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**EMBARGOED UNTIL 8 MARCH 2000**

## **International Women's Day: Empty rhetoric and unfulfilled promises**

*"NJ", an 11 year old girl in a camp for internally displaced persons on the outskirts of Khartoum, Sudan, became lost on 5 May 1999 while returning from visiting her relatives in a neighbouring camp. Mistaken as a vagrant child by the police she was taken to a police station and raped by one officer in the presence of three others. Despite medical evidence confirming that "NJ" had been raped, no one has yet been brought to justice and there are serious fears that her case will never be properly heard in court.*

The situation of women and girls throughout the world lies in stark contrast with the grand rhetoric of the international community, Amnesty International said today, International Women's Day.

"Despite the promises and declarations made five years ago at the Fourth World Conference on Women in Beijing, there have been very few positive developments taken by governments to advance women's rights and protect them from the plethora of human rights abuses that they face simply as a result of their gender," Amnesty International said.

"The continuing failure to protect women's rights reflects many governments' lack of political will to bring about real change in the lives of women."

"It is all too common for governments to ignore their promises and commitments made in the international arena or to place obstacles in the pursuit of women's rights by invoking cultural or religious interests," the organization added.

More women and girls die each day because of various forms of gender-based discrimination than as a result of any other type of human rights abuse. Every year a vast number of women and young girls are mutilated, battered to death, burned alive, raped, trafficked for domestic or sexual purposes, primarily because they are female.

Women continue to be treated as second class citizens in many parts of the world and are subjected to discriminatory laws and practices, often in the name of religion, tradition or culture. In Pakistan for example, hundreds of women every year are killed in the name of honour, yet despite the illegality of such practices, they continue to occur because of the indifference and gender bias of the Pakistan authorities. In some countries, young girls and women continue to be forcibly circumcised despite being outlawed by national legislation.

"Responsibility for these abuses rests with governments if they systematically fail to bring these attackers to justice and neglect their obligations to protect women against such forms of violence," the organization stressed.

Women are particularly at risk in areas of armed conflict. In addition, refugee or internally displaced women and young girls, who are often relied upon to care for the young, the sick and the elderly in unfamiliar and hostile surroundings, are vulnerable to rape and sexual abuse at state borders and in refugee camps.

Amnesty International has also received reports of sexual violence against female East Timorese refugees in West Timor, reportedly committed by Indonesian security forces and militia groups in September 1999. Similarly, in Burundi, the organization has learnt of women and young girls who were raped in October and November last year by members of the Burundi security forces in or near regroupment camps set up by the government.

One of the few achievements by the international community to help protect women from abuses has been the establishment of the International Criminal Court and its classification of rape and other forms of sexual violence -- including enforced prostitution, forced pregnancy and sexual slavery -- as crimes against humanity, and as a war crime when committed in the context of international or internal armed conflict.

The adoption of the Optional Protocol to the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women (Women's Convention) in December 1999, allowing women to bring complaints against states that have failed to uphold their commitments to the Women's Convention, is another positive step in ensuring that women are empowered to claim their rights.

"Universal ratification of the Women's Convention by the year 2000 was one of the goals of the Beijing Conference. However, many governments, including the USA, have still not ratified the Convention. Until they do so and start honouring their commitments, universal human rights for all women will remain an unattainable and distant goal."

"Governments must act today to live up to their obligations to respect and promote the human rights of women under international law," Amnesty International concluded.

### **Background**

Under the UN Charter, states pledge to take action to promote universal respect for and observance of fundamental freedoms for all, without discrimination on the basis of sex. The Universal Declaration of Human Rights and other human rights instruments proclaim that all are entitled to human rights without discrimination on the basis of sex.

The Convention on Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women was adopted in 1979. It recognises that discrimination prevents women from enjoying the full range of human rights and freedoms in the political, economic, social, cultural and civil fields, and it outlines measures which governments are required to take to end such discrimination. To date 165 members of the UN's 188 member states have ratified the Convention

The Convention establishes the Committee on the Elimination of Discrimination against Women (CEDAW), a committee of 23 independent experts which reviews the reports that state parties are required to submit indicating the measures taken to implement the Women's Convention.

Only 28 states have so far signed the Optional Protocol to the Women's Convention.  
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