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US Human Rights Network presents report on Katrina abuses to UN committee

GENEVA, TUESDAY, JULY 11, 2006 – The US Human Rights Network (USHRN) on Monday presented a report to the United Nations Human Rights Committee that details violations of an international covenant by the United States in the wake of hurricanes Katrina and Rita. The U.N. committee is meeting in Geneva this week to review compliance with the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights (ICCPR), which the U.S. ratified in 1992.

The report notes that the ICCPR creates obligations to protect life and property and sets forth principles of non-discrimination that the U.S. failed to uphold during various phases of the Katrina/Rita crises. “The unnecessary loss of life resulting from Hurricane Katrina and the discriminatory nature of evacuation plans for New Orleans Parish constitute human rights violations,” said USHRN executive director Ajamu Baraka. “The facts are simple: The U.S. knew of the threat to life from Hurricane Katrina and its associated flooding in New Orleans, but it failed to protect the lives of its residents.”

The U.N. review is a routine procedure that is supposed to occur every four years for countries that have ratified the ICCPR, one of two treaties that together are equivalent to an international “Bill of Rights.” But the U.S. review – its second – is more than seven years late due to the State Department’s delay in submitting its own official report. Last year, the U.N. warned that it would commence reviewing the U.S. without the official report if it were delayed any longer. The State Department submitted its official report on October 21, 2005.

In response, a coalition of 142 U.S.-based non-profits and organizations and 32 individuals submitted 22 “shadow reports” to the U.N. committee, including the USHRN report on Katrina. Together they comprise a comprehensive assessment of human rights violations in the United States that is unprecedented in its scope. “It is past time for the U.S. and the international community to recognize that human rights violations do not only occur outside our borders,” Baraka says. “These reports offer a perspective that is entirely missing from the official State Department analysis.”

The reports underscore the common theme that binds these human rights violations together: an unstated policy of “U.S. exceptionalism.” Before ratifying the treaty, Congress attached various “reservations, understandings and declarations” limiting the application of the treaty within the U.S. The coalition members point to these limitations on the treaty, the State Department’s reluctance to participate in the U.N. process, and the ongoing human rights violations in the United States as a systemic pattern of ignoring international human rights obligations.

Representatives from the US Human Rights Network are attending the Geneva meetings to emphasize that U.S. officials must take legal and political responsibility for the human rights violations associated with Hurricane Katrina. On July 17-18, representatives of the State Department and other federal agencies are expected to answer questions from the committee, which is expected to release its findings on July 28.

Last May after hearings held by the U.N.'s Committee Against Torture – an international review process similar to the current hearing – the committee demanded that the U.S. close the prison at Guantanamo.

The US Human Rights Network is a coalition of more than 210 U.S.-based organizations and 400 individuals working on the full spectrum of human rights issues. For more information or to view all 22 shadow reports, please visit our website: www.ushrnetwork.org

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