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Activists from 18 countries join global day of action ahead of elections to urge ‘no business as usual’ with Sudan

(City): Today (10th April 2010) activists from 18 countries will join a coordinated, global day of action, calling on Sudanese parties to ensure that the upcoming elections do not become a flashpoint for increased violence and human rights abuses. In recent days, many opposition parties have withdrawn from critical parts of the elections citing concerns that the election will not be free and fair and reports of widespread restrictions on basic freedoms. Campaigners fear that although the eyes of the world will turn to Sudan during the elections there will be inadequate focus on the human rights situation on the ground.

The events are being organised as part of Sudan365 (www.sudan365.org), a year of campaigning for Sudan, organised by a coalition of groups including Amnesty International, Arab Coalition for Darfur, Cairo Institute for Human Rights Studies, Darfur Consortium, Enough Project, FIDH, Human Rights Watch, Italians for Darfur, IKV Pax Christi, Refugees International, Save Darfur Coalition, and members of the Sudan Forum Norway.

Events are taking place from Mali to Norway, South Africa to Israel, Senegal to Northern Ireland (for a full list of locations see www.sudan365.org) as part of a global ‘beat for peace’ that is backed by famous drummers including Stewart Copeland from The Police, Phil Selway from Radiohead, Ghanaian drummer Mustafa Tettey Addey and Middle Eastern pop star Mohamed Munir.

Campaigners are urging world leaders to ensure that there is no ‘business as usual’ during the election period and to exercise extra vigilance over events on the ground. Campaigners warn that the elections are taking place in an unstable environment and point to recent offensive in the Jebel Marra region in Darfur - in which hundreds of civilians were reported killed and thousands displaced from their homes – and an increase of violence in southern Sudan.

“Sudanese authorities are failing to uphold election standards agreed with the African Union in March. Violations of human rights – particularly freedom of assembly and freedom of the press – are threatening prospects for a free, fair and credible vote,” said Georgette Gagnon, Africa Director of Human Rights Watch.

"Opposition activists have been prevented from carrying out peaceful activities, arrested and tortured. It is clear that elections carried out in this context will be severely compromised." said Osman Hummada, Executive Director of the African Centre for Justice and Peace Studies.

Activists will be coming together to join ‘Sudan Watch’ over the election period to keep a vigil over events on the ground. They will be watching Sudan Vote Monitor (www.sudanvotemointor.com), a project launched by Sudanese civil society to report on any violations occurring during the elections. Activists can also follow Sudan365 on Twitter (twitter.com/sudan365).

'The respect, protection and promotion of human rights by all those involved in the election; including the government, candidates, and supporters is of critical importance. Sudan must end the cycle of violence, insecurity and human rights abuses in the country,' said Erwin van der Borgh, Africa Director of Amnesty International.

The elections are intended to be a milestone in the implementation of the 2005 Comprehensive Peace Agreement. Campaigners are calling on the international community to scale up their support to Sudanese parties to resolve outstanding issues ahead of the scheduled referendum in January 2011 and increase measures to protect civilians over the course of the year. The campaign calls for:

- The Government of National Unity and Government of South Sudan to uphold the Electoral Code of Conduct that they have endorsed, including respecting the rights to freedom of expression, association and peaceful assembly and guaranteeing freedom of movement to all electoral observers throughout the country;
- Election Observation Missions who decide to remain in Sudan for the period to monitor and publicly report on the human rights context before, during and after the elections;
- The international community to speak out about any serious human rights violations that occur;
- The UN mission to increase its presence and patrolling in volatile areas, in line with its mandate to protect civilians;
- World leaders to scale up their engagement to support Sudanese parties resolve outstanding issues ahead of the referendum and work with Sudanese parties to agree a decisive strategy for international engagement after the referendum.

“This is a wake-up call to leaders. The elections start tomorrow. The referendum is less than 9 months away. The situation in Sudan remains dire. The recent spike in violence in Darfur shows that the conflict is far from over. The Comprehensive Peace Agreement, that brought an end to a civil war in which over 2 million people died, remains fragile and inter-ethnic violence has increased. We need a first-class, coordinated international response. And we need it now.” said Joel Charny, Vice President for Policy, Refugees International, a member of the campaign.

"The upcoming elections represent a missed opportunity for Sudan to take a step forward in its democratic transformation. Farce will turn into tragedy, however, if violence is allowed to get out of control and Sudan's people suffer. We call on all parties to publicly renounce the use of violence and ensure adequate protection for voters. Human rights protections cannot be put on hold during this tumultuous time," said Mark Lotwis, Acting President of the Save Darfur Coalition.