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THE PROTECTION OF HUMAN RIGHTS FOR WOMEN

A MEDIA GUIDE TO AMNESTY INTERNATIONAL'S POSITION ON THE UN CONFERENCE ON WOMEN

What does Amnesty International want to come out of the UN Conference on Women?

This is the first UN Conference on Women where human rights issues are on the agenda and Amnesty International is looking for a commitment in both words and action to improve the protection of those rights. The key issues for Amnesty International are:

The universality and invisibility of human rights

The Platform of Action -- the main document that will emerge from the conference -- still does not make a strong and clear statement that all women, wherever they live in the world or whatever their circumstances, should enjoy all the human rights and fundamental freedoms, and that all these rights are inextricably linked. This principle is expressed as the universality and indivisibility of human rights.

It is astounding that commitments on this very point made by 171 governments just two years ago at the 1993 UN World Conference on Human Rights in 1993 are barely visible in the Platform of Action. At that conference, governments adopted the Vienna Declaration and Programme of Action which states:

- The human rights of women and the girl-child are an inalienable, integral and indivisible part of human rights. The human rights of women should form an integral part of the United Nations human rights activities, including the promotion of all human rights instrument relating to women. The World Conference on Human Rights urges Governments, institutions, intergovernmental and non-governmental organizations to intensify their efforts for the promotion and protection of human rights of women and the girl-child.

At this stage, many governments have resisted attempts to affirm and build on the commitments to all human rights they made in Vienna, and at other global conferences on the environment, population and social development. The message many governments are sending is that they will not treat all human rights on the same footing -- and in particular that they do not want to tackle human rights violations for which they have direct responsibility.

Violence against women

Until the most recent draft of the Platform of Action, state violence against women -- such as torture, "disappearances", and extrajudicial executions -- was barely mentioned. The current draft states explicitly that governments should "refrain from engaging in violence against women" and prevent and investigate such acts and punish those responsible including state agents.

What is still missing, though, is a statement that torture by state agents is one of the most common forms of violence suffered by women. For the Platform of Action to commit governments to eliminating this form of violence, it needs to include a strong exhortation for all government to ratify without any limiting reservations the Convention Against Torture and other relevant human rights instruments. It must also urge them to take prompt steps to implement the Convention including a clear statement that any state agent suspected of being responsible for torture will be brought to justice.

This point is crucial not only because any attempt to stem violence against women must eradicate brutality by police and soldiers but also because any government which does not do so sends a message to others in its society that violence against women is not taken seriously.

Armed Conflict

Women are disproportionately the victims of human rights violations and abuses including rape and other torture, "disappearances" and summary or arbitrary executions during armed conflicts, a central point that the conference must take on board for it to make a real impact on the human rights violations suffered by women.

The conference must also recognize that both governments and armed opposition groups are bound by international humanitarian law -- known as the laws of war -- that prohibit rape and other forms of torture, as well as hostage taking, and extrajudicial execution.

Increasingly, rape is used by soldiers as a weapon of war, and the conference should specifically condemn such torture and governments should commit themselves to eliminating rape by their forces.

How do human rights issues relate to the other key points of debate at the conference?

The themes of the World Conference on Women - equality, development and peace - will not be achieved unless governments commit themselves to ensuring that women fully enjoy all human rights.

The rights to equality, development and peace are inextricably linked to civil and political rights because any woman who faces arbitrary imprisonment, torture, "disappearance", judicial or extrajudicial execution stands no chance of exercising any other of her rights.

The conference in Beijing will be the first opportunity for the world's governments to spell out how past commitments to the human rights of women can be implemented to achieve real and measurable change for women by the year 2000.

What are the obstacles to achieving a commitment from governments on human rights protection?

The major obstacles will be governments who ignore the urgent need for action on human rights protection for women in favour of vested political interests, and those who will ignore the fact that the state is a major cause of the violations of the human rights of women.

Does Amnesty International believe that the outcome of the conference will make a difference to the human rights of women?

It can make a difference if the governments at the conference build on, and do not roll back, their commitment to all human rights for women, and if they then take concrete action to promote and protect those rights when they leave Beijing and return to their countries.

The real test for the success of any major UN conference is not just what is said or agreed at the conference itself, but what takes place afterwards. The three previous world conferences on women have not dealt with the human rights of women – this is long overdue and we hope the conference will finally come to grips with human rights.

Amnesty International will judge the ultimate impact of the conference on whether governments ratify the various human rights instruments that are relevant to the protection of women, implement them by changing their national laws and policing, trial and other procedures, and, finally, whether human rights violations against women decrease.

Whatever the Platform for Action says, and we hope that governments will use this opportunity to make firm commitments to human rights, it is ultimately what governments do that will change the situation of women.