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INTERNATIONAL WOMEN'S DAY: AMNESTY INTERNATIONAL CALLS ON ALL GOVERNMENTS TO DRAW UP NATIONAL PLANS OF ACTION ON WOMEN'S RIGHTS

On International Women's Day, Amnesty International is urging governments worldwide to act on the commitments they made to women's human rights six months ago at the Fourth United Nations Conference on Women and, in particular, to go ahead with the national plans of action mentioned in the Beijing Platform for Action.

"Governments pledged action on issues from violence against women to the protection of women activists, yet those pledges have still to be transformed into reality," Amnesty International said today.

In the Beijing Declaration and Platform for Action, specific commitments were made on violence against women, women in armed conflict, refugees and internally displaced women, and women activists.

Since making those commitments, governments have continued to inflict sexual, physical, and other psychological violence against women with impunity. Women are attacked and sometimes killed for what they wear or do not wear and are intimidated, ill-treated and imprisoned as methods of enforcing family planning and reproduction policies. Women are brutally raped and sexually assaulted in custody, yet governments have been extremely reluctant to prosecute members of the police or the security forces.

One dramatic example is the case of Aurora Nazario, a 15-year-old Mexican girl, subjected to rape by three police officers in a police station in November 1995. The three officers remain at large, despite the complaint presented by the victim before the Mexican Public Ministry.

The Beijing Conference also strongly condemned violence against women in private life, particularly when this is condoned by the state.

In recent years, the horrific stories of rape in Bosnia-Herzegovina and the mass rape by the military and the militia in Rwanda have shown how particularly vulnerable women are in conflicts -- how they are often singled out for human rights violations which are not inflicted on men and how assault on a woman's body is used as a weapon of war.

In Beijing, governments committed themselves to investigate and punish members of the police, security and armed forces and others who commit acts of violence against women, violations of international humanitarian law and violations of the human rights of women in situations of armed conflict.

Governments also reaffirmed that rape in armed conflict constitutes a war crime and is sometimes a crime against humanity and an act of genocide as defined in the Convention on the Prevention and Punishment of the Crime of Genocide.

The statutes of the International Criminal Tribunals for Rwanda and for the former Yugoslavia include jurisdiction over rape and the tribunal for Yugoslavia has confirmed an indictment charging rape. Unfortunately, however, only 15 states have enacted legislation permitting the police and the judicial authorities to cooperate with the tribunal for former Yugoslavia and only six have done so for the Rwanda tribunal.

Amnesty International is calling upon all states which have not yet done so to pass the necessary legislation and to provide the tribunals with the support needed to bring to justice those responsible for atrocities such as rape.

The Beijing Declaration and Platform for Action stated that 80% of world's refugees and displaced persons are women and children. They are threatened by deprivation of the right to return to their homes of origin as well as by violence and insecurity. Women refugees and displaced women are also the victims of sexual violence and other gender-related persecution.

The governments committed themselves to take effective measures to protect refugee women from violence and to carry out thorough, impartial investigations of any such violations and bring those responsible to justice.

The declaration and platform also refer to "sexual violence or other gender-related persecution" as constituting a well-founded fear of persecution under the Convention relating to the Status of Refugees and its 1967 Protocol, and notes that in most countries of asylum women experience difficulty in being recognized as refugees when their claim is based on such persecution.

As well, governments committed themselves in the declaration and platform to protect women engaged in the defence of human rights. Increasingly, women are standing up for their rights as political opponents, trade unionists, human rights activists, lawyers, and community activists. The case of the Nobel Peace Prize Laureate Aung San Suu Kyi -- now freed and still working for the rights of other women and men in Myanmar-- constitutes a clear example of the importance of women human rights activists, the risks they face, and of what can be achieved by putting international pressure on the governments which do not respect fundamental rights.

Finally, Amnesty International urges all governments to ratify and implement international and regional human rights treaties which protect women's rights, as stated in the Beijing Declaration, and to bridge the gap between the existence of rights and their effective enjoyment. The governments themselves acknowledged in Beijing that this gap stems from a lack of commitment by the national authorities to promoting and protecting human rights.

Amnesty International emphasizes the consequences of the principle agreed in Beijing that "women's rights are human rights" and urges that this principle be put into action by governments developing national plans of action for the promotion and protection of women's human rights.

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