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10 million pledges to support human rights delivered to Kofi Annan

Paris -- In one of the most significant public commemorations of this Thursday's 50th anniversary of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights (UDHR), Amnesty International today presented over 10 million individual pledges of support for the UDHR to UN Secretary General Kofi Annan.

The pledges, gathered in 136 countries during a year long campaign by the worldwide human rights organization, were handed over in the Palais de Chaillot in Paris - the site of the adoption by the UN of the UDHR in 1948. Also today, in a globally coordinated event, Amnesty International representatives are handing over pledges to UN officials in over 20 countries.

"These pledges, signed by so many people from all walks of life in so many countries not only show powerful global support for the UDHR, but a demand to governments that they live up to the promise they made when adopting it - a world without cruelty and injustice," said Pierre Sané, Secretary General of Amnesty International.

"The fact that people from 136 countries have signed the pledge shows irrefutably that wherever the country, whatever the creed, the strong desire for human dignity will continue to beat in people's hearts."

Nobel Laureate and leader of the Burmese opposition Daw Aung San Suu Kyi was the first person to sign the pledge, which reads: "*I will do everything in my power to ensure that the rights contained in the Universal Declaration of Human Rights become a reality around the world.*" She was followed by UN High Commissioner for Human Rights Mary Robinson.

Since then they have been joined by politicians including Yasser Arafat, Tony Blair, Rafael Caldera, Jacques Chirac, Kim Dae-jung, Vaclav Havel, Yoweri Museveni, Ezer Weizmann, and Lech Walesa; human rights defenders including the Mothers of the Plaza de Mayo; religious leaders including His Holiness the Dalai Lama and Archbishop Desmond Tutu; entertainers including U2, Mick Jagger, Courtney Love, Harrison Ford and Julia Roberts; and sports people such as Mohammed Ali, Brian Lara and the national football teams of South Africa, France and Holland.

Alongside the well-known names, millions of ordinary people, - teachers, schoolchildren, trades unionists, churchgoers, police and army officers, have signed up to the pledge either in one of the 50,000 books distributed worldwide by Amnesty International or electronically through several specially created web-sites.

The Body Shop joined forces with Amnesty International in the campaign with their Make Your Mark initiative, launched in Atlanta by His Holiness the Dalai Lama. Customers of Body Shop stores in 34 countries contributed three million thumbprints to the campaign pledge. These

thumbprints were turned into portraits of human rights defenders and are part of the 10 million pledges collected in all.

“The UDHR has been called ‘the world’s best kept secret’,” Mr Sané said. “When governments adopted it in 1948, they promised to disseminate it throughout their countries in schools, colleges, government offices, local councils and workplaces.”

“Yet 50 years on, how many people around the world have actually seen a copy? Amnesty International, together with thousands of other organizations, has been spending the past year in a massive global publicity campaign to do the job that governments have been failing to do.”

The aim of the campaign was not only to acknowledge the importance of human rights, but also to inform and educate the global community at a grass-roots level about what their rights are. According to Mr Sané, it has reached people from all sectors of society in cities, towns, villages and remote rural communities in 120 countries.

The campaign has focussed on the protection of human rights defenders at risk or imprisoned -- “28 ordinary individuals who have taken the extraordinary step of dedicating their lives to defending the rights of others”. In the course of its duration, two of them -- Dr Beko Ransome-Kutif from Nigeria and Akhtam Nu'aysa from Syria -- have been released, and tens of thousands of letters, faxes and e-mails sent to government leaders, local officials and prison governors demanding an end to persecution, harassment and ill-treatment of the defenders.

“Human rights are an issue for everyone, everywhere. Until the rights of all the world’s citizens -- rich or poor, from whatever ethnic or religious background, political belief or gender -- are respected and upheld, all of us have a role to play in campaigning to protect human rights,” Mr Sané added.

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For more information, to arrange an interview, or to receive a press pack on the events in Paris, please call: Mark Ogle: +44 468 182 474 or Raphael Sachet: +33 1 4923 1141