

## **MEDIA ADVISORY**

### **Delegation to visit embassies on Human Rights Day, urge release of activists**

7 December – This International Human Rights Day, 10 December, CIVICUS: World Alliance for Citizen Participation and Amnesty International South Africa (AISA) will deliver hundreds of appeals signed by people from over 80 countries to the Pretoria embassies of Ethiopia, China, Iran, Syria and Mexico, urging the release of imprisoned civil society activists.

*“Peaceful civil society activism should be celebrated, not criminalised. Sadly, many courageous human rights defenders are currently in prison around the world - charged and sentenced for their vital work. This International Human Rights Day, we call for their freedom,”* said Clare Doube, Manager of the Civil Society Watch programme at CIVICUS.

As part of the joint campaign, Civil Society Behind Bars, the freedom of 21 activists in 15 countries has been fought for over the past two years. So far, eight of the activists have been released.

*“I wish to state my deep gratitude for your demonstration of solidarity towards me and all the remaining Cuban prisoners of conscience...As you can imagine, your actions filled me with deep emotion,”* wrote René Gomez Manzano, an activist who was part of the campaign. He was released in February 2007.

*“This Human Rights Day, we start a year long celebration of the 60th anniversary of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights. These cases unfortunately reflect the tragic lack of respect many countries hold for the UDHR, but they have an opportunity to show their commitment to the document by releasing these prisoners of conscience”* said Linda Mafu, Director of Amnesty International South Africa.

The activists in detention include:

**Netsanet Demissie and Daniel Bekele (ETHIOPIA)**, both coordinators of the **Global Call to Action against Poverty** campaign. Netsanet is also the head of **Organisation for Social Justice in Ethiopia**, and Daniel is a manager at **Action Aid International Ethiopia**. They were both detained in **November 2005**, and are currently being tried on the charge of **“Outrage against the Constitution or the Constitutional Order.”** Their verdict is due on **24 December**.

**Chen Guangcheng (CHINA)**, a blind activist and self-trained legal advisor, has assisted local villagers in Linyi City, Shandong province in their attempt to sue local authorities for conducting a brutal campaign of forced sterilisations and abortions in pursuit of birth quotas. Chen was sentenced to four years and three months in prison on 24 August 2006 on charges of "damaging public property and gathering people to block traffic."

**Diego Acros Meneses (MEXICO)** is an indigenous community leader, catechist (religious instructor) and health promoter. On 17 February 2007, he was charged with murder and belonging to a criminal organisation, based on a faulty investigation process. He now faces being held in custody for a year or more, while his trial takes place.

**Nusheen Ahmadi Khorasani, Shahla Entesari, Parvin Ardalan, Fariba Davoodi Mohajer, Sussan Tahmassebi & Azadeh Forghani (IRAN)** are women's rights activists who organised a peaceful protest in June 2006 and a campaign calling for

an end to discriminatory laws against women. In April 2007, they were sentenced to prison terms and suspended sentences ranging from six months to three years for threatening “national security.”

**Mutabar Tojiboyeva (UZBEKISTAN)**, head of the human rights group, Ardent Hearts, in the eastern city of Fergana, was detained on 7 October 2005 following the unrest in Andijan. Mutabar was sentenced to eight years in prison on 30 May 2006, on 13 charges, including threatening public order, fraud, theft, blackmailing local businessmen and tax avoidance.

**Kamal al-Labwani (SYRIA)** is a civil society activist, physician, artist and writer. He was arrested on arrival at Damascus airport on 8 November 2005, after time in Europe and the USA. On 29 May 2006, he was charged with “weakening national morale” and “conspiring with a hostile nation to attack Syria”. On 10 May 2007, he was sentenced to 12 years in prison.

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#### **For more information**

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