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NGO Update

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NGO UPDATE

To foster communication among human rights organizations around the world, each issue of the Human Rights Brief features an “NGO Update.” This space was created to aid non-governmental organizations (NGOs) by informing others about their programs, successes, and challenges. The views of the organizations below do not necessarily reflect those of the Human Rights Brief. For information on how to submit updates for your organization, please see the instructions provided at the end of the column.

SUDAN ORGANIZATION AGAINST TORTURE (SOAT)

www.soatsudan.org

Established in 1993, the Sudan Organization Against Torture (SOAT) is an independent, non-governmental, human rights organization working to prevent torture and challenge the impunity of torture perpetrators. Operating in Sudan and the United Kingdom, SOAT offers assistance to Sudanese survivors of torture by providing medical treatment, rehabilitation services, and legal aid. SOAT also monitors and documents the human rights situation in Sudan and advocates change in policy and practice at the national and international level.

SOAT's Medical Treatment and Rehabilitation program provides ongoing treatment to victims of torture until the recovery process is complete. Where adequate medical treatment is not available in Sudan, SOAT makes arrangements for its clients to travel to receive necessary care. The program also helps torture survivors rebuild relationships, reintegrate into society, and re-establish stable and independent lives. According to SOAT, survivors of torture often feel isolated and hopeless. Therefore, the aim of its rehabilitation services is to provide survivors with a sense of purpose, enabling them to lead dignified and independent lives.

SOAT's Legal Aid program has represented hundreds of clients and has successfully overturned numerous cases in which

persons were sentenced to death, amputation, or cross amputation – a punishment in which the convicted person's right hand and left foot are amputated. The legal aid program has also taken on several cases against human rights violators to send a clear signal to perpetrators of torture that they will no longer enjoy total impunity. SOAT is confident that this program has and will continue to have the effect of deterring others from committing violations in the future.

In 2003, SOAT established the Information, Research, and Freedom of Expression program to increase awareness of the human rights situation in Sudan at the local, national, and international levels. It does so through the Human Rights Education and Information Resource Center, which provides valuable information and documentation of human rights abuses to other NGOs, journalists, legal professionals, students, researchers, and human rights activists. By providing information on instances of torture and other human rights abuses to journalists for press releases and reports, SOAT has significantly increased media coverage of the human rights situation in Sudan and has been successful in lobbying for political reform.

SOAT believes that documenting and exposing torture is key to its prevention and forces perpetrators to face the consequences of their actions. SOAT's efforts send a strong message to perpetrators that they are known, that they will be prosecuted and punished, and that Sudan is on a path towards change. SOAT seeks to ensure that survivors of torture will not only receive the services they need, but that they will receive justice and one day live in peace without fear.

TIBETAN CENTER FOR HUMAN RIGHTS AND DEMOCRACY (TCHRD)

www.tchrd.org

The Tibetan Center for Human Rights and Democracy (TCHRD) is the first Tibetan non-governmental human rights

organization to be established in exile in India. Founded in 1996 and based in Dharamsala, Himachal Pradesh, India, TCHRD's purpose is to promote peaceful change to deepen and broaden the understanding of human rights principles and democratic concepts among Tibetans and non-Tibetans. The organization gathers information, produces and distributes publications, and documents the human rights violations in Tibet to raise public awareness. TCHRD's logo features the image of a white dove rising out of flames. The dove is a universal emblem of peace, and the flames represent the suffering of the Tibetan people and the purifying force of truth.

The former Executive Director of TCHRD Lobsang Nyandak, stated in an interview that one of the main purposes of TCHRD is to effectively monitor all aspects of human rights abuses taking place in Tibet, and to document this information and disseminate it to a larger public including United Nations (UN) agencies, governments, and international NGOs. TCHRD conducts regular, systematic investigations of the human rights situation in Tibet and assesses the human rights policies of the People's Republic of China. TCHRD publishes an annual report as well as thematic reports, profiles of former political prisoners, monthly newsletters, press releases and news briefs.

The numerous educational activities of TCHRD range from conducting workshops in the Tibetan settlements to briefing parliamentarians from various countries around the world. TCHRD also organizes talk series, public discussions, and campaigns to engender a culture of respect for human rights and democracy. The most recent workshop was jointly organized with the Asian Human Rights Commission based in Hong Kong, and over 32 prominent international and local participants from various backgrounds attended. Some of the more crucial discussions focused on the ways in which current laws affect the regional autonomy of China's national minorities, especially Tibetans. Among the numerous lecture series given in Dharam-

sala by TCHRD were briefings to the European Union First Secretary in India and to an Italian Parliament delegation. Two weeks after the briefing, the Italian Parliament passed a Tibetan resolution which called for China to fully recognize and respect the fundamental political, social, and cultural rights of all minorities in China.

Engaging the global community, TCHRD regularly attends the UN Commission on Human Rights and regional, national, and international conferences. The purpose of participation is to highlight the human rights situation in Tibet at the international level and ultimately to increase international involvement in the promotion and protection of human rights in Tibet. TCHRD also conducts campaigns such as letter writing and signature appeals and submits memoranda to visiting delegations and the media.

TCHRD's promotion of peaceful change has reached beyond the Asian sub-continent. The organization's efforts have led to the remarkable distribution of information that has motivated peaceful protest on behalf of Tibet throughout the world.

ADVOCATES FOR ENVIRONMENTAL HUMAN RIGHTS (AEHR)

www.ehumanrights.org

Advocates for Environmental Human Rights (AEHR) is a nonprofit public interest law firm whose mission is to provide legal services, community support, public education, and public campaigns focused on defending and advancing the human right to a healthy environment. AEHR's efforts include advocacy for the human rights of internally-displaced U.S. Gulf Coast hurricane survivors.

The founders and co-directors of AEHR are two attorneys who have helped numerous communities achieve important environmental justice victories. The Board of Directors is comprised of skilled advocates with expertise in environmental health policymaking, human rights advocacy, and community organization.

AEHR advances the human right to a healthy environment by advocating for the right to life, health, racial equality, and a secure home environment. According to AEHR, African-American and poor communities have been subjected to toxic pollution and other hazards, and the complex environmental regulatory system of the United States facilitates and perpetuates environmental racism and injustice. AEHR charges that, by permitting toxic and hazardous facilities to operate in close proximity to these communities, the U.S. government prioritizes the economic interests of polluting industries over the protection of fundamental human rights. AEHR invokes international human rights laws to remedy government actions that subject communities to toxic environments.

In the Gulf Coast region, AEHR also works to protect the right to return home in the aftermath of hurricanes, particularly Hurricane Katrina. AEHR advocates for a just, sustainable, and anti-racist rebuilding of Gulf Coast communities that respects the right of all residents to voluntarily return to their communities with dignity and justice. In the aftermath of Hurricanes Katrina and Rita, reconstruction policies by the Bush Administration created a housing crisis that unjustly prolongs the displacement of predominantly African-American residents. It also denied local governmental requests for assistance to build a comprehensive and effective flood protection sys-

tem, public healthcare facilities, and other critical infrastructure.

Central to AEHR's advocacy is raising public awareness about the UN Guiding Principles on Internal Displacement in every aspect of Gulf Coast recovery efforts. A decision by the UN Committee on the Elimination of Racial Discrimination calls on the U.S. government "to increase its efforts in order to facilitate the return of persons displaced by Hurricane Katrina to their homes" as well as to "ensure genuine consultation and participation of persons displaced by Hurricane Katrina in the design and implementation of all decisions affecting them." Monique Harden, Co-Director of AEHR, stated that the U.S. government has failed to protect these human rights of internally displaced individuals.

AEHR has an excellent reputation for working in collaboration with communities in New Orleans. These communities have largely been able to take charge of and create their own community initiatives. AEHR sees its role as providing support through litigation and public advocacy work, and its commitment to letting communities speak for themselves demonstrates the importance of promoting the public voice within the Gulf Coast communities. AEHR strives to build a broader consensus for lasting change and pledges to continue its efforts to advocate for justice and the protection of basic human rights in the Gulf Coast region.

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