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**UN SECRETARY GENERAL URGED TO TAKE ACTION ON ORGANIZATION OF
CONFERENCE ON WOMEN**

Women's groups and other organizations will be effectively shut out of the United Nation's first conference on women for a decade -- slated for September in Beijing -- unless the UN's Secretary General takes action now on the disastrous facilities and organization being proposed by the Chinese government for non-governmental organizations (NGOs), Amnesty International said today.

"The site now proposed for these organizations is so small, remote and ill-equipped that it will more or less block women from having a voice at a conference where they should be heard," the human rights organization said.

"Less than four months before the conference kicks off, the continuing wrangling over logistics is detracting from the real issues at stake -- how the key themes of equality, development and peace are going to be put into action so that the fundamental rights of women from around the world are protected.

The organization sent a letter to the UN Secretary-General Boutros Boutros-Ghali this past Monday (15 May) urgently calling on him to guarantee that NGOs will be able to participate fully in the conference. Amnesty International members worldwide will be lobbying their governments to put pressure on the UN to take decisive action now and will be participating in petitions organized by women's non-governmental organizations.

"At a time when the UN is trying to bolster the role of women in decision making, it would clearly be a step backwards if women were effectively excluded from the only world conference in 10 years looking specifically at the needs and aspirations of women," Amnesty International said.

Amnesty International's call comes on the heels of a rejection of the new site by the NGO facilitating committee, and a demand from the committee that a more suitable venue be provided. The committee has given a deadline of 24 May for the China Organizing Committee to consider alternative venues.

This demand to the organizing committee was made after a visit to China by an 18-member delegation from the facilitating committee -- which is mandated by the UN to organize the NGO Forum.

The delegation returned a few weeks ago from China where they assessed the new site proposed by the government -- the Huairou tourist area -- and determined that it was totally unsuitable for a meeting of thousands of women's and other organizations. The committee was not allowed to look at other alternative sites.

The original site proposed for the Forum was an athletic stadium in Beijing, but following claims from Chinese officials that the structure was not sound the Forum is now proposed to take place at the Huairou site. Despite the claims of structural problems, there are reports that the original site is still in use.

The proposed location is 30 miles outside Beijing, and takes at least one hour to reach by public transport. There are few meeting areas and those that exist are far apart. It was reported that telecommunications are so limited that a member of the facilitating committee caused a power failure when he plugged in his lap top computer.

The NGO Forum, a meeting specifically for NGOs, will be held from 30 August to 8 September, and overlaps with the official government conference which runs from 4-15 September.

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