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Malaysia: Tribute to Irene Fernandez

Amnesty International paid tribute today to Irene Fernandez, a respected human rights defender in Malaysia who passed away on 31 March 2014.

Irene Fernandez was a tireless human rights campaigner, and her death marks the loss of an important voice in the fight for human rights in Malaysia. Amnesty International joins national and international activists in mourning her loss and expresses its deepest condolences to her family.

At the same time, the organization celebrates her life and her steadfast commitment to the protection and promotion of human rights in Malaysia. Her enormous efforts will live on in the work of all those she inspired, and all those who will continue to be inspired by her legacy.

Irene Fernandez was the founder and director of Tenaganita (Women's Force), a Malaysian non-governmental organization which advocates for the rights of migrant workers, refugees, asylum-seekers and victims/ survivors of trafficking and exploitation. She played a major role in exposing violations against migrant workers in Malaysia, and her work was highly respected by national and international activists alike.

She was a tireless campaigner, who faced consistent government harassment for her human rights work. In March 1996 she was arrested and charged under Section 8A(1) of the Printing Presses and Publications Act, accused of publishing "false news" in a report on alleged human rights violations against migrants in detention centres. She was found guilty and sentenced to one year in prison in October 2003, although her sentence was later overturned in November 2008.

In 1998, Amnesty International recognized Irene Fernandez's efforts as a human right defender, and selected her case for campaigning during the organization's celebration of the 50th anniversary of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights (UDHR).