

Human Rights Watch Honors Global Rights Defenders

Activists From Mexico, Nepal, Zimbabwe Recognized

(New York, October 18, 2006) – Human Rights Watch will give its highest honor on November 2 to three leading activists working to defend human rights in Mexico, Nepal and Zimbabwe.

“The activists we honor have shown dedication to the cause of human rights. They have worked courageously, often in life-threatening environments, to expose rights abuses in their countries.”

Kenneth Roth, executive director of Human Rights Watch

Human Rights Watch works closely with these courageous, brave individuals as part of its defense of human rights in more than 70 countries around the world.

“The activists we honor have shown dedication to the cause of human rights,” said Kenneth Roth, executive director of Human Rights Watch. “They have worked courageously, often in life-threatening environments, to expose rights abuses in their countries.”

The 2006 Human Rights Watch Annual Dinners in New York, Toronto, Chicago, Los Angeles, Santa Barbara and San Francisco will honor the three activists. Mandira Sharma exposes “disappearances” and indiscriminate attacks against civilians in Nepal. Verónica Cruz fights for the right of rape victims to receive the safe abortions they are entitled to under Mexican law. Arnold Tsunga takes legal action against the forced displacement of hundreds of thousands of people in Zimbabwe.

“All three of this year’s honorees share the fight to build and preserve civil society in their home countries,” said Roth. “We salute their bravery in putting their lives on the line to seek justice and preserve basic human rights.”

Human Rights Watch is a nonprofit, international monitoring group with headquarters in New York. It accepts no financial support from any government.

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The 2006 Human Rights Watch Honorees are:

[Mandira Sharma, Nepal](#)

Mandira Sharma is a Nepali lawyer and human rights activist who co-founded Advocacy Forum, one of Asia's most respected and effective human rights organizations. Sharma works to publicize human rights abuses and provide legal support to Nepali activists, many of whom have been targeted by the government.

Sharma's efforts have been critical to the pursuit of justice for abuses committed by both the Royal Nepali Army and Maoist rebels during a civil war that has plagued Nepal for nearly a decade. In the face of entrenched ineptitude and corruption in the Nepali court system, Sharma continues to file and win cases on behalf of human rights activists who have been arbitrarily detained, tortured, and "disappeared." She also conducts advocacy to raise awareness about these widespread human rights violations and engages in grassroots outreach to educate the public about their legal rights. Human Rights Watch honors Sharma for representing and defending the Nepali people in the midst of severe political oppression and bloody civil war.

[Verónica Cruz, Mexico](#)

Verónica Cruz is the founder and head of Las Libres, the only organization in the conservative Mexican state of Guanajuato to tackle the issue of access to abortion after rape. In Guanajuato, abortion has been legal in cases of rape for more than 30 years. But due to official negligence, obstruction and a wealth of administrative hurdles, few if any rape victims in Guanajuato have ever obtained a state-provided abortion. Cruz leads the fight against this injustice by connecting rape victims with medical and legal aid, training youth to hold health workshops for peers, and challenging policy-makers to ensure real access to abortion as allowed under the law. Cruz's efforts, and those of her colleagues at Las Libres, have put the lack of access to abortion after rape on the national agenda, making it impossible for the government to continue to turn a blind eye to the plight of pregnant rape victims. Human Rights Watch honors Cruz for her unwavering dedication to protecting the physical integrity and autonomy of women all over Mexico.

[Arnold Tsunga, Zimbabwe](#)

Arnold Tsunga stands on the frontlines of the struggle for human rights in Zimbabwe, where the government has pursued a massive campaign of forced evictions and demolitions, obstructed humanitarian assistance, and intimidated political opponents.

As the executive director of Zimbabwe Lawyers for Human Rights (ZLHR), Tsunga heads a small and extremely effective staff of lawyers, as well as a network of around 200 members of the legal community who offer their services on a part-time, pro bono basis. Though he has been beaten, arrested and threatened at gunpoint, Tsunga is tireless in his support of those who risk their own lives to denounce the deteriorating state of human rights in Zimbabwe. He visits police stations to secure the release of activists,

stands in court with outspoken opponents of the government, and speaks out against the abduction, harassment and arbitrary detention of countless others. Human Rights Watch honors Tsunga for his steadfast commitment to those who fight for human rights in Zimbabwe.