



human rights *first*

January 10, 2007

The Hon. Dr. Condoleezza Rice
Secretary of State
The State Department
Washington D.C.

Headquarters
333 Seventh Avenue
13th Floor
New York, NY 10001
Tel: 212.845.5200
Fax: 212.845.5299

Washington D.C. Office
100 Maryland Avenue, N.E.
Suite 500
Washington, DC 20002
Tel: 202.547.5692
Fax: 202.543.5999

www.humanrightsfirst.org

Dear Secretary Rice:

Human Rights First welcomes the “Guiding Principles on Non-Governmental Organizations” you announced at the State Department on December 14, 2006 as part of a set of initiatives to commemorate the 58th anniversary of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights. We share your belief that the contributions of human rights defenders are essential to building societies in which basic rights and freedoms are respected, and we welcome your leadership in supporting this important work.

The Guiding Principles are an important reaffirmation of the international human rights standards that provide the legal basis for the work of human rights activists and the freedoms of expression, assembly and association – including the right to receive financial support from domestic, foreign and international entities – without which human rights defenders cannot function freely and effectively. We were pleased that Assistant Secretary of State Barry Lowenkron attended the Human Rights Defenders Policy Forum we co-hosted with the Carter Center in Atlanta last May. While there he heard from a diverse group of human rights defenders that increased U.S. government support for their work is vital. We hope that meeting contributed to the guiding principles and will help inform your future work on behalf of human rights defenders.

The value of the guiding principles will depend, to a large degree, on the extent to which they are applied in practice in situations where the treatment of human rights defenders by other governments falls short of these standards. We write today to highlight two current cases of particular concern in which intervention by the United States would demonstrate a commitment to implement the Guiding Principles in practice.

First, in Russia, on January 23, 2007, the Federal Supreme Court in Moscow will hear the appeal against an order to close the human rights organization, the Russian

Chechen Friendship Society (RCFS) issued by a court in Nizhny Novgorod on October 13, 2006. The organization has suffered a long history of threats, harassment and attacks that appear designed to silence its work as one of the few remaining independent organizations reporting on human rights violations in the context of the ongoing conflict in Chechnya and the North Caucasus. The pressure exerted against the RCFS by the Russian government violates several of the principles you set forth on December 14, 2006. Enforcing the closure of the RCFS would send a chilling message to other human rights defenders in Russia, particularly in the aftermath of the unsolved killing of the eminent journalist and activist Anna Politkovskaya. We ask you to urge the Russian government to uphold basic freedoms of expression and association, and cease harassment and interference with the work of independent human rights organizations. The closure order against the RCFS should be lifted, and a February 2006 conviction against its director, Stanislav Dmitrivesky, on spurious charges of "inciting ethnic hatred" should be annulled.

Second, in Colombia, Príncipe Gabriel González Arango, Regional Co-ordinator of the independent human rights organization the Political Prisoners Solidarity Committee (*Fundacion Comité de Solidaridad con los Presos Políticos* (FCSPP)) has now been imprisoned for over one year. Since January 4, 2006, Mr González has been detained in Bucaramanga, Santander Department, falsely accused of rebellion and of being a FARC guerrilla. Mr González and the FCSPP have endured a series of attacks and threats which appear calculated to deter them from performing their legitimate non-violent activities as human rights defenders. We believe that the rebellion charges against Mr González are specious and rest largely on evidence that lacks plausibility and credibility. The legal proceedings against him appear to be politically motivated and in breach of several of the Guiding Principles. We ask that you urge the Colombian Attorney-General's office to drop the charges against Mr González, release him from prison and desist from the all-too-common practice of instigating baseless legal proceedings against FCSPP leaders and other human rights defenders.

We appreciate your leadership in this area and look forward to working with the U.S. government to ensure that the Guiding Principles and all international standards that uphold the rights of human rights defenders are implemented in practice.

Sincerely,



Maureen Byrnes,
Executive Director

cc.

The Hon. Dr. Paula Dobriansky, Under Secretary of State for Democracy and Global Affairs.
Barry Lowenkron, Assistant Secretary of State, Bureau of Democracy, Human Rights and Labor