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NGO Update

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NGO UPDATE

To foster communication between human rights organizations around the world, each issue of the Human Rights Brief features the "NGO Update." This space was created to help non-governmental organizations (NGOs) inform other groups about their programs, successes, and challenges.

To submit information on an event or situation in your organization, please send a short description to hrbrief@wcl.american.edu, and include "NGO Update" in the subject heading of the message. The Human Rights Brief reserves the right to edit for content and space limitations.

NATIONAL CAMPAIGN ON DALIT HUMAN RIGHTS (NCDHR)

www.dalits.org

On December 5, 2003, the National Campaign on Dalit Human Rights (NCDHR) began the Dalit Swadhikar Rally (Rally). The Rally moved along four routes spanning across the Indian subcontinent, covering 20,000 kilometers and eighteen states and converging on January 16, 2004, in Mumbai at the fourth World Social Forum (WSF). The goal of the Rally was to protest globalization's impact on the state of Dalit rights. Dalits are widely known as untouchables in South Asian countries and suffer social, economic, and workplace discrimination arising out of the practice of the caste system.

The Rally included a stop on December 14, 2003, at Vaikom, a hub of an historic *satyagraha*, or non-violent protest, led by Mahatma Gandhi and supported by many Dalit leaders. Using street theatre, the Rally raised awareness about globalization and the WSF as over 1000 people watched. The Rally also highlighted the need for Dalit organizations to put up a united front to fight discrimination. Then, in Kamakshipur and Moimanagar, the villagers talked about forms of discrimination and untouchability that still exist. For instance, Dalit women are not allowed to draw water from the public well,

handle articles in the local shop, or enter temples. Dominant castes also stopped a local Dalit leader who had run for the State Assembly from campaigning in dominant caste districts.

At the WSF, Dalits worked to develop a strategy to oppose neo-liberalism and casteism with the goal of promoting and protecting their human rights. The main themes of the conference included militarism, war, and peace; democracy and economic security; sustainable and democratic development of land; and food, health, education, and social security. Over 300,000 activists and leaders from over 900 organizations around the world attended the WSF.

THE CONSULTIVE INFORMATION CENTRE

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On October 15, 2003, men and women from dozens of Kazakh NGOs, members of Parliament, and senior government officials met in Astana, the capital of Kazakhstan, for the first Civil Forum in the country's history. The forum brought together nearly 200 participants in the nation's capital to discuss ways to increase their cooperation as the country progresses with democratic and economic development. From the state of Pavlodar alone, delegates included Nevada (an anti-nuclear NGO), Women for the Future of the Nation, Consultive Information Centre (an information technology NGO), and Samal (an NGO that works on behalf of handicapped children). The participants held broad-ranging discussions and issued a call for the creation of mechanisms for open communications between state authorities and civil society.

Before independence in 1991, NGOs were almost unknown in Kazakhstan, yet today over 4,500 NGOs make up an important part of the country's society. Around 200,000 people work in Kazakh NGOs in either a full-time, part-time, or volunteer capacity. These NGOs provide important services in healthcare, education, environmental protection, women's

issues, and democracy building by introducing the political process to Kazakhstan's fifteen million people.

Observers from foreign missions and international organizations took part in the Civil Forum. It was preceded by a day of smaller meetings between NGOs and cabinet-level officials from departments including education, environment, and the national Human Rights Ombudsman. Kairat Kunzhayev, a leader of a local NGO in western Kazakhstan, said at the Civil Forum, "We face a difficult task of improving the lives of our farmers and restoring *auyl* [the traditional village]. We must pull together."

President Nursultan Nazarbayev addressed the forum and said, "The gathering moved the relationship between the government and NGOs into a new stage. Our common goal is to ensure sustainable progress on the path of liberalization, building an economically strong, legal state and a developed civil society."

In a joint declaration, the Civil Forum called on all the country's NGOs "to engage actively in social programs of fighting poverty, drug abuse, and crime, of development of rural territories, environment protection, raising the legal and political awareness of the people, as well as in the promotion a healthy way of life." The government and various NGOs also signed A Joint Protocol on the Protection of Human Rights.

THE ASSOCIATION FOR CIVIL RIGHTS IN ISRAEL (ACRI)

www.acri.org.il

The Association for Civil Rights in Israel (ACRI) submitted a petition to the Israeli Supreme Court against the Israel Defense Forces (IDF), demanding that the access points along the barrier be kept open at regular and consistent intervals. ACRI filed the petition to stop the egregious human rights violations suffered by Palestinian residents of the occupied territories who are trapped in enclaves by the construction of Israel's separation barrier. The court ordered the state to

explain within twenty days why it does not allow the passage of residents, vehicles, and mechanized equipment from four villages bordering the separation barrier through the designated gates at reasonable hours. The petition placed special emphasis on the lack of justification for the paralysis of the civilian population's daily lives. The barrier cuts them off from their agricultural land, social and family ties, commercial centers, sources of livelihood, educational institutions, public services, and critical access to medical care.

ACRI filed another petition jointly with *B'tselem* against the IDF judge advocate general demanding a military police investigation

into the death of every Palestinian civilian not involved in the fighting so far killed by IDF soldiers. The court ordered the military to provide sufficient data regarding the number of investigations regarding civilian deaths, and further required differentiation between deaths which occurred in the course of combat and those that occurred at checkpoints or in other circumstances. The petition details the circumstances surrounding the deaths of eight Palestinians who were killed by IDF soldiers between May 2002 and May 2003.

Between the beginning of the *Al Aqsa Intifada* (popular uprising) in October 2000 and October 15, 2003, 2,171 Palestinians have

been killed by the Israeli security forces, including 410 minors. Despite these figures, Israeli military police have opened only 70 investigations addressing shooting offenses, many involving non-fatal injuries. Only nine of these investigations led to indictments. **HRB**

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attempts to put pressure on the ruling Burmese regime by exerting financial pressure and by supporting democracy activists. The Act is effective for one year, but it can be renewed annually for two additional years by the passage of a joint "renewal resolution" in both houses of Congress.

Financial Pressure

Most significantly, H.R. 2330 imposes a trade embargo on Burma. The "findings" section of the bill states that the regime has integrated the Burmese military into most aspects of the economy. As a result, the embargo consists of a ban on imports from companies associated with the regime. These organizations include the Union Solidarity and Development Association (USDA), a civic group created by the SLORC in 1993; the SPDC and any ministry or member of that organization; and the military-controlled Myanmar Economic Corporation (MEC). In addition, H.R. 2330 extends the ban to known narcotics traffickers.

The BFDA specifies the requirements for lifting the embargo. The SPDC must make "substantial and measurable progress to end violations of internationally recognized human rights." It must release all political prisoners, allow freedom of speech and of the press, permit the free exercise of religion, allow freedom of assembly, and, most importantly, transfer power to the democratically-elected civilian government led by the

NLD. The secretary of state, in conjunction with the International Labor Organization and relevant non-governmental organizations, must certify that the Burmese regime has met these requirements before lifting the embargo.

Furthermore, the BFDA provides for the freezing of US assets belonging to the SPDC and senior officials within that organization. Finally, the BFDA directs the secretary of the treasury, who is responsible for the United States' interactions with the International Monetary Fund and the World Bank, to oppose and vote against any loan or financial or technical assistance to Burma.

Support for Democracy Activists

The BFDA authorizes the president to use "all available resources to assist Burmese democracy activists." To that end, Congress requires the secretary of state to recommend comprehensive short- and long-term programs to support these activists. Congress also requires the secretary of state to report on the resources necessary to reconstruct Burma after the SPDC is no longer in power. Specifically, the secretary of state is to report on funds necessary to form democratic institutions; establish the rule of law and freedom of the press; provide for the reintegration of the military into Burmese civil society; and assist in the country's health, education, and economic development. Finally, ninety days before the embargo is set to expire, the secretary of state is to report

back to Congress on the progress of human rights and democracy issues in Burma. In this report, the secretary of state is to include measures taken by the US and other governments to promote human rights and democracy, as well as the impact the embargo has had on improving conditions in Burma.

Conclusion

The findings in H.R. 2330 paint a grim picture of life in Burma. The bill cites the use of rape to intimidate women, the forcible conscription of child-soldiers, and the torture of prisoners. The intimidation of democracy activists indicates an apparent willingness by the Burmese regime to restrict the free flow of the political process. The BFDA makes concrete steps to pressure the Burmese regime to loosen this grip. By freezing assets in the US that belong to the regime and its leadership, opposing aid to Burma from international financial institutions, and banning imports from Burmese interests connected to the SPDC, Congress has taken one of the most dramatic steps to pressure the Burmese regime to take a democratic path. **HRB**

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