

## Web Action WA 50/06; AI Index AFR 53/003/2006

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### South Africa Shelter under threat

*"When I see them getting out of the police van with the few possessions they have salvaged... in black rubbish bags, it is heartbreaking... Those black bags signify the women's own self-image forged after years of abuse – as if they were rubbish, the refuse of society, worn out, worthless and disposable."*

- Rachel Tomlinson, Director of Sinethemba Shelter, KwaZulu-Natal province

A woman, raped and thrown out of her community. A grandmother of 84, beaten and robbed for her pension by her grandson. Women disabled and disfigured for life, shot by their partners, infected with HIV and other sexually transmitted diseases.

Since 2004, the Sinethemba Shelter for Domestic Violence Victims has offered survivors like these a temporary haven. Sinethemba, which means "we believe", is the only lodging of its kind in the south coast region of KwaZulu-Natal province. It works closely within a referral system that includes police stations, hospitals, courts and the Department of Social Welfare and Population Development. It also receives some support from local businesses and community organizations.

Survivors of domestic violence are warmly helped by staff that assist them in accessing legal, medical and social welfare support, and provide some emotional support within the safe environment of the shelter. The shelter has capacity for 20 persons, but will house up to 30 rather than turn survivors away. Wherever possible, children are placed in children's homes after an initial short stay.

However, all this work may come to an abrupt halt because the existing shelter house, which Sinethemba has been renting, has been put up for sale. Attempts to secure larger, permanent premises on another site in the same community have so far proved unsuccessful. The new site is owned by the Umdoni Municipality, and the municipality is stalling on making a decision as to whether to donate the site to the shelter.

Under the Domestic Violence Act (116 of 1998), any police officer is required to assist a person complaining of domestic violence, including assisting or making arrangements for the complainant to find a suitable shelter. Government authorities therefore have an obligation under national law as well as under international human rights law to ensure the availability of appropriate shelter accommodation. General Recommendation 19 (Article 24 b) of the UN Committee on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women spells out the need for states to provide "protective measures, including refuges ... for women who are the victims of violence or who are at risk of violence".

#### Call to action

Write to the KwaZulu-Natal Provincial Minister of Local Government and Provincial Minister of Social Welfare and Population Development, urging them to help the Sinethemba Shelter obtain safe and appropriate premises for the long-term.

## Sample letter

Dear Ministers,

The Sinethemba Shelter for Domestic Violence Victims provides the only lodging of its kind in the south coast region of KwaZulu-Natal Province giving assistance and support for women and child survivors of domestic violence. However, its ability to continue its work is being jeopardized by lack of access to appropriate long-term and secure premises.

We urge you to take all necessary measures immediately to ensure that the shelter can be suitably and safely housed for the benefit of women and children at risk of domestic violence now and in the future.

The government is obliged under national and international human rights law to ensure that there are refuges available for women and their children who are the survivors of violence or who are at risk of violence.

This appeal is part of Amnesty International's worldwide campaign to mark the International Day for the Elimination of Violence against Women, 25 November, focusing on shelters for women who suffer domestic violence.

Yours sincerely,

### Target contact details

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Please send copies of your letters to:

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If you would like to find out what more you can do to support the work of the Sinethemba Shelter, contact the AI group in Durban, South Africa at [galefra@mweb.co.za](mailto:galefra@mweb.co.za)