

**AMNESTY INTERNATIONAL
PRESS RELEASE**

AI Index: PRE 01/337/2009
22 September 2009

Sierra Leone: That one in eight women risk dying during pregnancy or childbirth is a human rights emergency

(Freetown, Sierra Leone) On the eve of world leaders meeting in New York to discuss increased funding for healthcare in developing countries, Amnesty International's Secretary General Irene Khan launched a campaign to reduce maternal deaths in Sierra Leone.

The accompanying report *Out of Reach: The Cost of Maternal Health in Sierra Leone* uses graphic and personal testimonials to show how women and girls are often unable access lifesaving treatment because they are too poor to pay for it. In Sierra Leone one in eight women risk dying during pregnancy or childbirth. This is one of the highest maternal death rates in the world.

Thousands of women bleed to death after giving birth. Most die in their homes. Some die on the way to hospital; in taxis, on motorbikes or on foot. In Sierra Leone, less than half of deliveries are attended by a skilled birth attendant and less than one in five are carried out in health facilities.

"These grim statistics reveal that maternal deaths are a human rights emergency in Sierra Leone," said Irene Khan while launching the report in Sierra Leone's capital, Freetown. "Women and girls are dying in their thousands because they are routinely denied their right to life and health, in spite of promises from the government to provide free healthcare to all pregnant women."

At the United Nations General Assembly meeting on 23 September, access to healthcare in the developing world will be high on the agenda. British Prime Minister Gordon Brown is expected to announce a series of new finance packages devoted to improving healthcare in the developing world with particular focus on infant and maternal health. Sierra Leone is expected to be among the recipients of the fund.

"Additional money is desperately needed in Sierra Leone but will not reach women and children in remote areas who are at greatest risk," said Irene Khan. "The lives of women and girls will only be saved when the health system is properly managed and the government is held to account. "Money alone will not solve the problem. In Sierra Leone severe discrimination and the low social status of women underlies the terrible tragedy of maternal deaths. This is a country where girls are forced into early marriage, excluded from schools and face sexual violence. Women's health needs are given a low priority by their own families, community leaders and their government."

Irene Khan's visit to Sierra Leone marks the start of Amnesty International's action against maternal mortality in the country. A campaign caravan will tour Sierra Leone over the coming weeks acting as a

vehicle for information and debate on the issue of maternal health.

Amnesty International believes poverty is a human rights issue and this year launched a global campaign called Demand Dignity which calls for an end to the human rights violations that drive and deepen poverty. Maternal mortality is a key strand of this campaign.

The campaign mobilises people all over the world to demand that governments and corporations listen to the voices of those living in poverty and respect their rights.

Notes to editors

- On 22 September in Freetown, thousands are expected to gather at a public event where Irene Khan will kick-off the Amnesty International Caravan to End Maternal Mortality. The caravan will tour the country raising awareness of maternal deaths as a human rights issue within Sierra Leone and demanding improved healthcare services from the government. The event will be addressed by Irene Khan, senior government officials and will feature a film screening and play performance on the subject of maternal mortality.
- While in Sierra Leone Irene Khan met with First Lady Sia Koroma and other senior government officials. She also visited a number of health facilities, slums and women's groups to hear those who live with the daily reality of maternal death.
- Images, a News Access Tape and B-roll of the mission will be available under embargo ahead of the report launch.
- Irene Khan will be available for interviews from Sierra Leone.
- Amnesty International is tackling maternal mortality as part of its recently launched Demand Dignity campaign focusing on poverty and human rights.
- The mission to Sierra Leone comes ahead of the launch of Irene Khan's book, the Unheard Truth, on October 15. This is Amnesty International's first book addressing poverty and human rights.

www.theunheardtruth.com

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