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## **African human rights defenders under attack**

**JOHANNESBURG** - Fifty years on from the adoption by the United Nations of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights (UDHR), Africans from all over the continent continue to be killed, tortured and imprisoned for defending their rights, according to delegates to the first ever All-Africa Human Rights Defenders Congress, which is taking place in South Africa from 2-4 November.

Around 100 grassroots activists from some 44 African countries are participating in the conference, which is the culmination of regional workshops in North, East, West, Central and Southern Africa, all organized by Amnesty International as part of a year-long campaign to mark the 50<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the UDHR.

The conference was officially inaugurated by Jacob Selebi, Director General of the South African Department of Foreign Affairs and Pierre Sané, Amnesty International Secretary General.

In his opening remarks Mr Sané said: "African leaders have pledged to uphold and promote the basic human rights of their citizens contained in the UDHR. However, the reality behind this rhetoric is that they have failed to live up to their promises."

"In fact, as many of the delegates to this conference can personally testify, throughout the continent, far from upholding these rights, governments are doing everything they can to deny them to their citizens and torturing, killing and jailing those brave individuals who try to hold the authorities to account."

"Faced with such attacks, it is the duty of the international community to provide protection to human rights defenders. For without their courage and vision, there is no future for human rights in Africa," Mr Sané added.

Workshops taking place during the conference will focus on the threats faced by human rights defenders in Africa, in particular the dangers faced by women's rights activists; the role of journalists as promoters of human rights; and setting up an Africa-wide network of human rights defenders to monitor abuses and devise mechanisms for the protection of defenders.

In many of the countries represented, the state has either absolved responsibility for protecting human rights or is responsible for violations itself. In others, a collapsing state has seen human rights as the first casualty. Human rights defenders have assumed the central role the government can't or won't play and as a result are often targeted for gross abuses themselves.

The defenders participating in the conferences come from many different professions – including non-governmental organization (NGO) workers, journalists, lawyers, development field

workers, women's activists and trade unionists. They described the threats they face daily and how they handle harassment from phone tapping to infiltration, arrest, torture and assassination.

In Tunisia, NGOs including the Tunisian Association of Democratic Women (ATDF) have had their office under police surveillance, their members and leaders imprisoned, interrogated, followed and harassed by police, their meetings and other activities banned or disrupted, their mail confiscated and their telephones tapped. The government has also instigated public sleaze campaigns against some prominent defenders and jailed others on trumped-up charges.

Conference participant Pius Njawé, director of the newspaper *Le Messager*, the oldest independent newspaper in Cameroon, has been detained as a prisoner of conscience on several occasions. He was most recently arrested in December 1997 following an article which questioned President Paul Biya's state of health. While serving a one-year prison sentence, in extremely harsh conditions, Pius Njawé was granted presidential clemency and released on 12 October 1998.

Since the start of the armed conflict in the Democratic Republic of Congo this August, the situation for human rights defenders has become bleak. On 6 August 1998, Jacques Semurongo, a leading member of the human rights organization *Héritiers de la Justice*, was reportedly shot dead by members of the armed opposition. Other human rights defenders have been forced to flee the country. In Rwanda, human rights defenders face intimidation and harassment - ranging from threats and public criticisms to arrests, attacks and killings - which have ensured that few dare to publicly denounce violations. Independent journalists, lawyers, religious officials and those perceived as political opponents are all at risk.

In Zambia, the government continues to harass journalists. There are still up to 20 cases of government-sponsored criminal charges outstanding against *The Post* and other journalists. In September, charges of "conduct likely to cause a breach of the peace" were still outstanding against Masautso Phiri, a former editor of *The Post*. Police arrested him at an aborted November 1997 political rally in Kabwe photographing police ill-treating opposition party members.

In East Africa the picture is grim too. Kenyan human rights organizations have experienced fire-bombing of offices, death threats, arbitrary arrests of their members on false charges, torture, constant intimidation and harassment.

The conference is due to conclude on Wednesday with the adoption of a "Johannesburg Declaration" to protect and promote the work of African human rights defenders, which will be presented to the first world summit of human rights defenders in Paris this December.

This declaration is expected to include regional level plans to keep in touch and safeguard defenders at risk; and international level plans to lobby bodies such as the Organization of African Unity (OAU).

In particular, the conference is likely to end with a call on the OAU to show its commitment to improving Africa's human rights record by itself adopting a declaration similar to the UN Draft Declaration on Human Rights Defenders which is expected to be approved by the UN General Assembly this December. ..../ENDS

**To obtain a media pack, a list and biographies of participants available to speak to the media, to attend the press briefing or to arrange an interview, please call: Mark Ogle: cellphone: +44 468 182 474 (Rm 619, Holiday Inn Milpark, tel: 011 726 5100); Sue Wixley: cellphone: 082 25 45 157; Rafael Barca, Holiday Inn Garden Court, Rm 153, Tel: 011 392 1062; fax: 011 974 8097**