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NGO Update

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NGO UPDATE

NGO UPDATES

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 contact us at hrrbrief@wcl.american.edu.

NEW ETHIOPIAN LAW RESTRICTS NGOs

A law ratified by the Ethiopian Parliament on January 6, 2009 struck a fatal blow to non-governmental organizations. According to many rights groups, the Proclamation for the Registration and Regulation of Charities and Societies (NGO law) criminalizes virtually all NGO activity. Under the law, any group receiving at least ten percent of funds from abroad is labeled a “foreign NGO.” Those designated as such are banned from promoting ethnic, gender and religious equality; human rights; democracy; or conflict resolution. Violators face disproportionately large fines and sentences of up to 15 years in jail. Because nearly all NGOs who work in these restricted areas rely on foreign funding, the NGO law is synonymous with a blanket ban on NGO human rights advocacy in the country.

In addition, the NGO law creates a new regulating body, the Charities and Societies Agency (CSA), to oversee the management and general conduct of NGOs in Ethiopia. The vague language of the NGO law gives the CSA broad and extensive powers over the registration of charities, which worries opponents of the law. At its discretion, the CSA may refuse recognition of organizations or disband those previously given legal status. The right to appeal decisions made by the CSA is almost non-existent for foreign NGOs.

The Ethiopian government says the NGO law is necessary to regulate the country’s NGOs and encourage financial transparency and accountability. It argues that it is the role of the government, and not civil society, to protect human and democratic rights. Meles Tilahun, a whip in Parliament, insists that the NGO law is not meant to “shut [NGOs] down,” emphasizing NGOs may still engage in humanitarian assistance.

The passage of the NGO law has been met with scathing criticism from an international community already critical of Ethiopia’s human rights record. The U.S. Department of State says the NGO law “appears to restrict civil society activities and international partners’ ability to support Ethiopia’s own development.” The World Alliance for Citizen Participation fears the NGO law will have a “crippling effect on civil society” by preventing NGOs from taking part in democracy-building initiatives and acting as a check against human rights abuses. Many groups feel that the NGO law thwarts one of the few options available in Ethiopia for expressing dissent.

Among the local NGOs who will be impacted are the Ethiopian Human Rights Council (EHRCO) and the Ethiopian Women’s Lawyers Association (EWLA). About 99 percent of both the EHRCO’s and EWLA’s annual budget come from foreign sources including the United States, Canada and Europe. The EWLA does not believe that local fundraising will even cover the expenses for running its legal services hotline. Yoseph Mulugeta, secretary-general of the EHRCO believes that, “for many NGOs, this [issue] is a matter of life or death.” Organizations like the EHRCO and EWLA must now either abandon their work or give up their critical funding lifeline.

MARRIAGE EQUALITY USA

www.marriageequality.org

The California Supreme Court held unconstitutional a statutory ban on same-sex marriages on May 15, 2008, thus allowing County Clerks to issue marriage licenses to same-sex couples. This new right, however, was short lived. Six months later California voters approved Proposition 8, a ballot proposition to amend the state constitution. The measure added a new section defining marriage exclusively between a man and a woman. That same day, similar measures passed in both Arizona and Florida. Election Day 2008 struck a serious blow to Marriage Equality USA. The California based NGO insists, however, that the fight is not over. The organization will continue to work tirelessly to regain what it maintains is a fundamental human right.

Same-sex marriage is legal in only two states, with constitutional bans in 30 states. Marriage Equality’s mission is to obtain legally recognized civil marriages at the federal, state, and local level without regard for sex or gender identity or sexual orientation. Founded in 1998 with a chapter in New York, Marriage Equality quickly expanded to a national, all volunteer organization. Today, Marriage Equality has chapters operating in nine states with the strongest presence in California. As a grassroots organization, the local chapters serve as frontline activists, working to change the minds of those within their communities.

Marriage Equality’s primary approach is through education and media campaigns. Speaking engagements, forums, and town hall meetings allow Marriage Equality chapters to alleviate fears and educate the public on the importance of allowing same-sex couples to enter into civil marriages. In addition, high-profile activities such as statewide rallies, parades, press conferences and other media events provide Marriage Equality with the exposure necessary to more widely distribute its message. Every year

on February 12th, Marriage Equality sponsors National Freedom to Marry Day. On this day, same-sex couples request marriage licenses at their local County Clerk's office and are subsequently turned away. Marriage Equality hopes this visible display of discrimination will highlight the struggle faced daily by same-sex couples and their families.

After the vote on Proposition 8, Marriage Equality requested input from thousands of Californians both gay and straight. Marriage Equality compiled these stories into a report entitled "Prop 8 Hurt My Family—Ask Me How", to illustrate the effect of Proposition 8 on same-sex couples and their families. "Over 1,200 people shared specific instances of the harms they experienced," said Pamela Brown, National Policy Director for Marriage Equality. In addition, on January 16, 2009, Marriage Equality appealed directly to the justice system by filing an amicus curiae brief with the California Supreme Court in support of petitioners challenging Proposition 8.

Despite recent setbacks, Marriage Equality continues to look forward. It plans to work closely with President Obama's new administration to not only overturn restrictive federal legislation such as the Defense of Marriage Act and eliminate the US military's Don't Ask, Don't Tell policy, but to expand federal rights and protections for same-sex couples. Marriage Equality also recently expanded outreach to allow other organizations to join Marriage Equality as "member organizations," while maintaining each organization's complete independence. "We are building a coalition of grassroots organizations to conduct coordinated information events" says Brown. In the coming months, Marriage Equality plans to release another report entitled "We Know Where We Are Going, We Know Where We've Been". This report will provide a road map for the future,

detailing ways to best harness the grassroots community in support of marriage equality in all 50 states and at the federal level.

HUMAN RIGHTS FOUNDATION OF TURKEY

<http://www.tihv.org.tr/tihve/>

On January 22, 2009, the trial of sixty police officers, soldiers and prison officials implicated in the death of political activist Engin Çeber opened in Turkey. Çeber died from a brain hemorrhage in October 2008 after being arrested at a demonstration protesting police brutality. Four of the defendants are charged with torturing Çeber. The Human Rights Foundation of Turkey (HRFT) announced the start of Çeber's trial in its Daily Human Rights Report.

Cases like this are familiar to HRFT. Established in 1990 out of an initiative of the Human Rights Association, the oldest and largest human rights organization in Turkey, HRFT was charged with putting those human rights guaranteed by international conventions into practice at home. The Ankara based organization works to provide treatment and rehabilitation services for torture survivors and to document human rights violations in Turkey. HRFT carries out this mission through two main projects: the Treatment and Rehabilitation Centers for Torture Survivors Project and the Documentation Center Project.

Treatment and Rehabilitation Centers have been set up in Ankara, Istanbul, Izmir, Adana, and Diyarbakir. Each Center provides medical treatment and social assistance to torture survivors and their families. HRFT was one of the first organizations in Turkey to provide this crucial assistance. The Centers also conduct research into the physical and psychological problems associated with torture. In

addition to its team of twenty-seven medical professionals, HRFT has hundreds of volunteers spanning a variety of disciplines, including lawyers and journalists. As of the 2007, HRFT provided treatment and rehabilitation services to 10,786 torture survivors. All services are provided free of charge.

At the Documentation Center in Ankara, HRFT closely monitors human rights violations and disseminates daily, monthly, annual and special reports summarizing its findings. Reports are published in both Turkish and English and are made available on HRFT's website. HRFT estimates its Daily Reports reach approximately 300 addresses a day, including representatives at the United Nations, European Parliament and embassies in Ankara.

HRFT also values the role of legal and judicial avenues to assist victims. In 2002, HRFT initiated a Legal Assistance Project. HRFT encourages victims to claim their rights and provides the support of specialized counselors during every stage of the legal process.

The same Daily Report detailing the start of Engin Çeber's trial also contained nine other reports of rights violations, ranging from coercion in prison to the confiscation of newspapers. While December 30, 2008 marked the eighteenth anniversary of HRFT, its work is far from over. HRFT vows to continue its mission to aid victims of torture and eliminate all violations of human rights against Turkish citizens.

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