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UN CONFERENCE ON WOMEN
BRIEFING STATEMENT

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AMNESTY INTERNATIONAL

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Equality, development and peace.

Those three words spell out the main themes of this first UN World Conference on Women for a decade.

You will have noticed that human rights is not explicitly one of those themes.

By the end of this conference, Amnesty International wants to make sure that better protection for the human rights of women is strongly and clearly reflected in the Platform of Action.

And that the governments who leave here after 15 September have committed themselves to taking real and measurable action to improve those rights.

Specifically we want five things to come out of this conference and from governments:

- a commitment to reaffirm and build on their previous commitments to the universality and indivisibility of the human rights of women
- a commitment to take action on state violence against women
- a commitment to tackle human rights violations of women in armed conflict
- a commitment to fulfill their international obligations to end human rights violations occurring in the private sphere and in communities
- a commitment to protecting women activists

The reason for these demands is straightforward. No woman who is at risk of arbitrary imprisonment, torture, "disappearance" or political killing stands any real chance of exercising her rights for equality, development and peace.

Let me give you one example of what I am talking about.

It is the case of Josephine Nyawira Ngengi, arrested on 8 May 1994 in Kenya and held illegally and incommunicado for 22 days before being charged with violent robbery. Her crime was her membership of a campaigning human rights group, the Release Political Prisoners, and being the sister of a prominent government critic and prisoner of conscience currently on trial for his life.

During her detention, she says she was tortured by being beaten and having blunt objects forced into her vagina until it bled.

Amnesty International believes that Josephine is a prisoner of conscience and that the charges against her have been fabricated. We are calling for her immediate and unconditional release.

What I have just been talking about illustrates our first demand from the conference – the indivisibility and universality of human rights.

The principle that all women, wherever they live in the world or whatever their circumstances, should enjoy all the human rights and fundamental freedoms.

Amnesty International argued for this principle in Vienna in 1993 at the UN World Conference on Human Rights.

It is astounding that commitments on this very point made by 171 governments at the conference just two years ago are barely visible in the Platform of Action at this stage.

What they said then, and I quote, is:

"The human rights of women and the girl-child are an inalienable, integral and indivisible part of universal human rights."

At this stage many governments have resisted attempts to affirm and build on the commitments to all human rights they made in Vienna, and at other global conference on the environment, population and social development.

The message that many governments are sending is that they will not treat all human rights on the same footing – and in particular that they do not want to tackle human rights violations for which they have direct responsibility.

This is nothing short of an abdication of their responsibility and a sell out of the human rights of women. And no less astonishing since this is the first world conferences on women to deal with human rights.

And this brings me to our second demand. Action from governments to stem state violence against women.

Until the most recent draft of the Platform of Action, state violence against women – such as torture, "disappearance" and extrajudicial execution – was barely mentioned.

Now there is a reference that governments should refrain from engaging in violence against women. What is still missing, though, is a statement that torture by state agents is one of the most common forms of violence suffered by women. The conference must make it clear that governments should

promptly ratify and implement the Convention Against Torture, and other Cruel, Inhuman or Degrading Treatment or Punishment, and to bring state agents responsible for torture to justice. This point is crucial not only because any attempt to stem violence against women must eradicate brutality by police and soldiers.

But also because any government which does not do so sends a message to the rest of society that violence against women is condoned.

And this leads me to our third demand. Ending human rights violations against women in armed conflict.

Women are disproportionately the victims of violations and abuses such as rape, other torture, "disappearance" and summary or arbitrary executions during armed conflict.

This is a central point that the conference must take on board for it to make a real impact on the human rights violations suffered by women. And in doing so, it must recognize that governments and armed opposition groups are bound by the laws of war that prohibit rape and other forms of torture, as well as hostage taking, and extrajudicial execution -- and governments are additionally bound by human rights law.

If torture is one of the most common forms of violence suffered by women, then the most damaging form of torture must be rape by soldiers and security forces. In a world where rape is increasingly used as a weapon of war -- and not just seen as the "spoils of war" -- the conference should single this out for condemnation.

Our fourth demand is that, in addition to ensuring an end to violence committed by state agents, governments must also live up to their obligation to see to it that human rights violations committed in the so-called private sphere and in communities are prevented and brought to an end. The widespread practice of female genital mutilation is an example of such a practice.

And our fifth, and final, demand relates to human rights activists. The Platform of Action now includes a reference to the duty of governments to guarantee all the human rights of women activists, but governments have yet to make a firm commitment to guaranteeing these rights.

These, very simply, are our hopes for the conference.

That the governments in Beijing will build on universality and indivisibility.

That they will take steps to clean up their own house by addressing state violence, and also move to eliminate human rights violations in the private sphere.

That they will move to bring their soldiers in line with international humanitarian law in conflicts.

And that women activists will receive real protection of their human rights.

Our fears are just as straightforward.

That governments will not build on, but will try to backdown on, the oft repeated commitments to the universality and indivisibility of human rights.

That they will ignore the urgent need for action on human rights protection for women in favour of vested political interests.

And that they will ignore the fact that the state is a major cause of the violations of the human rights of women.

I said earlier that this is the first of four world conferences on women to deal with human rights issues -- this is long overdue and we hope the conference will finally come to grips with human rights.

It is also the first UN women's conference since the global thematic conferences in Rio, Vienna, Cairo and Copenhagen.

But whatever the Platform for Action says, and we hope that governments will use this opportunity to make firm commitments to human rights, it is ultimately what governments do that will change the situation of women.

The agenda that I have just set out is the reason for Amnesty International coming to Beijing.

But as most of you know, this is also the first time that Amnesty has been allowed into China. And sitting here, in the capital of a country whose government has a grave human rights record, we cannot be silent.

Just over two weeks ago, some 10 people were executed as part of a security operation to make this city safe for the conference on women. Days later, another six faced death by the state. Sixteen people among the thousands known to be executed by the Chinese authorities each year.

We have heard virtually every excuse from governments to justify human rights violation, but this is simply unbelievable. To welcome the world to Beijing, must people die?

Of course this is not new. Those of you based in Beijing know that it's common for dissidents to be arrested and people executed before major festivals and important political events.

But it doesn't happen just when the international spotlight is on China.

- the repression of prominent dissidents and human rights activists has intensified since 1994, with scores detained and held without charge

- members of religious groups who refused to join the official churches have been harassed, fined or detained in the crackdown that has continued into this year.

- and those who dare to ask questions about the fate of hundreds killed during the suppression of the 1989 protests and the thousands arrested at that time have themselves been victimized.

In June 1995 Amnesty published a report on human rights violations against women in China. Every violation that I have just described affects women as well as men. We are here to address human rights protection for women, not just in China, but all over the world.
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