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LEADING GROUPS WELCOME U.N. REPORT ON INTIMIDATION OF DEFENSE LAWYERS IN NORTHERN IRELAND

Envoy finds “intimidation, harassment, hindrance”

Five of the world’s leading international human rights organizations—Amnesty International, the International Commission of Jurists, Human Rights Watch, the International Federation of Human Rights, and the Lawyers Committee for Human Rights— today welcomed the publication of a United Nations report on United Kingdom. The report, by the U.N. Special Rapporteur on the Independence of Judges and Lawyers, Dato’ Param Cumaraswamy, a leading Malaysian jurist, results from his fact-finding mission to Northern Ireland and England in October 1997 to investigate allegations that police officers in Northern Ireland routinely issued death threats against and intimidated defense lawyers.

Cumaraswamy, finding that police officers in the Royal Ulster Constabulary (RUC) have engaged in “activities which constitute intimidation, harassment, hindrance” of defense lawyers, recommends an inquiry into such practices. He also recommends an independent judicial inquiry into the 1989 murder of prominent defense lawyer, Patrick Finucane; recognition of the right to full access to counsel; restoration of the right to remain silent; reinstatement of the right to trial by jury; and rigorous human rights training for Northern Ireland’s police force and judiciary.

“As agreement on a historic peace settlement for Northern Ireland nears, the U.K. government and the RUC must take stock of persistent abusive police conduct supported by emergency laws that routinely violate the due process rights of detainees. It is the combination of bad law giving rise to police abuse that permits RUC investigators to threaten, intimidate and harass defense lawyers with impunity. A just and durable peace will depend on an independent, well-informed judiciary and on legal professionals unhindered in their duties by abusive treatment at the hands of law enforcement officials,” commented Holly Cartner, executive director of the Europe and Central Asia division for Human Rights Watch in New York.

See attached joint statement by the five organizations.

The full text of the U.N. Special Rapporteur’s report can be found at

<http://www.unhcr.ch/html/menu4/chrrep/98chr39.htm>.