

## NGO UPDATE

*To foster communication between 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 Brief. For information on how to submit updates for your organizations, please see the instructions provided at the end of the column.*

### **DITSHWANELO – THE BOTSWANA CENTRE FOR HUMAN RIGHTS**

[www.ditshwanelo.org.bw](http://www.ditshwanelo.org.bw)

DITSHWANELO’s slogan “human rights, not human wrongs,” nicely summarizes their work: the Botswana Centre for Human Rights promotes and protects human rights in Botswanan society. With an emphasis on marginalized and disempowered populations, the Centre educates, trains, counsels, mediates, and researches current human rights issues in Botswana. DITSHWANELO also works to foster solidarity within civil society in southern Africa.

DITSHWANELO has a number of programs through which it promotes and directly provides legal assistance to the poor and unrepresented in Botswana. In Botswana, only defendants in death penalty cases are provided with government-funded lawyers and legal representation is not allowed in customary law courts, where 90 percent of civil cases are heard. DITSHWANELO advocates for access to government-funded lawyers for all criminal defendants and for legal representation to be allowed in customary courts. In addition, DITSHWANELO advocates for criminal defendants on death row, monitors cases involving refugees and asylum seekers, and provides legal aid to other marginalized groups, such as youth with HIV/AIDS, sexual minorities, and indigenous peoples. DITSHWANELO also works toward the abolition of the death penalty in Botswana.

In order to address the multitude of legal problems facing AIDS orphans (especially young women) in Botswana, DITSHWANELO published an Inheritance Booklet in December 2004. This booklet, available in both Setswana and English, explains how to write a will. DITSHWANELO uses this booklet to educate HIV/AIDS-stricken families on securing their lands and personal property for orphans upon the death of their parents.

### **HUMAN RIGHTS EDUCATION INSTITUTE OF BURMA (HREIB)**

[www.hreib.org](http://www.hreib.org)

The Human Rights Education Institute of Burma (HREIB), based on the Thai-Burma border, works with Burma’s diverse communities to facilitate community trainings and advocate for basic human rights, women’s rights, children’s rights, community organizing, democratic leadership, and transitional justice. HREIB’s trainings and advocacy programs aim to promote public awareness of international human rights law, including UN mechanisms and key human rights treaties. Toward this end, HREIB trains grassroots activists, community leaders, women, sexual minorities, migrant workers, and youth, who then become trainers themselves.

Looking ahead to the day when Burma transitions to democracy, HREIB initiated the Transitional Justice Program in 2001. Through this program, HREIB staff work with local communities to initiate a dialogue on developing ways to deal with perpetrators and victims of human rights abuses. HREIB also conducts trainings with communities to examine comparative cases of transitions to democracy.

Given HREIB’s close connections with Burmese refugees, migrant workers, and community organizers living in areas of Thailand recently hit by the tsunami, in January 2005, HREIB initiated a tsunami relief effort aimed at Burmese living in the southern provinces of Thailand, including Phuket and Phang Nga. In collaboration with other organizations, HREIB provided food, water, clothing, and medical assistance to many of the communities, as well as legal

assistance to help Burmese acquire migrant worker registration cards. HREIB also organized an effort to identify the bodies of Burmese migrant workers and hold religious ceremonies to help the communities cope with their grief after so much loss of life. For more information on this relief effort, please see [www.saydanatsunami.org](http://www.saydanatsunami.org).

### **EARTHRIGHTS INTERNATIONAL (ERI)**

[www.earthrights.org](http://www.earthrights.org)

EarthRights International (ERI) is a nonprofit organization with offices in the United States and Thailand. ERI’s staff and volunteers consist of activists, organizers, and lawyers with expertise in human rights, the environment, and corporate and governmental accountability. ERI documents, exposes, and publicizes human rights and environmental abuses, helps to organize human rights and environmental activist communities around the world, and trains villagers and refugees to testify about abuses at the United Nations and other international agencies. In addition, ERI brings lawsuits on behalf of people whose rights have been violated by governments and transnational corporations. ERI is currently working in partnership with other legal organizations and private lawyers on several cases, and has also recently filed amicus curiae briefs in other cases.

ERI uses the Alien Torts Claim Act (ATCA) to litigate cases, including its landmark case, *Doe v. Unocal*, filed in 1997. The plaintiffs in the *Doe v. Unocal* lawsuit were Burmese peasants who suffered a variety of abuses, including forced relocation, forced labor, rape, torture, and murder, at the hands of Burmese army units that were securing a Unocal gas pipeline in Burma. For the first time, a U.S. federal court found that corporations and their executive officers could be held legally responsible under the ATCA for violations of international human rights norms in foreign countries, and that U.S. courts have the authority to adjudicate such claims. Nonetheless, the District Court later dismissed the case in 2000, holding that Unocal could not be held liable unless it intended the army units to commit the

abuses. The plaintiffs appealed and the U.S. Court of Appeals for the Ninth Circuit decided to hear the case. Unocal settled the case in December 2004.

### MARÍA ELENA CUADRA: MOVEMENT OF WORKING AND UNEMPLOYED WOMEN (MEC)

[www.mec.org.ni](http://www.mec.org.ni)

María Elena Cuadra (MEC) was founded in 1994 by a group of women workers in Nicaragua who were dissatisfied with the male-dominated trade unions and frustrated by their lack of employment options. MEC began with the goal of improving labor conditions through a model of woman-to-woman labor rights training, direct negotiation with employers, and legal and political advocacy. Their work soon expanded to provide for the needs of

women beyond the factory door, including employment training, small business development, preventive health education, and housing improvement loans.

MEC's work is focused in the "free trade zones" of *maquiladoras*, or assembly plants, which make goods for export. MEC currently has over 70,000 women members in the provinces of Managua, Granada, León, Estelí, Chinandega, and Juigalpa. MEC members include workers in over 100 *maquiladoras*, mineworkers, domestic workers, and unemployed women. The women organize a yearly national colloquium that brings together workers, employers, policymakers, and the press to discuss ways to improve the working conditions of women without endangering foreign investment and employment opportunities. Through this collaborative process, MEC successfully con-

vinced the Nicaraguan Parliament to pass three amendments to national labor laws, including labor standards enforcement initiatives and an increase in the minimum wage for workers in the *maquiladoras*.

*The Human Rights Brief is accepting submissions for the next edition of "NGO Update." If your organization has an event or situation it would like to publicize, please send a short description to [hrbrief@wcl.american.edu](mailto:hrbrief@wcl.american.edu), and include "NGO Update" in the subject heading of the message. Please limit your submission to two paragraphs. The Human Rights Brief reserves the right to edit for content and space limitations.*

**HRB**

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region, particularly as related to elections. The bill states that some prior elections were not free and fair because of voter intimidation, unlawful detentions of opposition party supporters, disappearances, and killings.

The bill acknowledges the Ethiopian government's efforts to hold democratic elections through its willingness to re-run the 2000 parliamentary elections in fourteen constituencies. The bill further commends the Ethiopian government's choice to increase private media sources and encourage dialogue amongst opposing governmental parties. The bill, however, acknowledges that Ethiopian civilians still require civic education about their democratic rights and duties. It also calls for the prosecution and penalization of local and regional officials engaged in intimidation and harassment of opposition party leaders.

Because of the continuing need to ensure future fair and free elections in Ethiopia, H.R. 5321 authorizes the President, acting through the Administrator of the United States Agency for International Development, to provide assistance to non-governmental organizations on a grant basis for activities related to monitoring the May 2005 national elections. The bill authorizes the President to appropriate \$10,000,000 for such purposes for fiscal year 2005. This

bill saw no further movement in the 108<sup>th</sup> Congress and has not yet been reintroduced in the 109<sup>th</sup> Congress.

#### **S.2939, ASSISTANCE FOR ORPHANS AND OTHER VULNERABLE CHILDREN IN DEVELOPING COUNTRIES ACT**

**Sponsor:** Senator Richard Lugar (R-IN)

**Status:** Read twice before the Senate and referred to the Committee on Foreign Relations on October 7, 2004.

**Substance:** This bill amends the Foreign Assistance Act of 1961 to provide assistance for orphans and other vulnerable children in developing countries. The bill acknowledges that more than 110,000,000 orphans live in sub-Saharan Africa, Latin America, Asia, and the Caribbean and that the HIV/AIDS crisis has created an unprecedented orphan crisis, leaving 14,000,000 children who have lost one or both of their parents to AIDS.

The bill would authorize the President to provide basic care and services for vulnerable children, either directly or through non-governmental or international organizations. One measure would increase support to families and communities to assist them in mobilizing their resources. The bill would establish community-based organizations to assure basic care for these children. It also

proposes aid for school food programs that would increase primary school enrollment by eliminating fees and other barriers, and provide employment and training for children of working ages. The bill promotes and protects inheritance rights for widows and orphaned or vulnerable children, and it provides culturally appropriate psycho-social support. Finally, the bill includes increased access to pharmaceuticals, pediatric-specific technologies, and recruitment and training for pediatric treatments.

Under S.2939, Congress would authorize the President to carry out the efforts mentioned with as yet unspecified funds for the fiscal years 2005 and 2006. In creating the strategy, the President should consult with employees in the field missions of the United States Agency for International Development. Up to one year after the submission of the strategy plan and annually thereafter, the bill would require the President to submit a report on the implementation of the Act. This bill saw no further movement in the 108<sup>th</sup> Congress and, although there has been discussion about reintroducing it in the 109<sup>th</sup> Congress, it has yet to be reintroduced.

**HRB**

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