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HUMAN RIGHTS DEFENDERS: PROTECT THOSE WHO DEFEND OTHERS' RIGHTS

Human rights defenders around the world have been left standing alone, with only their own courage and determination to help them survive, while a few governments at the United Nations (UN) are attempting to undermine their very right to defend the rights of others.

"For more than 10 years the world's governments have debated a UN declaration to recognize and strengthen the work of human rights defenders, yet a small group of governments have introduced amendments to severely limit their activities," Amnesty International said today as it began a worldwide week-long campaign to highlight the precarious status of human rights defenders.

"The watch dogs of human rights who struggle on the local level worldwide to protect those vulnerable to state abuse urgently need their own rights protected," Amnesty International said. "They have suffered too much in the defence of others' rights to be undermined by states notorious for committing human rights violations."

In many countries, human rights defenders (who often include lawyers, journalists, peasant leaders, trade unionists, students and relatives of victims) risk assassination for organizing protests, imprisonment or "disappearance" because of their investigations, as well as government censorship and restrictions on their freedom of movement, expression or association. They get death threats, their phones are tapped, their houses are watched, their families are intimidated.

In Nigeria, for example, working for human rights means you must be ready to be shot at, bombed, jailed and put on trial for your life. For many years Dr Beko Ransome-Kuti, founder member of the Committee for the Defence of Human Rights and president of the Campaign for Democracy; Chief Gani Fawehinmi, a prominent human rights lawyer and government critic; and Femi Falana, President of the National Association of Democratic Lawyers; have been targeted for their human rights protection work in Nigeria, repeatedly detained and held in harsh conditions. All three have been arrested several times in the turmoil which followed the military government's annulment of the results of the 1993 presidential election. Armed men have shot at Gani Fawehinmi's law chambers, severely wounding his staff, and Dr Ransome-Kuti's home has been fire-bombed.

Most recently, Dr Beko Ransome-Kuti was reportedly sentenced to life imprisonment in July 1995 after being convicted in a secret and blatantly unfair trial. Despite High Court rulings in his defence, he has been imprisoned, incommunicado, because he exposed to the world the government's sentencing of prisoners of conscience and possible prisoners of conscience to death or to life imprisonment --- on totally inadequate evidence --- in secret military trials .

Sister Nohemy Palencia, a Catholic nun and prominent member of the Civic Committee for Human Rights in Colombia's Meta region, was among several human rights activists in the group forced to leave the region because of threats to their lives. Members of the Committee has endured constant death threats since the organization was founded in 1991 to investigate human rights violations. In its first two years, four leading members were gunned down, three members were made to "disappear" and an associated health clinic was closed down by death threats.

When Bao Ge applied in 1994 to the authorities in China to set up a human rights organization, their response was harsh: he was arrested and sentenced to three years "re-education through labour", a period of detention imposed without charge or trial or any judicial process. Bao Ge is serving this sentence in a forced labour camp in China

Like many human rights activists in Turkey, Mahmut _akar fell foul of his country's legislation that outlaws "separatism". In 1994, he was arrested with three fellow human rights workers for publishing a human rights report by his organization, the Turkish Human Rights Association. He was later accused of membership in the PKK, an armed opposition group. Under the glare of international attention, with Amnesty International observers monitoring the court trial, he and seven others were released from pre-trial detention. But Mahmut _akar is still on trial because of his human rights work.

A working group, set up in 1985 by the UN Commission on Human Rights, has met annually to draft a declaration aimed at protecting the rights and freedoms of human rights defenders. Yet progress is being blocked by a few governments. During the 1994 session, Cuba --- supported by China and Syria, and partially by Mexico --- proposed adding a long list of new limitations to the work and rights of human rights defenders.

The restrictions proposed by Cuba appear more suited to suppress human rights than support them. The Cuban proposal calls upon defenders "to refrain from manipulating information and events with the aim of defaming or damaging the image of other persons and institutions, thereby encouraging smear campaigns."

Other states, including the United States of America, the United Kingdom and Greece, have made valuable proposals on many issues but object to clauses allowing third parties to take court action to protect the human rights of those unable to defend themselves, such as people who have been made to "disappear".

Before the next meeting of the Working Group, scheduled for early 1996, Amnesty International members around the world will be lobbying their own governments and others to agree that:

- * progress on the declaration should not be blocked by procedural manipulation;
- * No new limitations to the rights of defenders be added;
- * A minimum set of rights should be guaranteed to defenders, including
 - the right to defend the rights of other people;
 - the right to advocate human rights work freely and openly;
 - the right to work in the defence of any or all human rights;
 - the right to obtain and utilise resources needed for work, including fund raising;
 - the right to communicate with national and international NGOs;
 - the right to participate in peaceful action to oppose human rights violations.

"If these minimal rights are not upheld by the international community, then the declaration on human rights defenders becomes meaningless and leaves those who stand up for the defenceless and voiceless in their societies vulnerable," Amnesty International said.

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