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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.

CAMBODIAN LEAGUE FOR THE PROMOTION AND DEFENSE OF HUMAN RIGHTS (LICADHO)

www.licadho.org

Following the 1991 Paris Conference peace settlement, bringing an end to over ten years of civil war in Cambodia, Dr. Kek Galabru and other nationals returned to their country with the mission of alleviating the extreme hardships facing Cambodians. In 1992, they founded the Cambodian League for the Promotion and Defense of Human Rights (LICADHO). Since then, LICADHO has become one of the largest human rights NGOs in Cambodia, constantly a pioneer in the fight to protect and promote human rights.

Today, over 130 staff members operate out of LICADHO's main office in Phnom Penh and their 12 provincial offices. They work to improve human rights conditions in the country by investigating human rights violations, providing direct assistance and legal advocacy for victims, conducting research campaigns on prevalent rights abuses, and offering human rights training to authorities and the public. In addition, LICADHO, with the help of other NGOs, conducts advocacy both at the local and national level with the hope of influencing the government and bringing about concrete reform.

LICADHO monitors the status of human rights first hand by collecting and analyzing data on a wide variety of issues including rape, human trafficking, tor-

ture, violence against women and children, illegal detentions and land grabbing. The organization monitors and assists victims in filing complaints with the police, courts, and other institutions. After the initial filing, LICADHO continues to advocate for their victims' cases to be adequately investigated and resolved. In the first half of 2008 alone, LICADHO investigated a total of 182 new cases of human rights abuses consisting of 265 violations and 5,081 victims.

In 2000, LICADHO established its Project Against Torture (PAT), which provides comprehensive rehabilitation services to victims and conducts advocacy against torture. Currently the only project of its kind in Cambodia, PAT works with clients on an out-patient basis to provide both physical and mental medical treatment. Once rehabilitated, the program aids victims in becoming economically self-sufficient by referring them to vocational training and issuing small loans. Finally, PAT uses legal avenues to bring perpetrators to justice.

The activities of LICADHO do not come without risks. Rights defenders across the country continually face threats, intimidation, or legal prosecutions. The government regularly fails to protect activists from such attacks. A recent report issued by LICADHO detailed more than 50 incidents of intimidation or violence against human rights defenders in 2007 and called Cambodia “a dangerous place for human rights defenders.” These intimidation tactics, however, do not stop LICADHO. They unwaveringly continue to promote their vision of achieving a democratic society in Cambodia that is peaceful, stable, and whose government and institutions are committed to human rights and social justice.

BAOBAB FOR WOMEN'S HUMAN RIGHTS (BAOBAB)

www.baobabwomen.org

A baobab tree can provide for almost every human need ranging from food and shelter to fuel and medicine. It is a symbol of strength, power and persistence throughout Africa. BAOBAB For Women's Human Rights (BAOBAB), which takes its name from the tree and features it prominently in the organization's logo, seeks to imitate the tree's qualities in its mission to promote the rights of women across Nigeria.

Established in 1996, BAOBAB operates from its national office in Lagos, and has outreach teams stationed in 14 states throughout the country. Working with women, legal and paralegal professionals, human rights NGOs, and members of the general public, BAOBAB focuses on advancing women's legal rights under the three systems of law in Nigeria: customary, statutory, and religious. Their main objectives are to promote the development and exercise of women's rights, raise awareness of the abuses of these rights, and support and strengthen women's and other human rights organizations both in Nigeria and around the world.

BAOBAB accomplishes its goals through a variety of activities. To educate the public on women's rights issues, the organization disseminates books and legal literacy leaflets on topics such as reproductive rights and divorce. BAOBAB frequently sponsors training and educational conferences with the hope of putting attendees in a better position to advocate for the rights of women. The most recent of these conferences was a leadership training and political education symposium for seventeen Nigerian women politicians. The organization has also commented on bills before the Nigerian legislature and in July 2008 served as the architect for Nigeria's NGO coalition shadow report to the United Nations Committee on the Elimination of Discrimination Against Women. In response to this report, the Committee requested that Nigeria work immediately

to adopt the Convention into the country's legal system and strongly suggested that the government amend laws that impede women's equality.

BAOBAB continuously uses new and unique tactics to aid its efforts to influence the Nigerian public, media, and government to eliminate the oppression of women. For example, in March 2001, BAOBAB organized the first ever National Tribunal on Violence Against Women, during which 33 women voluntarily testified about their past experiences of violence and repression. While the tribunals were unofficial and non-binding, judges deliberated and returned with recommendations for significant policy changes. Since the tribunals, the Nigerian government passed, although has had difficulty enforcing, laws against female genital mutilation and other forms of violence against women. BAOBAB also saw, as a result of the tribunals, an increase in the number of cases reported to them by victims. Mufuliat Fijabi, a senior program officer at the time, said, "Tribunals have helped to empower survivors and give them hope for the future."

Changing the hearts and minds of those in Nigeria who do not acknowledge the rights of women is a major obstacle facing BAOBAB. While there is still a lot of work to be done, BAOBAB continues to both challenge and inspire women to achieve their goals and engage the government in a dialogue to improve the conditions of women throughout Nigeria.

ADALAH — THE LEGAL CENTER FOR ARAB MINORITY RIGHTS IN ISRAEL

www.adalah.org

Violence broke out between police and demonstrators during the "March of Return" in Israel in May 2008. The march was held by Arab-Israelis to protest the right of refugees to return to their homes. On September 25, 2008, Adalah, the Legal Center for Arab Minority Rights in Israel, along with the Arab Association for Human Rights, filed a complaint with the Israeli Ministry of Justice's Police Investigations Department documenting the excessive use of force by police against participants. In the complaint, the two groups demanded a prompt and impartial criminal investigation into the events.

Adalah, whose name means "justice" in Arabic, is the leading Arab-run legal center in Israel. Established in 1996 by Hassan and Rina Jabareen, Adalah focuses on addressing and advancing the rights of the Arab-Israeli minority, which constitutes about 20 percent of the population. In particular, Adalah concentrates its efforts on improving land rights; civil and political rights; cultural, social, and economic rights; religious rights; women's rights; and prisoners' rights.

Each year Adalah files cases and petitions with Israeli courts and various state agencies demanding redress. Issues include the treatment of political prisoners, the sale of confiscated land and the right of Arab children to adequate education. Adalah often provides legal commentary on legislation that negatively impacts the Arab minority. Recently, Adalah sent a letter to the Israeli Knesset opposing amendments to a law regarding the detention of unlawful combatants. In addition, Adalah provides legal advice to individuals, NGOs, and Arab institutions; organizes study days, seminars, and workshops; publishes reports on legal issues of concern; and trains legal apprentices, law students, and new Arab lawyers in the field of human rights.

To mark its tenth anniversary, Adalah issued "The Democratic Constitution," the first constitutional proposal by an Arab organization. According to Professor Marwan Dwaairy, Chairman of the Board of Directors, this proposal was "based on the concept of a democratic, bilingual and multicultural state" and drew on "universal principles and international conventions on human rights." In drafting, Adalah consulted legal experts from around the world and modeled the document after constitutions of other states, including South Africa, which experienced similar problems. By issuing this document, Adalah hoped to spur objective public debate and dialogue on the legal and cultural standing of Arab minorities in Israel.

The response from the Israeli local and national government to Adalah's legal advocacy has been mixed. Following Adalah's intervention in September 2008, the Municipality of Ramle agreed to register Arab children at Jewish kindergartens closer to their home. By contrast, however, Adalah has attained little to no accountability from the government for the killing of 13 Arab citizens by Israeli police forces in October 2000. Despite these obstacles, Adalah continues persistently to raise awareness for and promote the rights of the Arab-Israeli minority. **HRB**

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