



**On the Record: Human Rights Defenders (1998)**

**Issue 4: December 10, 1998**

**50<sup>th</sup> Anniversary Special**

Fifty years ago today the UN General Assembly adopted the Universal Declaration of Human Rights at its third session in Paris. This milestone in the history of human rights is being celebrated in scores of countries around the world, in many different ways.

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**From the AP Editorial Desk**

**Urgent Appeal! Activist Disappeared in Tabasco, Mexico**

**Jose Dolores Cordova Hernandez**, ex-commissioner of the Ejido Carrillo Puerto in Centla, Tabasco and a collaborator of Servicio Paz y Justicia (SERPAJ) Tabasco, disappeared on Thursday, December 3, according to the testimony given by his wife, Veronica May Ocana, to a public official in Centla. The case was given the following police code: A-RMPEC-III-1529. His leadership in efforts to defend ejido (communal) lands had resulted in harassment and threats. There are serious concerns for his physical safety.

Please send messages - as soon as possible - asking Mexican authorities to thoroughly investigate his disappearance, to guarantee his physical security, and to protect the rights of Ejido members. (See Recommended Action below.)

## **Background:**

During his tenure as governor of the Ejido Carrillo Puerto, Cordova Hernandez re-opened the books on an unsettled lawsuit involving a parcel of public land on which both the local grade school and high school are situated. The lawsuit was brought forth by the community of the Ejido when a large group of private landholders suddenly claimed the land as their own. As a result of his activism and staunch support of the community interests, Cordova Hernandez received numerous threats including a warrant for his arrest for "federal crimes." Members of the Lezcano Rodriguez family, the largest and most powerful of the private landholders, have been the most hostile of the group towards Cordova Hernandez and are also believed to be the major influence leading to the warrant for his arrest.

During a visit to the home of Cordova Hernandez in June, human rights activists from the United States (including the Fellowship of Reconciliation) were told that police had been posted at night on the road near his house. He believed they were there in an attempt to find him alone and seize him. As the visitors were leaving his house, two people in civilian dress drove by slowly in front of the house, taking photographs of them.

On the morning of December 3, Cordova Hernandez left his house at dawn and traveled on a public bus headed towards the city of Villahermosa. He arrived in Villahermosa at 6:30 am and a witness states that Cordova Hernandez mentioned he was visiting the city in order to pay a visit to his lawyer regarding the warrant for his arrest. He never reported to his lawyer's home, however, and has not been seen since leaving the bus station.

Family members reported the disappearance to authorities and conducted a search of all local hospitals, police stations, jails, and morgues, but so far no clues have been found.

**Recommended Action** – Please send letters or faxes to the officials listed below, respectfully urging:

An urgent and thorough investigation of the disappearance of Jose Dolores Cordova Hernandez until he is found and his physical security is guaranteed. Official guarantees that the recognized authorities of the public land known as Ejido Carrillo Puerto are able to safely carry out their duties and that legal actions be resolved in order to secure the continued survival and welfare of the ejido.

Send them to:

Lic. Ernesto Zedillo Ponce de Leon  
Presidente de la Republica  
Palacio Nacional  
06067 Mexico, DF  
Fax: (001) (52) (5) 515-17-94

Lic. Roberto Madrazo Pintado  
Governor of the State of Tabasco

Palacio de Gobierno  
Villahermosa, Tabasco  
Fax: (001) (52) (93) 14-18-48 or 12-33-47

Send copies to:

Tabasco Human Rights Committee  
Villahermosa, Tabasco  
Fax: (001) (52) (93) 12-83-62

**Please circulate this appeal among your friends, colleagues, and networks.**

For more information on this action contact **Global Exchange**, 2017 Mission St., Rm. 303, San Francisco, CA 94110; Phone: (415) 255-7296; Fax: (415) 255-7498.

**Defenders Celebrate the 50th Anniversary of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights With Call for Individual Commitment and Greater Protection from Governments**

*Development Banks and multinational enterprises urged to moderate impact of globalization*

Fifty years to the day after governments adopted the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, the Defenders' Summit today (Thursday) adopted its own declaration in the same room, reaffirming the universality of human rights, urging individuals to become defenders by promoting human rights "in their own lives," and calling on governments and nonstate actors to help.

The defenders' declaration was drafted in advance of the Summit at a series of regional meetings, and was read out by Salima Chezali, a newspaper editor from Algeria. It comprises 22 articles and is one of three substantial documents that will come out of the summit. A plan of action and a list of grievances will be discussed Friday.

Meanwhile, in New York, the UN General Assembly was expected to adopt a UN declaration on the rights and responsibilities of individuals. The declaration has been 14 years in the making, partly because so many governments view human rights defenders as subversives.

Although neither is legally binding, it is hoped that both declarations will make it easier for ordinary people to take up human rights, and provide them with greater protection. In keeping with the mood of the summit that has taken place here this week, the session opened with statements from several prominent activists and Nobel Laureates, including the Dalai Lama and Bishop Jose Ramon Horta from East Timor.

The first aim of the Defenders' declaration is to reaffirm the universality of human rights. These, it states, are "universal, indivisible, and inalienable and represent the birthright of all men, women, and children and the common legacy of humanity which binds us and future generations together." (Article 3)

The arguments against universality are directly confronted in Article 9, which denounces "the attempts of certain States to justify or excuse human rights violations in the name of cultural, religious, or historical specificity, or of particular or national security interests; and by misleadingly setting civil and political rights against economic, social, and cultural rights and the right to development."

The declaration is notable for its emphasis on economic violations. It denounces "economic and social insecurity" and notes that "a growing number of actors, particularly economic actors" are responsible for the fact that violations today tend to be "increasingly varied and complex." The declaration calls on "private business, multinational companies, and international financial institutions" to ensure that their strategies and projects help, not obstruct, the fulfillment of human rights.

This echoes the emphasis placed on economic rights by the defenders' summit this week. But it also means that the poor are actually the only group singled out for special mention in the declaration. Article 10 states: "we stress that those who are subject to conditions of extreme poverty are among the principal victims of the full range of human rights abuses and that the efforts they expend in their daily struggle to stay alive place them among human rights defenders." This suggests that the poor are ipso facto human rights defenders – which may be hard for some campaigners to understand, let alone accept.

At the same time, there are several notable absences in the Paris Declaration. One concerns gender. Surprisingly, after Vienna and Beijing, there is no mention of the special difficulties facing women human rights defenders. Nor is there any reference to children or youth as actors in the human rights struggle. A third omission is the special role of persons with disabilities.

The Declaration draws attention to the systematic repression that is directed against human rights defenders (Article 14) and the proliferation of measures that impede their legitimate work (Article 17). It also denounces "the fact that human rights defenders are a target of those regimes and practices they condemn." It expresses solidarity with those whose rights are violated without recourse to protection mechanisms. Finally, it urges States "to immediately take the necessary measures at national and international levels to ensure the effective implementation of the rights enunciated in the Declaration."

Some participants expressed unease at the fact that only one of the ten speakers that spoke at the adoption ceremony was a woman. Nor did the ten include a black African. Indai Lourdes Sajor, from the Philippines noted that the line-up was heavy on personalities and Nobel Laureates, who are "no longer in the trenches." She continued: "At a defenders summit, we should be hearing from those who are probably unknown to most of us, but need our support and solidarity."

The real question is whether the existence of two new declarations will have any real impact. Kek Kalabru, from Cambodia, predicted that governments would need to be pushed hard into implementation. On the other hand, skeptics said the same 50 years ago today – but this has not prevented the Universal Declaration from evolving into an indispensable moral and legal tool.

Many hope for the same from their new declaration, whatever their reservations. "Three hundred defenders came here to put the Declaration together. That gives me moral, emotional support," said Sajor. "The Declaration will also give us guidelines in our future work. It is a powerful Declaration – clear about what we want to see, about the type of accountability we expect from governments. It will also help in inspiring the next generation, that will have to continue the human rights struggle. We got our training not in the halls of the UN but before the guns and in the slums. Now we have to inspire others, especially other women. For millions and millions of women, human rights is the best kept secret, because they don't know it exists. The Declaration has to become a living document for them."

- (See below for the text of the new Defenders' Declaration)

### **Defenders Steal the Show at French Government Anniversary Ceremony**

by Iain Guest

The French government marked the 50th anniversary of the Universal Declaration here today with a ceremony that combined the pomp and circumstance of a state occasion with the outraged language of a human rights protest.

The ceremony took place at the Chaillot palace, in the same room where the Declaration was adopted on December 10, 1948 by the third session of the UN General Assembly. It was attended by French President Jacques Chirac, Prime Minister Lionel Jospin, the Dalai Lama and the Guatemalan Laureate Rigoberta Menchu. Aung San Suu Kyi and Vaclav Havel addressed the ceremony by a video link, as did UN Secretary-General Kofi Annan, speaking from New York.

The Defenders' Summit was suspended for the afternoon to make way for the event, yet the summit and its themes were very much in evidence, as the audience heard from Pierre Sane, the Secretary-General of Amnesty International, and three young women who have lived through repression and violence in Kosovo, Afghanistan, and Colombia. Aung San Suu Kyi's video statement bore all the hallmarks of a home video, which was not surprising given that it was recorded in her house, where she has been contained, almost continuously, for years.

The ceremony opened with music from oriental sitars, a western choir, and an army band, and was orchestrated by Stephane Hessel, a distinguished French diplomat. Hessel is an author, former member of the French Resistance, and long-time participant at the UN Human Rights Commission. He worked for the UN human rights secretariat in 1948, and watched the Declaration adopted. Today, he introduced Anna, the granddaughter of Eleanor Roosevelt, who was one of the intellectual authors of the Declaration.

All this produced an intriguing mixture of intimacy and formality; of French and English; of male and female, and – finally – of satisfaction at the progress made so far and outrage at what remains to be done. It was perhaps fitting, given the universal nature of the issues under review.

Throughout the week, there has been discussion among the defenders about the wisdom of participating in an event orchestrated by the French government. At one stage it was reported that Madeleine Albright, the US Secretary of State, would be speaking. After much soul-

searching, the summit organizers decided to hold their own separate December 10 ceremony in order to avoid angry protests. Many human rights activists do not see the US as their friend, and there are still memories of how relatives of Latin American disappeared howled down Jimmy Carter at the Vienna Human Rights Conference in 1993.

Allbright did not in the end attend, and this allowed the defenders to be well represented. In the end, they were event dominating. The highlight was without doubt the three personal stories. Temory Mezghan, in exile from Afghanistan, told how Afghan women are routinely beaten, prevented from working, denied medical care, and forced to wear veils – just for being women. Jetta Xhara, a 20-year old Albanian from Kosovo, recounted working with refugees in Pristina this summer and watching as one man burned to death.

Yanette Bautista from Colombia, president of the Federation of Latin American Families of Disappeared (FEDEFAM) told of losing her sister at the age of 11, and of find her mutilated body. Her mother had a heart attack while listening to the President of Colombia decorate the general whose forces were responsible.

Twenty-seven human rights defenders have been murdered in Colombia, said Bautista. This is a dramatic reminder of what the Defenders' summit is all about, yet there has been little pressure on Colombia from the international community. "Fifty years on, the time has come for governments to understand that international cooperation is not tolerance in the face of brutality," she said, to applause.

Responding to these three "anguished voices," Pierre Sane asked who was listening to the thousands of Algerians whose throats had been slit; to the Palestinians in Israeli jails, who are being "held hostage to a peace process that does not recognize human rights"; to the mass graves in the Congo; to the street urchins and the landless; to the disappeared in Mexico; to the 3,000 Americans on death row or the women in US prisons who give birth in chains. Could it be that such abuses were of no interest because they were not quoted on the London or New York stock markets?

This rammed home one of the themes of the defenders' summit, namely the threat from globalization. It found an echo from President Chirac, who also spoke out against social and economic exclusion, and called on the UN to develop a new set of rules to cover the new technology, ensure privacy, and protect the environment.

Some were struck by the sight of President Chirac praising the heroism of human rights defenders and applauding as Aung Sang Suu Kyi deplored the Burmese junta. He listened attentively as Sane denounced capitalism and Bautista berated the government of Colombia (with which France has reasonably cordial relations). All in all, it was not hard to feel that the defenders had imposed their agenda on their French hosts. If this holds, it will elevate the importance of the defenders' agenda in the UN, and ensure French patronage for the plan of action and declaration in the months to come.

The other, more skeptical view is that the French have pulled off a smooth public relations coup. As one solitary heckler pointed out in the only discordant moment, France's own human rights

record leaves a lot to be desired. At this very meeting, the International Federation for Human Rights has accused the huge French company Total of providing support for the detested Burmese Junta by helping to build a gas pipeline to Thailand. France's record in Central Africa is dreadful, and two weeks ago the French government assured the Congolese president Laurent Kabila that he could attend the Franco-African summit without fear of arrest – a striking contrast with the way that Britain has grasped the nettle and opened the way to Pinochet's extradition to Spain. Kabila's suppression of human rights defenders has been savagely denounced here this week.

All of this underscores that it will take a huge effort to turn the rhetoric into action. For the moment, however, it is time to savor 50 years of one of history's great documents.

In spite of its slim volume, the Universal Declaration manages to mean many things to many people, while at the same time possessing a rock-solid moral core. Anna Roosevelt put it eloquently, while reminiscing about her grandmother. Eleanor, she said, had always seen the Declaration as a gift to future generations. For Anna herself (born in 1948) "it begins in small places: at home, or in respect for neighbors, for co-workers, and for our own children. Supporting their development helps us to understand how to give strength to people far away who we may never know. We are at peace. We are more dignified. We become more beautiful."

### **Cuban Youth Leader Arrested and Prevented from Attending Defenders' Summit**

In yet another comment on the threat that human rights defenders pose to repressive governments, Cuba has arrested a prominent Cuban activists, Nestor Rodriguez Lobaina, and prevented him from attending the Defenders' Summit currently taking place in Paris.

According to Amnesty International, which issued an "Urgent Action" on behalf of Lobaina on Wednesday, Lobaina was arrested with his father on Monday after organizing a protest against the government's refusal to allow him to leave for Paris. Lobaina is president of the Movimiento de Jovenes Cubanos por la Democracia (MJCD) and is considered a prisoner of conscience by Amnesty. He has been detained by the Technical Department for Investigation in Havana, and is reported to have gone on a hunger strike for the duration of the Paris Defenders' Summit.

In an open letter to the Conference, Lobaina stated: "The Cuban people have been denied the opportunity to create an economic, political, and judicial structure which would allow the integral development of the human being."

Lobaina is well known as a critic of the Cuban government. In 1996 he was arrested in connection with the efforts of the MJCD to organize university reform, and sentenced to five years in internal exile. On April 8, 1997 of this year, he was sentenced to 18 months in jail for the crimes of "disrespect" and resisting authority. Lobaina had criticized a government youth and student festival.

- (See below for an article on Amnesty's Urgent Action program)

## **Urgent Action Saves Lives**

by Willem Offenberg

It was in a pizza-restaurant, in the seventies, in downtown London that a new technique was developed by young human rights campaigners. Their goal: to immediately act once an arrest is reported and a detainee's life seems threatened – anywhere in the world.

Twenty-five years later, this quick method of intervention – formerly by telex or letter, nowadays via fax or email – is widely used by non-governmental organizations (NGOs) and inter-governmental organizations, including the Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights of the United Nations. It has turned out to be a literal lifesaver for many prisoners during the first days of interrogation when the use of torture or mistreatment is most likely.

The Urgent Action strategy was born of frustration and a feeling of impotence over the inability to intervene when intervention is most needed. Amnesty International was a small human rights organization then, based in a cramped office in London, with a few dozen campaigners and researchers. Martin Ennals, Amnesty's first secretary-general, was confronted with hopelessly inadequate action techniques with which to address numerous horror stories. But the young organization was too busy concentrating on the fate of prisoners of conscience to be geared up for immediate action.

The turning point came when Tracy Ullveit-Moe, Amnesty's Brazil researcher in 1973, was received disturbing reports from that country about state terror. There was one case in particular that stirred emotion. During the night of February 15, 1973, in a Sao Paulo suburb, heavily armed military police forced their way into the home of Luiz Basilio Rossi, professor of history at the local university. Without explanation they took him into the darkness, leaving his relatives behind in utter panic and confusion.

It was in this way that many Brazilians "disappeared." The security forces returned to the house of the Rossi-family, surrounded it and even nailed boards across the front door to prevent his wife, Maria Jose, and three young daughters from telling the world what had happened. "We couldn't get out of the house," recalls Maria Jose, "not even out to the street, so I had to write a note to a neighbor without the police seeing."

The message was passed to neighbors through a back window, and then to a priest who in turn handed it to the Bishop of Lins. The Rossi family's smuggled message finally reached London and landed on Ullveit-Moe's desk. She told Martin Ennals and, says Ullveit-Moe, he decided to "solve this problem once and for all." She remembers: "We invited one of our Brazilian contacts, who was in Paris at the time, to come to London and meet myself and Martin Ennals. We spent the entire weekend discussing the problem and concluded that what we needed was a quick action for prisoners in danger, irrespective of whether the appeal was being made for prisoners of conscience."

So the idea for Amnesty's first Urgent Action was born over a pizza in a local restaurant, late at night. Ullveit-Moe: "I suggested the name and Martin accepted it right away. I told him: 'It's an urgent matter, action-related, so let's call it Urgent Action. It implies that something bad is

happening and that we have to act immediately.' We implemented this technique the next day at the secretariat."

The title stuck. Over the last quarter-century, millions of appeals have been sent on behalf of tens of thousands of imprisoned individuals in many countries. It is appreciated by some, but not by others. Says one released prisoner from Sudan: "Government officials smell trouble when appeals start arriving. A name and a stamp from overseas is what counts."

There are now Urgent Action Networks in 78 countries. In the United States, for instance, thousands of individual members, student groups, community chapters, and other organizations make up a huge Urgent Action Network. Thank-you notes from released prisoners encourage the participants, like the following from a non-violent pressure group, Release Political Prisoners (RPP) in Kenya: "I have just finished talking to several members of the RPP who gathered at their office in Nairobi today. They told me to pass a message to all their international supporters. They say a very big THANK YOU to everyone. They were looking at copies of the faxes and letters from all over the world urging the release of Josephine Nyawira Ngengi. She says she is glad she can resume her medical treatment. She says she remains steadfast in the face of all the dangers she and others faced and continue to face."

Two weeks after Professor Rossi's arrest, his wife Maria Jose received a telegram ordering her to come to the military police headquarters in Sao Paulo to "identify her husband's body." On arrival, however, she got a glimpse of her husband alive! She was also shown a pile of letters. The director told her: "Your husband must be a more important person than we thought, because we've got all these letters from all over the world.' Says Maria Jose: 'I immediately wrote another letter to Amnesty, saying that Luiz had been tortured, but that several hundred protest letters had arrived which I believed had saved his life."

After his release, the family left Brazil for Belgium. When they returned, many years later, they set up an Amnesty group in Brasilia. Wearing an Amnesty Urgent Action T-shirt Professor Rossi proclaimed at a recent meeting: "I am an example of your success and a symbol of the importance of continuing your work."

## **Profiles**

### **China:** Wei Jingsheng, the Veteran Dissident

China's Public Enemy No. 1, veteran dissident Wei Jingsheng, is becoming increasingly impatient with "Western appeasement" towards the People's Republic. One year in exile in the US has made him an equally staunch critic of a human rights community "that is turning more and more bureaucratic."

"Terror verdict for dissident: the Chinese Communist Party shows its ugly face once again." On December 13 exactly three years ago, the screaming headline in Der Spiegel reported on the sentence of 14-year prison term that had just been handed to Wei Jingsheng. Amnesty International dubbed his sentence (after a previous period of 14 years in jail, most of it in solitary

confinement) a "judicial farce." For some activists he became the Father of the Democratic Movement in China. He was nominated for the Nobel Peace Prize.

Wei was set free and expelled from China late last year just after a state visit by President Jiang Zemin to the United States. Since then this gregarious 48-year old with his easy smile and husky laugh has been the voice of Chinese dissidents in exile. But his good-humored appearance is deceiving.

He has the following message for those that he terms the "money-grabbing nouveaux riches" in China. "If I had the chance to talk to them I think that within an hour I would convince them that they have to pay more attention to politics. I would say: 'Do you feel secure with your millions? If the Communist Party wants to take your money away, they can in no time.'"

"Among the fundamental rights is the right of property. That right is not, of course, observed in China. First you can lose everything, and second the right of freedom of speech is not allowed in China. So if everything is taken away, you have no power to express disappointment or rebellion. Then you are left with nothing to fight with. Not everybody understands what it means to have rights. This is our work. We have to explain this to people and to convince them."

Is he frustrated not to be able to communicate with his compatriots in China? "That's why I say: the first thing is to get freedom of expression. Without it there is no way to make a population three times bigger than that in Europe understand what it is to have rights."

Actually, he continues, the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) is working in the same direction as dissidents, but not in the same way. By oppressing the Chinese population, the CPP is slowly making the people aware of their human rights and the freedom to speak out.

Wei does not believe in the economic potential of China. He thinks that the market-opportunities are fictitious. "The so-called 'big Chinese market' is a myth. British trade with China is not one-tenth of Britain's trade with Belgium, for example. Clinton said that if the United States maintains commercial links with China we would create job-opportunities for 7000 people. What does that mean in America? It is nothing!"

According to Wei, the Western governments are tricking their electorate. In fact, they are trying to help the communists maintain power. Without a pause he lashes out: "You Westerners are not doing your job promoting human rights. And you defenders of human rights in Europe have to do more work on your own governments!"

"We must absolutely use political pressure to fight the CCP. There is no other way. If it takes 18 years" (Wei's time in prison) "to free one freedom fighter, and there are a few thousand freedom fighters in jail, then count how long it will take to secure their release! We must use politics to end imprisonment."

China has signed human rights covenants such as the one on Civil and Political Rights. Does this mean that Western pressure on Beijing is working? "No. Pressure from Western countries is very important. But it should not be aimed only at making the Chinese sign a few covenants. I have

the feeling that many human rights fighters are afraid to offend their own political leaders, and because of that many are playing tricks. This is dangerous. At least one very important human rights organization in the United States is now talking like the government, saying that the situation in China is getting better and that human rights are more respected. It is using donations to make propaganda for the CCP! This is really most worrying."

Referring to some of the speeches in the Palais de Chaillot during the Defenders' Summit in Paris, he says: "We are not diplomats. We are working to fight for human rights. I think most human rights defenders are becoming more and more like diplomats. It is a kind of competition. But we must not become bureaucrats. Maybe it has to do with raising money. If you raise money, but are not doing anything with it, then why raise money?"

"I have noticed that in some human rights organizations the leaders have become more bureaucratic than the governments. If you hear them speak you don't know who's talking – a government or an NGO? It seems that the spirit of the old days has gone. We need more activism. These organizations cease to be human rights groups the moment they lose their activists. There are so many bureaucrats in this world already – who needs more?"

**Uganda:** James Otto on Insurgency and Human Rights  
by Laurie S. Wiseberg

Under the Presidency of Yoweri Museveni, Uganda has slowly been moving towards democracy and rule of law, and erasing the image of barbarism associated with the reign of President Idi Amin Dada. However, in the Gulu District of northern Uganda, a war of insurgency has continued throughout the decade. "In a situation of armed conflict," says James A.A. Otto, "everyone is vulnerable to human rights violations."

Otto founded his own rural-based NGO, the Human Rights Focus Uganda, to expose the abuses in Gulu. In August 1996, Human Rights Focus released a report which graphically described how two officers of the Uganda Peoples Defense Forces (UPDF) – a Colonel and a Major – incited a mob in the market square in Gulu to kill two suspected rebels by beating the men to death with iron bars and stones.

Two others were threatened with lynching, but were spared by the mob. One was a 15-year-old student, abducted by the Lord's Resistance Army, who managed to escape before being caught by the UPDF. The second was a well-known local tailor, who had been picked up by the military on his way home. (The tailor was subsequently killed, though no details are provided in the report.)

Human Rights Focus took the second two cases to the Uganda High Court, winning compensation for victims and their families (in the case of the student, for illegal arrest). While the amounts awarded by the Court were nominal, the victories were symbolic. It is through such actions that peasants are taught that they have rights and can fight for them, explained Otto.

He then elaborated. Human Rights Focus Uganda deals with three types of violations. First, there are those caused by ignorance, which are largely violations in the household, where neither the

victim nor the violator realizes that rights are being violated. Second, there are those caused by neglect (e.g., a father failing to provide for his family, though he knows he has an obligation to do so). Third, there are those violations where the perpetrators are aware of the violations they are committing – that is, violations by those in power. Where the state is at fault and the rule of law can be brought into play, Human Rights Focus Uganda urges peasants to take their cases to court. With respect to the first two instances, education is the strategy adopted.

Otto, now retired, was first a teacher in business administration and then a public servant. He plunged into human rights as a result of his political activism. He was imprisoned from 1981 to 1985 by the Obote regime for being an outspoken advocate of pluralism and democracy. But no charges were ever laid against him and he never went on trial. He became an Amnesty International prisoner-of-conscience.

Otto was kept in Luzira Upper Prison. Conditions were terrible. The prison was built to hold 600, but which actually housed 3,000 during the years he was incarcerated. What kept him alive, he said, was the food, clothes, and bedding provided by the Red Cross. "Had it not been for that, it would have been survival of the fittest."

He is concerned about the problems still confronting Uganda. The biggest challenge in the Gulu region stems from the children who have been abducted by the Lord's Resistance Army (LRA) and coerced into fighting. Numbers are hard to cite with certainty, but Otto puts it at 10,000.

After such children are freed – whether they escape from, or were turned loose by, the rebels – they end up in the hands of the Ugandan army for debriefing. This usually means they are held at UPDF barracks, sometimes for months. (Human Rights Focus Uganda does not deal directly with their rehabilitation, which is done by World Vision International and the Gulu Support the Children Organization.)

Equally troubling to Otto is the poverty, corruption, and violence in Uganda – and the impact on human rights defenders. "Corruption," says Otto, "deprives people from getting the services the government should be providing; and an impoverished population is highly vulnerable to human rights abuses."

Moreover, he explains, "if we want to make people conscious of their rights, we have to feed them. And to feed our people we need peace. All these things are interrelated." Uganda was once a breadbasket: feeding not only Ugandans, but also Uganda's neighbors. "We have fertile land and strong people, and we should be able to feed ourselves. But corruption is rampant and the army absorbs 40 percent of the national budget." With peace, development, and human rights so closely intertwined, there is certainly plenty of work for Human Rights Focus Uganda in Gulu province.

The Child Soldiers of Gulu are documented in a September 1997 report of Amnesty International: "Breaking God's Commands – The Destruction of Childhood by the LRA."

**Russia:** Ella Poliakova on the Menace to Russian Conscripts  
by Manisha Thomas

The once-proud Russian army is in crisis, suffering from the malaise that affects all post-totalitarian Russia.

Three thousand young soldiers are being killed each year during peacetime. They are abused, starved, used as labor, forced into drug trafficking and the arms trade, and subjected to torture. Much of this is caused by officers trying to profit from conscripts who have no choice but to follow orders or face abuse and torture.

Military service is compulsory for men in Russia when they reach the age of 18. Russia is not unique in its conscription law, but in Russia young men who look 18 are being snatched in public from metro stations by police. While some of them are draft-dodgers, many are younger boys. Some are as young as 13. Often, weeks pass before they can contact their families to let them know where they are. Men who have had legitimate medical reasons for not serving have been forced to serve, despite the objections of doctors outside of the military.

Many do not know that there are ways to fight back. Ella M. Poliakova and nine others founded the Soldiers' Mothers of St. Petersburg in 1991. It was not a particular incident in her life that motivated Poliakova to found the organization, so much as the realization that there was a need to be filled. She felt that civil society could help to counter the militaristic tendencies of post-totalitarian Russia and help the youth of Russia. This commitment to improving Russian society has provided the impetus for her work as co-chair of the organization.

According to Poliakova, soldiers in the army are facing "slave-like conditions." There is abuse, both physical and mental, resulting in psychological illnesses. Many cases have been reported of soldiers being used for free labor in factories or to perform services for higher officers. They move boxes in factories during the night and remove manure from horse factories, but receive no compensation for their work. One conscript, a wood carver, has never even carried a gun because his job - in the Army! - has been to carve wood and build apartments for higher officers. Yet under article 37 of Russia's federal law on military service, officials are not allowed to "give orders that are not related to...military service."

Soldiers' Mothers of St. Petersburg aims to raise awareness of such laws and of human rights through meetings and education campaigns aimed at conscript-age men, those serving in the armies, and their families. A booklet developed by the organization provides an easy reference for soldiers on how to defend their rights. It has helped hundreds of soldiers and potential soldiers argue their cases through legal means to avoid conscription or gain early discharges. Each year, the Soldiers' Mothers of St. Petersburg receive hundreds of letters from soldiers and deserters asking for help to either avoid being drafted or to get an early discharge. Fifty thousand people have sent appeals to the organization since its foundation. As more people learn about their human rights, more will be able to avoid being conscripted on legal grounds.

Poliakova is convinced that human rights can help post-totalitarian Russia move away from its militaristic tendencies. But the roots of conscript abuse lie deep in the economic crisis gripping the country. The drug trafficking and arms trade in the army provides a supplemental income for officers who would otherwise be suffering the same dire economic conditions faced by ordinary

Russians. Yet the chances of the situation in the army changing are slim unless the economic and political conditions in Russia improve.

Until such time, Poliakova will continue her work, despite the threats and the problems created by the government. Currently, the government is trying to force the organization out of its premises. It was pressured by the city administration to move offices once before. Now, the city has increased the monthly rent over 20 times from 492 to 10,792 rubles. Despite these problems, the Soldiers Mothers of St. Petersburg will continue to fight for the young conscripts of Russia and their families.

### **The Paris Declaration: The Human Rights Defenders Summit, 10 December 1998**

We, human rights defenders,

1. **Are gathered** as a World Summit of human rights defenders on the occasion of the fiftieth anniversary of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights at the Palais de Chaillot, a place of symbolic importance where this Declaration was adopted on 10 December 1948 by the Member States of the United Nations;
2. **We are committed** in our daily lives to make a reality of the high aspirations of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights for all people throughout the world of all the rights guaranteed by the international and regional instruments for the protection of human rights;
3. **We insist** that human rights are universal, indivisible and inalienable and represent the birthright of all men, women and children and the common legacy of humanity which binds us and future generations;
4. **We welcome** the fact that, in the last fifty years, the increasing number of organizations and individuals who defend human rights has opened up new possibilities for action and considerably strengthened the influence of human rights defenders at national and international levels.
5. **We believe** that the Universal Declaration of Human Rights represents "a common standard of achievement for all peoples and all nations", and establishes, for the present and the future, principles essential for living in society with respect for human dignity; and that, as such the Universal Declaration constitutes an indisputable moral and legal reference;
6. **We are witnesses** to the fact that in the fact in the fifty years since the adoption of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, "disregard and contempt for human rights" remain the everyday reality in which many people continue to live and that human rights violations take on increasingly varied and complex forms, involving a growing number of actors, particularly economic actors, in the context of globalization;
7. **We affirm that:**

7.1- it is the responsibility of States to ensure the realization of all human rights enshrined in the Universal Declaration of Human Rights and other international and regional human rights instruments,

7.2- human rights are the concern of the international community as recognized in the Vienna Declaration and Plan of Action and it is the responsibility of all in that community, intergovernmental organizations, financial institutions, multinational corporations and private business, to contribute to their realization,

7.3- it is the rights of any individual to protect and promote the human rights enshrined in the Universal Declaration of Human Rights and other international and regional human rights instruments, in conformity with them;

8. **We denounce** the growing disparity between the often dramatic reality of human rights violations in many countries and the rhetorical speeches made by those same States to support their international image;

9. **We denounce** the attempts by certain States to justify or excuse the human rights violations in the name of cultural, religious or historical specificity, or of particular or national security interests; and by misleadingly setting civil and political rights against economic, social and cultural rights and the right to development; or, on the contrary, by denying the value of the latter;

10. **We denounce** economic and social insecurity, which in its most serious and persistent forms leads to extreme poverty and exclusion, and constitutes a violation of human rights; we stress that those who are subject to conditions of extreme poverty are among the principal victims of the full range of human rights abuses and that the efforts they expend in their daily struggle to stay alive place them among human rights defenders;

11. **We denounce** the failure of states to address impunity which constitutes one of the main obstacles to the full respect of human rights and which continues to obstruct the work of human rights defenders; we welcome the creation of the International Criminal Court and call upon States to ratify its Statute immediately and to ensure that it functions efficiently and effectively;

In this spirit,

12. **We affirm** that the realization of all human rights remains today as yesterday, the common aim for which we live, work and act and that we are resolute in our belief that until human rights are respected for all, the peace and security for which we all strive will remain unattainable;

13. **We invite** all people, individually or collectively, to contribute to the realization of the rights guaranteed by the Universal Declaration of Human Rights and other international and regional instruments, as proclaimed in the Declaration for the protection of human rights defenders adopted by the United Nations;

14. **We deplore** the fact that the increase in the number and influence of human rights defenders in the world has been accompanied by a development and systematisation of repressive measures and practices used against them;

15. **We deplore** the fact that in some countries, those systematic measures of repression are such that women and men have no means of promoting and protecting human rights and fundamental freedoms at a national level;

16. **We denounce** in particular the fact that human rights defenders are a target of those whose regimes and practices they condemn; and that, because of their commitment, they are among the victims of summary executions, enforced disappearances, torture, arbitrary detentions, violations of the rights to a fair trial, freedom of opinion, expression, association, assembly, demonstration, movement, the right to privacy, the right to employment and employment rights, the right to housing, health, education and culture and that they are increasingly forced into exile or enforced displacement, or to live in inhuman or degrading conditions;

17. **We condemn** the proliferation of systematic measures and practices used by States to prevent or impede the legitimate work of human rights defenders, -including censorship and seizure or publications, defamation, administrative and police harassment, intimidation, implication in criminal cases, their identification with 'terrorist' groups, restrictions imposed on the creation or registration of associations, the legal and administrative obstacles to the right of access to and dissemination of information, the surveillance and control of access to funding and the use made of such funds, the creation by the authorities of State-controlled non-governmental organizations, reliance on a state of emergency or public order requirements, impunity for the perpetrators of such acts against human rights defenders;

18. **We express** our solidarity with those whose rights are violated without any recourse to mechanisms for the protection of human rights because of the systematic repression of their rights;

19. **We call upon** States to fulfill their obligations under international human rights law and to respect, and enforce respect for, the right to freedom of action for human rights defenders, and to this end:

19.1-**To fulfill** their obligation, in accordance with the Universal Declaration of Human Rights and other international or regional instruments, to which they have freely subscribed, not to impede the free and effective exercise of the right to protect and promote human rights;

19.2-**To adopt** the necessary measures to guarantee this right and protect those exercising it; in particular by ensuring that their national laws are in conformity with the Universal Declaration of Human Rights and other international and regional human rights instruments;

19.3-**And to provide** such protection against acts or omissions of the State, as well as against acts of violence and affronts to human dignity perpetrated by armed groups, private groups or individuals;

20. **We call upon** intergovernmental organizations, international or regional, to protect human rights defenders and to this end, to set up the necessary instruments and mechanisms to guarantee effectively the freedom of action of human rights defenders, and to protect them against all forms of repression; and, in this respect:

20.1-**Welcome** the United General Assembly's adoption finally on 10 December 1998, of the Declaration for the protection of human rights defenders(1), which has been in preparation for thirteen years;

20.2- **Call upon** States to immediately take the necessary measures at national and international levels to ensure the effective implementation of the rights enshrined in that Declaration;

21. **We reaffirm** the fact that the realization of all the rights enshrined in the Universal Declaration of Human Rights is the responsibility of everyone, and we call upon private business, multinational companies and international financial institutions to ensure that their strategies and projects contribute to the implementation of civil, cultural, economic, political and social rights, and do not obstruct the freedom of action of human rights defenders;

22. **Finally, we urge** men and women of all ages and all organs of society to engage in their daily lives in their communities to respect and promote all rights for all people everywhere, and to join us to make of the high aspirations proclaimed by the Universal Declaration of Human Rights a reality for present and future generations.

(1) Declaration on the right and responsibility of individuals, groups and organs of society to promote and protect universally recognized human rights and fundamental freedoms.