



February 18, 2008

Dear Ambassador,

Review of Human Rights Defenders Mandate

We are writing to seek your support for renewing and improving the mandate of the Special Representative of the Secretary General on Human Rights Defenders (Special Representative). We welcome your government's co-sponsorship of the 2007 General Assembly resolution on human rights defenders.¹ Given your government's support of the Special Representative's mandate, we encourage you to actively participate in the review of the mandate at the 7th regular session of the Human Rights Council on March 13, 2008 to ensure that the mandate is improved and renewed for another three years.

Human rights defenders—anyone who promotes or protects human rights—are vital agents in securing compliance with human rights standards both nationally and internationally. Many UN mechanisms depend on reports and other first-hand information provided by human rights defenders within the countries concerned. As such, the ability of such advocates to work safely and freely has direct consequences for the effectiveness of the international system of human rights protection as a whole.

The Special Representative plays an essential role in supporting and protecting human rights defenders. Our organizations have come to rely on the Special Representative as one of the most responsive and effective means to support the work of those defenders most at risk. The Special Representative's work has frequently led to tangible outcomes, such as the release of defenders from prison or the curtailment of attacks against them.

The mandate enables the Special Representative to: gather information on the situation of human rights defenders; enter into dialogue with governments and other interested actors; recommend effective strategies to better protect defenders; and follow up on these recommendations. The Special Representative conducts country visits, takes up individual cases of concern with governments, and reports to the Human Rights Council and General Assembly on common trends affecting defenders.

¹ See "Draft Resolution IV Declaration on the Right and Responsibility of Individuals, Groups and Organs of Society to Promote and Protect Universally Recognized Human Rights and Fundamental Freedoms", in *Report of the Third Committee*, UN Doc: A/62/439/Add/2, 5 December 2007.

The Special Representative was established in 2000 by the Commission on Human Rights to support implementation of the 1998 Declaration on Human Rights Defenders. Support for the mandate amongst member states has grown since 2000, as evidenced by the increased number of states co-sponsoring the annual resolution on human rights defenders at the General Assembly and the former Commission on Human Rights. Recently, strong cross-regional support was expressed for the mandate at a panel on October 24, 2007 at the U.N. General Assembly sponsored by Human Rights First and the International Service for Human Rights.²

The review of the mandate at the 7th regular session offers an important opportunity for the Human Rights Council to affirm its strong commitment to the protection of human rights defenders. This is particularly timely as 2008 is the 10th anniversary year of the UN Declaration on human rights defenders.³

We look to the Council to build upon the resolution of the Commission on Human Rights and the recommendations of the Special Representative, by renewing and strengthening the mandate. We believe that the review process should increase the capacity of the UN system to follow-up on the Special Representative's recommendations so as to further enhance the mandate's positive impact. The review should also pay specific attention to the situation of women human rights defenders, and a focus on gender-specific violations should be firmly built into the resolution.

Therefore, we encourage you to actively support the strengthening of the mandate and to co-sponsor the resolution to renew it.

Please contact us if there is anything we can do to assist you in this process.

Yours sincerely,



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² *Challenges Faced by Women Human Rights Defenders: Showcasing the United Nations Special Representative on Human Rights Defenders*. For more information see: http://www.humanrightsfirst.org/defenders/hrd_women/UNevent102407.asp

³ *Declaration on the Right and Responsibility of Individuals, Groups and Organs of Society to Promote and Protect Universally Recognized Human Rights and Fundamental Freedoms*, A/RES/53/144, December 9, 1998.