

March 2000 newsletter

## Western Europe - Deaths during deportation

Nigerian national Semira Adamu died of asphyxia within hours of an attempt to forcibly deport her from Brussels-National airport, Belgium, in September 1998. A statement by the Ministry of the Interior revealed that she had been handcuffed and shackled by gendarmes during the deportation operation, and confirmed that one of the gendarmes had pushed a cushion against her face. Eighteen months later a judicial investigation into Semira Adamu's death is still under way. The "cushion technique", which allowed gendarmes to press a cushion against a person's mouth to prevent biting and shouting, has been suspended. Three gendarmes involved in Semira Adamu's deportation remain under investigation, in connection with possible manslaughter, but they have not been suspended from duty.

Semira Adamu's death is not an isolated incident. She is one of several asylum-seekers who have died in recent years during forcible deportations from Europe's airports. In August 1994 another Nigerian national, Kola Bankole, died of heart failure on board a plane from Frankfurt, Germany. He had been restrained, sedated and gagged with a device made from socks and a belt by one of the accompanying Federal Border Police officers.

In March 1999 Khaled Abu Zarifa, a Palestinian, died of suffocation at Zurich-Kloten airport in Switzerland during deportation after adhesive tape was placed over his mouth and he was strapped into a wheelchair. In May Marcus Omofuma, a Nigerian national, died during a flight from Austria to Nigeria; his arms and legs had been bound by police officers and he had been gagged with adhesive tape. One witness reportedly stated, "They wrapped the entire upper part of his body and arms with adhesive tape like a mummy stuck to the seat."

Barely four weeks later Aamir Ageeb, a Sudanese asylum-seeker, died after he stopped breathing on board a Lufthansa flight from Frankfurt to Egypt. Reportedly, his arms and legs had been bound by German Federal Border Police, a motorcycle helmet had been placed on his head and his head had been forced between his knees.

Some small steps have already been taken to address the treatment of deportees, but much remains to be done. In January 1999 the Belgian Vermeersch Commission, established to evaluate the instructions and techniques relating to forcible deportation, recommended that restraint methods "obstructing normal respiration" should be banned during deportation, and new internal guidelines issued to gendarmes apparently largely reflected the Commission's recommendations. In August last year the Zurich cantonal authorities stated that adhesive tape would no longer be used to cover deportees' mouths.

In Austria, the inquiry into the death of Marcus Omofuma revealed a considerable degree of ambiguity regarding the types of physical restraints which could permissibly be used during deportation. The Minister of the Interior issued a statement explicitly prohibiting the use of gags.

However, AI continues to receive reports that asylum-seekers across Europe are being subjected to cruel and dangerous methods of restraint during forcible deportation. Recent reports from Belgium claim that gendarmes have used heavily-padded gloves to cover deportees' mouths, and that deportees have been placed face down in four-point restraints with their hands and ankles bound together from behind. In Switzerland there are serious concerns about the safety of a new rubber helmet specially designed for use during forcible deportations. It has a "chin-cup" which forces the jaws together and a cover which is placed across the mouth, containing a small aperture for a breathing tube.

AI continues to seek clarification from the Austrian, Belgian, German and Swiss authorities regarding the methods of restraint used during deportation operations, and the relevant training given to officers involved in such operations. Unless legislation and regulations are strictly enforced to provide protection of each deportee's inherent dignity and human rights, then there is no guarantee that tragic deaths like those of Semira Adamu, Kola Bankole, Khaled Abu Zarifa, Marcus Omofuma and Aamir Ageeb will not recur.

[pic caption - Relatives and friends carry the coffin of Semira Adamu, Brussels, Belgium]

Chile - New president is 'in favour of life'

'I cannot believe that to defend life and punish the person that kills, the State should in its turn kill... The death penalty is as inhuman as the crime that motivates it.'

Former Chilean President Eduardo Frei Ruiz-Tagle

Since former President Frei made this statement in 1996, seven people have been sentenced to death by Chilean courts. In April 1999 Chile sponsored and voted in favour of a UN Commission on Human Rights resolution recommending, among other things, a worldwide moratorium on executions pending abolition of the death penalty. Just three months later, another death sentence was passed in Chile. In recent years no executions have been carried out and all death sentences have been subsequently commuted to life imprisonment. However, prosecutors continue to call for capital punishment and courts continue to hand down such sentences. Initiatives in 1990 and 1996 to abolish the death penalty were blocked in Congress, and it has been retained for more than 20 offences. Since 1992, proposals to widen its scope still further have been studied in parliament. There have also reportedly been parliamentary moves to remove the right of the President to exercise his constitutional power to commute death sentences to life imprisonment.

As a result of elections held in January 2000, Ricardo Lagos, candidate for the Concertación de Partidos por la Democracia, Coalition for Democracy, will take office as President of Chile in March 2000. When asked about his views on capital punishment, he has reportedly said that he is "in favour of life", and in a letter to AI, expressed his commitment to human rights.

Please write, urging President Lagos to announce an official moratorium on executions and introduce legislation for the abolition of the death penalty, and asking him to exercise his constitutional power to commute the death sentences in those cases pending appeal. Send appeals to: President Ricardo Lagos, Palacio de la Moneda, Santiago, Chile (fax: +562 694 5080); and to: Ministro de Justicia, Ministerio de Justicia, Morandé 107, Santiago, Chile (fax: +562 695 4558).

Sierra Leone - A precarious peace

Peace in Sierra Leone remains fragile and AI has made specific recommendations to the UN Commission on Human Rights, which meets in March and April 2000, to reinforce the opportunities to end human rights abuses offered by the peace agreement signed in July 1999 between the government and armed opposition. Abuses during the internal armed conflict have been among the worst known: thousands of civilians, including women and children, have been victims of deliberate and arbitrary killings, mutilation including severing of limbs, rape and abduction.

Despite some improvement after the peace agreement was signed, killings, rape, abduction, looting and destruction of homes resumed from October, particularly in Northern Province. AI has called on former rebel leaders now holding government positions to instruct their forces to end attacks on civilians, emphasizing that the general amnesty in the peace agreement does not extend to abuses committed since July 1999 and that those responsible must be brought to justice.

Although the peace agreement specified the immediate release of civilians abducted by rebel forces, a comparatively small number has been freed and the number of those abducted since July 1999 has exceeded those released. More than 2,000 children, most of them girls, abducted when rebel forces attacked the capital, Freetown, in January 1999, remained missing. Almost without exception, abducted girls and women have been raped.

Implementation of other key provisions of the peace agreement, including disarmament and demobilization of former combatants and unhindered humanitarian access, has been slow. Only a small number of child combatants have been demobilized.

UN peace-keeping forces deployed to help implement the peace agreement, in particular to monitor the cease-fire and disarmament and demobilization, are also mandated to protect civilians in imminent danger. The human rights section of the UN mission in Sierra Leone must be able to continue monitoring and reporting abuses and undertake other activities to protect human rights at this critical time.

[pic caption - Eastern Freetown, Sierra Leone, destroyed by rebel forces in January 1999]

#### New Zealand - Asylum-seekers released

Sixteen asylum-seekers who had been detained in violation of international standards were released in December 1999, following a High Court decision in November. The Court directed the government to grant the asylum-seekers temporary permits to stay, citing New Zealand's obligations under the 1951 UN Convention relating to the Status of Refugees, which was incorporated into domestic law in October 1999.

Some of the detainees had initially been held at Mount Eden Prison, Auckland, on the grounds of security requirements during the Asia-Pacific Economic Co-operation summit in September, but were not released once the summit had ended. Following refugee law reforms in October, Immigration Service instructions were issued under which asylum-seekers could be denied temporary permits and detained if their case was deemed to be manifestly unfounded. This violates international standards which state that detention of asylum-seekers should normally be avoided, unless the authorities can demonstrate that it is necessary in each individual case, and is on grounds prescribed by law and recognized in international standards.

By October, a total of 16 asylum-seekers were routinely detained alongside criminal suspects at Mount Eden Prison. They claimed to have been harassed and assaulted by other prisoners. To protest against their continued detention, many of the group spent a month on hunger strike. Until they were released after the High Court decision, local human rights groups and AI repeatedly raised concerns about their detention with the authorities.

#### Rwanda - Death penalty after unfair trial

Déogratias Bazabazwa, a schoolteacher, is held under sentence of death in Cyangugu Central Prison, Rwanda. After a blatantly unfair appeal hearing, he was found guilty of participating in the 1994 genocide, a charge of which he had previously been acquitted.

Déogratias Bazabazwa was first arrested on genocide charges in August 1996 and provisionally released in October 1997. In May 1998 he was rearrested and additionally accused of collaborating with the armed opposition. He was tried by the court in Cyangugu, acquitted of both charges and released in August 1998.

The prosecutor appealed against this verdict and in September 1999 the Appeal Court heard the case. Déogratias Bazabawa was not informed of this new hearing and neither he nor his lawyer were present to defend his case. On 7 October the Appeal Court sentenced Déogratias Bazabazwa to death. The first Déogratias Bazabazwa knew about the verdict was when police arrested him at the primary school where he had resumed work.

+Please write, pointing out that AI takes no view on the guilt or innocence of Déogratias Bazabazwa but is concerned that he was denied the right to a fair trial at the Appeal Court. Ask for his case to be reconsidered in accordance with inter-national standards for fair trial, which includes the right of the accused and his lawyer to be present at proceedings and to have adequate time to prepare a defence. Urge the Rwandese authorities not to impose death sentences. Send letters to: Monsieur Jean de Dieu Mucyo, Ministre de la Justice, Ministère de la Justice, BP 160 Kigali, République Rwandaise (fax: +00 250 86509).

#### UK/Northern Ireland - Police fail to act on sectarian killing

Robert Hamill, a 26-year-old Catholic father of three children, was kicked to death by a mob of 30 Loyalists (Protestants) while walking home with three friends from a Catholic dance hall in Portadown.

The attack took place in April 1997, within 20 metres of a Royal Ulster Constabulary (RUC) van and only 200 metres from a RUC station. However, the four armed RUC officers in the van failed to protect Robert Hamill and his companions, ignoring both warnings of a potential incident as well as pleas for help. Despite the brutal nature of the attack, the RUC officers failed to cordon off the scene of the crime, to secure forensic evidence, take statements or make arrests. No one was ever convicted of killing Robert Hamill and no action has been taken against the RUC officers for their failure to act. Since the attack, the Hamill family has suffered further abuse from both Loyalists and the RUC. In March 1999 the family's lawyer, Rosemary Nelson, who was preparing to bring private proceedings against six suspects and the RUC, was killed in a Loyalist car bomb attack.

+Please write, expressing concern about the RUC's failure to intervene and protect Robert Hamill and his companions, to cordon off the scene of the crime, to gather evidence and to make arrests. Call for a fully independent and impartial inquiry into Robert Hamill's killing and the role played by the RUC at the time of the attack and in its aftermath. Send letters to: The Rt. Hon. Tony Blair, Prime Minister, 10 Downing Street, London SW1 2AL, United Kingdom.

#### USA - First federal execution looms

Juan Raúl Garza is set to become the first federal prisoner to be put to death in the USA in almost four decades. Although more than 600 prisoners convicted of capital murder have been executed in the USA since it resumed judicial killing in 1977, all were sentenced under state laws. No one convicted under federal capital statutes has been put to death since Victor Feguer was hanged in 1963.

The authorities have not yet set the date for Juan Raúl Garza's execution – by lethal injection – but are likely to do so in the near future following the recent exhaustion of his court appeals. His last hope for clemency lies with President Bill Clinton.

In December 1999 Juan Raúl Garza filed a complaint with the Inter-American Commission on Human Rights, arguing that the US government had violated his rights to a fair trial by introduction of evidence – which the defence could not effectively challenge – alleging his involvement in unsolved crimes in Mexico. No other defendant in the USA has been sentenced to death after the prosecution introduced evidence of an unadjudicated crime committed in another country.

In response to international concern about US executions, the federal government has until now claimed that they are a matter for individual US states over which it has no control, even in cases where a violation of US treaty obligations is occurring, such as in the use of the death penalty on children. The case of Juan Raúl Garza will be the first in which the US government will be unable to hide behind this "states' rights" argument.

+Please write, urging President Clinton to commute Juan Raúl Garza's death sentence, as a first step towards leading the USA into line with the global trend towards abolition of the death penalty. Send appeals to: The Honourable William J. Clinton, President of the USA, The White House, 1600 Pennsylvania Avenue, N.W. Washington, D.C. 20500, USA (fax: +1 202 456 2461).

#### DRC - Arms sales linked to conflict

During the ongoing civil war in the Democratic Republic of the Congo (DRC), thousands of civilians have been massacred and many others have "disappeared" or have been abducted, tortured or raped. Hundreds of thousands have been internally displaced and many others have fled to neighbouring countries. Despite overwhelming evidence of such mass human rights abuses, government forces and rebels have been able to obtain new supplies of weapons, equipment, training and personnel to continue their campaigns of torture and murder.

On 18 January 2000 the UK government announced that it would allow the shipment of spare parts for Hawk jet aircraft to Zimbabwe, now fighting as an ally of the DRC government. UK Prime Minister Tony Blair stated that the transfer of spare parts for the Hawks could only be halted in "extreme circumstances" and that there was "no substantial evidence" of the aircraft being used in the DRC. AI, however, has received reports that in December 1999, over 600 civilians were killed in the northwest of the country as a result of indiscriminate bombing by DRC government forces and their allies. Dozens of other civilians were reportedly killed when DRC government forces and their allies bombed several towns, including Goma, Uvira and Kisangani from May 1999. AI has called on the UK government to show clearly what end-use monitoring measures will be undertaken to ensure that UK-supplied equipment will not be used to commit human rights violations. The proposed UK transfers are just the latest in a series of reported shipments of military equipment to all sides in the DRC conflict. Belarus, Ukraine and China have reportedly supplied a range of such equipment, including tanks and helicopters, and the DRC government has apparently received support from North Korean military experts. AI is calling on all governments to halt the supply of all military, security and police goods and services likely to be used to commit human rights abuses in the DRC conflict.

#### Bahrain - Release of political prisoners

The last year has seen a number of positive human rights developments in Bahrain. Around 756 political detainees and prisoners were reportedly released following three amnesties issued by the Amir, Shaikh Hamad bin 'Issa Al Khalifa, in June, November and December 1999. Most of those pardoned had been held without charge or trial for up to three years in connection with civil unrest in the country from 1994 to 1997. At least 32 Bahraini nationals who had lived in forced exile were allowed to return to the country.

In August 1999 the Bahraini government also withdrew its reservation to Article 20 of the UN Convention against Torture, and in October a human rights committee was set up to "study all human rights legislation and regulations which apply in Bahrain" and to "raise awareness of human rights, take part in seminars and conduct studies and research in the field." On 16 December 1999, in his National Day speech, the Amir announced the launch of local elections in which women would be able to vote for the first time, and since the beginning of this year the press has been given greater freedom.

In June last year an AI delegation held frank and detailed talks with Bahraini government officials, including the Ministers of the Interior, Justice and Islamic Affairs, Foreign Affairs, and Labour and Social Affairs. However, AI regretted that its delegates were not allowed to meet privately with other sectors of society concerned with human rights promotion and protection.

While AI welcomes these developments it continues to be concerned with the reports it receives regarding certain human rights abuses, including detention without charge or trial, ill-treatment and cases of forcible exile. The organization continues to call for past human rights abuses, including torture, to be independently and impartially investigated and for those responsible to be brought to justice and the victims compensated.

#### Laos - Five protesters remain missing

The whereabouts of five men, leading members of an underground group known as the "Lao Student Movement for Democracy", arrested in October 1999 remain unknown. The authorities have yet to acknowledge their arrest and detention; this raises serious concerns for their safety.

On 26 October 1999 hundreds of people, most of them young students, gathered at different locations in Vientiane intending to take part in a demonstration which had been planned by the "Lao Student Movement for Democracy". Shortly before the demonstration was due to begin, one of the main leaders of the group, Thongpaseuth Keuakoun, a father of seven, was arrested. The other demonstrators dispersed. In the following days, hundreds of people are re-

ported to have been taken for questioning by the police about their possible involvement in the planned demonstration. They included four other leading members of the group, Khamphouvieng Sisaath, Seng-Aloun Phengphanh, Bouavanh Chanhmanivong and Keochay, all of them former students. It is believed that as many as 100 others may also remain in detention.

An "open letter" written by the demonstration organizers listed their demands, which included respect for human rights, the release of political prisoners, a multi-party political system, and greater government support for education and health care. Political dissent is not tolerated in Laos and this was an unprecedented attempt to openly express criticism of government policies.

AI believes that the five men are prisoners of conscience, detained solely for their peaceful political beliefs. There are fears that if charged they will face long prison sentences because of their attempts to express their views through a peaceful demonstration.

Please write, asking for information about the whereabouts of prisoners of conscience Thongpaseuth Keuakoun, Khamphouvieng Sisaath, Seng-Aloun Phengphanh, Bouavanh Chanhmanivong and Keochay, urging their immediate and unconditional release. Write to: His Excellency Sisavat Keobounphanh, Prime Minister, Office of the Prime Minister, Vientiane, Lao People's Democratic Republic.

## Focus

### Women's rights are human rights The struggle persists

How far are women's rights a living reality at the turn of the century? Undoubtedly, the last century saw a great leap forward in the struggle for women's rights. In many countries, women won the right to vote and to take part in government. In many they acquired an economic independence and social status unthinkable one hundred years earlier. A number of countries have adopted constitutions or legislation banning discrimination on grounds of gender. International human rights treaties to eradicate discrimination against women have been adopted. But women are still treated as second-class citizens all over the world.

Although there is now a widespread acceptance of women's right to vote, this fundamental right has yet to guarantee a meaningful change in the lives of millions of women in many parts of the world. By the end of the last century women comprised two thirds of the world's one billion illiterate population. Women continue to bear the double burden of work and childcare, to own less and earn less than men, and to be excluded from making decisions that affect the way society is organized, or even decisions over their own bodies. In many countries, women are struggling to help their families and communities survive poverty and armed conflict.

#### Migrant workers

Poverty pushes hundreds of thousands of women and young girls to migrate from their countries seeking work, often as domestic helpers. Most work without government protection from abusive employers. In Saudi Arabia, one of the major destinations of migrant women employed as domestic workers, law and customs severely restrict women's freedom of movement. This and the absence of effective mechanisms to protect their basic rights make it extremely difficult for foreign domestic workers who suffer abuse and ill-treatment by their employers to seek redress through the state.

#### Torture

Countless women in many parts of the world are raped and subjected to other forms of abuse and sexual violence by those very authorities who have a duty to protect them. In early March 1999, two Kurdish young women – a 16-year-old student (referred to in the following text as NCS), and 19-year-old student, Fatma Deniz Polatta, were arrested by the Turkish police authorities and detained at the Anti-Terror Branch headquarters in Iskenderun, Turkey. While in police custody, the girls were interrogated; both said they were tortured and forced to give false confessions. Their torture included rape and other sexual assault. They were blindfolded throughout their detention. For two days after her arrest, NCS was not allowed to sit or lie down to sleep, nor was she allowed to use the toilet. She was denied food and drink, except for sour milk. She was forced to strip and remain naked in a cold room. During the interrogation, she was beaten on different parts of her body – with blows directed especially at her head, genitals, buttocks and breasts – and she was forced to sit on a wet floor for long periods before being made to roll naked in water. On other occasions, she was suspended by the arms and hosed with pressurized cold water. She was constantly threatened that she would be killed and that her mother would be raped if she did not cooperate with the police. Fatma Deniz Polatta was subjected to the same methods of torture as NCS. She was told that both her father and her mother would be raped in front of her and that her father would be dismissed from his job. During one of the torture sessions, she was punched in the face and one of her teeth was broken; in another, she was raped.

#### Domestic violence

Acts of domestic violence against women were one of the most serious forms of human rights violations against women of the last century. These violations often go unreported. Often, when they are brought to the attention of the state authorities, there is a failure to protect the victims and punish the perpetrators. In 1995 Indravani Pamela Ramjattan, from Trinidad and Tobago, was convicted of the 1991 murder of her common-law husband and sentenced to death by hanging, despite evidence

that during the 11 years they lived together her husband had subjected her to appalling domestic violence. After a major campaigning effort and court appeals, in 1999 her murder conviction was reduced to manslaughter and she was sentenced to serve a further five years in addition to the eight she had already served. Countless women in Trinidad and Tobago suffer from a similar continuing pattern of abuse and violence in their own homes while the state fails to provide them with adequate support and protection. In 1997 alone, 2,282 incidents of domestic violence were reported. In these incidents, 27 women were killed. There are only six shelters for victims of domestic violence for the entire country – each having room for six to eight people for a maximum stay of only four months.

#### Refugee and internally displaced women

In times of war and armed conflict, refugee or internally displaced women and young girls are often relied upon to care for the young, the sick and elderly in unfamiliar and hostile surroundings. At the same time they are extremely vulnerable to rape and sexual abuse by both state agents and non-state actors at the borders and in refugee camps. In West Timor, Indonesia, there were persistent reports of sexual violence against female refugees who had fled the violence in neighbouring East Timor in September 1999. East Timorese women were reported to have been abducted from a refugee camp in Soe, near Kupang, West Timor, and forced to work as prostitutes. Other witnesses and sources have also referred to women and girls being taken regularly at night from camps in Belu and raped.

Refugees interviewed by AI upon their return to Dili from Belu district in November 1999 also spoke of incidents of rape. According to testimonies by two refugees, a number of women were held in sexual slavery at the house of an Indonesian National Army soldier in Rai Henek Oan near Betun. One of the women said to have been held there and repeatedly raped was Filomena Barbosa. Her sister was later told by a militia member that she had been killed sometime in mid-October. It is believed that Filomena Barbosa was specifically targeted because she had been active in the pro-independence campaign in East Timor.

#### Human rights defenders

Women are at the frontline of the struggle not only for their own rights but also for those of their families and communities. In the midst of these struggles, many of these women human rights defenders are at risk of human rights abuses themselves. In Honduras, Dora Emperatriz Oliva Guifarro, aged 33, works for the *Comite de Familiares de Detenidos-Desaparecidos en Honduras (COFADEH)*, Committee of Relatives of the Disappeared. On 5 July 1999, she was abducted and detained for two hours by two men, reportedly paramilitaries, who threatened to kill her. This is one of several incidents of threats against her family over the years. Her sister, Bertha Oliva, whose husband Tomás Nativí Gálvez “disappeared” in June 1981, has been the target of a long and sustained campaign against her and her work as a defender of human rights. In 1998, defamatory articles appeared in the Honduran press in an apparent attempt to discredit her work and that of COFADEH.

#### Discriminatory laws and traditions

The protection of women’s human rights is often undermined by profoundly discriminatory laws and practices – often in the name of religion, tradition or culture – that preserve the notion that women are inferior to men and do not deserve equal rights or equal protection of these rights. There are countries which continue to deprive women of their right to live safely and to think and express themselves freely – and to live without fear of violence by their own families and communities. In certain parts of Bangladesh, women who insist on their freedom to choose when and whom to marry, or are involved in dowry disputes, are at risk of becoming victims of acid attacks. Ajufa Khatum was blinded permanently when her rejected suitor broke into her house and threw acid in her face while she was sleeping. The increase in the number of such attacks highlights the government’s failure to take adequate measures to protect women and address underlying gender discrimination. Responsibility for

these abuses is shared by the government if it systematically fails to bring these attackers to justice and neglects its obligations to protect women from such violence.

In the name of tradition, millions of women and girls also continue to suffer the trauma of female genital mutilation (FGM) in many countries. Adelaide Abankwah fled her country, Ghana, in 1997, for fear of FGM and sought asylum in the USA. In August 1999, after two years of legal battles, the US Board of Immigration Appeals finally granted her asylum after a federal court in New York decided that she had a well-founded fear of being subjected to FGM if returned home. A landmark decision in 1996 in the USA ruled that fear of FGM can be grounds for granting asylum.

Looking ahead

The last three decades of the 20th century saw some important breakthroughs in the struggle for the concept of human rights to be more inclusive and gender-sensitive in coverage. The Vienna Declaration and Programme of Action, the final document of the UN World Conference on Human Rights in 1993, asserted that the human rights of women are an inalienable, integral and indivisible part of universal human rights. It urged that the full and equal enjoyment by women of all human rights should be a priority for governments and the UN. In particular, the World Conference stressed the importance of working towards the elimination of violence against women in public and private life – thus articulating international concern and state accountability for violence against women in both the public and private spheres.

At the UN Fourth World Conference on Women, which took place in 1995 in Beijing, China, delegates from 189 states adopted the Beijing Declaration and Platform for Action, which sets out commitments and steps for achieving those commitments under the agreed goals of equality, development and peace. Progress in implementing the Platform for Action will be assessed in June 2000 at a special session of the UN General Assembly.

Two major achievements since the Fourth World Conference are the adoption in 1998 of the treaty to establish an International Criminal Court (ICC), and the adoption of the Optional Protocol to the UN Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women (Women's Convention), both of which will strengthen women's access to justice.

The ICC will hear cases of genocide, other crimes against humanity, and war crimes. Its mandate explicitly lists rape and other forms of sexual abuse – including enforced prostitution, forced pregnancy, and sexual slavery – as crimes against humanity when they are committed as part of a widespread or systematic attack directed at any civilian population. These gender-based abuses will also be considered to be war crimes when committed in the context of armed conflict, whether international or internal.

The Optional Protocol to the Women's Convention is an important international mechanism which women will be able to use in seeking scrutiny at the international level of human rights violations committed against them. Already signed by 23 states at the 1999 session of the UN General Assembly, the Optional Protocol establishes two procedures for this scrutiny. Under the "complaints procedure", it will allow women to bring complaints of violations of their rights for examination by the committee of independent experts that monitors compliance with the Women's Convention – the Committee on the Elimination of Discrimination against Women (CEDAW). Under the "inquiry procedure", CEDAW may also take action on its own initiative and investigate serious and/or systematic violations of the Convention without waiting to receive a complaint. Under either procedure, if it finds that the government failed to carry out duties set out in the Convention, CEDAW will make recommendations about what the government should do to correct the situation.

Once at least 10 states have ratified the Optional Protocol, these procedures will be available to help women claiming a violation by one of those states, as long as certain procedural requirements are met. Actions speak louder than words

Commitments to women's rights made by the UN and its member states are simply rhetoric so long as adequate resources for the meaningful implementation of these commitments are not allocated. This failure to commit resources reflects a lack of political will to improve women's rights, a lack of

determination in the face of competing demands, and a lack of integrity on human rights issues. When political expediency demands, governments abandon what they have promised in international arenas. Similarly, they reject or put obstacles in the way of the pursuit of women's rights at the international level by rigidly invoking national interests. The year 2000 will disclose the extent of the commitment of governments to women's rights, when governments and the UN are joined by representatives from both the women's and human rights movements in reviewing what has been achieved since the Beijing Platform for Action was drawn up five years ago.

The struggle for the realization of all human rights for women is essentially about reshaping society by bringing about profound changes in social structures as well as in basic individual attitudes towards women and their rights. Problems dissolve then reappear, and women often find themselves fighting anew for those rights which they had previously won. The battle is an arduous one, and for women's rights activists and their allies, it is certainly far from over.

What you can do:

- Support the work of women's groups in your community who are involved in protecting women's human rights
- Report to the authorities any human rights abuses of women and girls
- Help raise awareness about women's human rights in your family and community
- Set up support groups to protect and promote women's human rights in your community
- Find out what your government has committed itself to at the UN on women's human rights; support the work of organizations demanding government accountability in fulfilling these commitments