High Commissioner should fulfill her duty to act immediately, not only expressing sympathy with victims but by identifying the responsible authorities and proposing how the international community and the UN in particular should respond.

“1998 marks the 50th anniversary of the UN Universal Declaration of Human Rights. One way for Mary Robinson to make a lasting contribution to human rights protection for the next 50 years would be working to ensure the establishment of an effective, permanent international criminal court to tackle impunity for human rights violations,” Amnesty International said.

“The new High Commissioner should also ensure that the Human Rights Defenders declaration is adopted, and develop a sophisticated approach to ensuring gender sensitivity in human rights issues and throughout the UN system.”

The organization highlighted some of the organizational changes which are necessary to make the functioning of the High Commissioner’s office more effective – particularly the ongoing restructuring of the UN Centre for Human Rights – but also an increased involvement and

participation of the human rights program in decision-making and planning in New York regarding UN field operations, and the strengthening of the High Commissioner's New York office.

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For further information, or to receive a copy of Amnesty International's report *Agenda for a new United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights*, which looks at the successes and failures of the first High Commissioner and the agenda for the next, please contact:

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