

1. Talk platform ml fri 16th

Minister, Excellencies, High Commissioner and Friends,

I am so happy to welcome you to Dublin . Many of you have made long and arduous journeys to be with us here today, and we are truly grateful. In many ways it is apt that today is Thanksgiving day – on Thanksgiving, families and friends in North America gather for a reunion, a day of thanks, and a festive meal. So dear human rights defenders, I want to thank you for your unquenchable spirits and impossible hope as you work for the rights and dignity of the voiceless -the most powerless, the most poor, the most vulnerable and the most marginalised people of the world. We value you and pledge to do our utmost to help try and protect you - we are mindful that the situation for hrds is getting worse .

In the context of the so called "war on terror" many governments have instigated or escalated legislative and administrative initiatives that seek to control the activities of human rights defenders and other independent voices under the pretext of national security. Such initiatives portray the human rights struggle as being against the 'interests of the state' and brand those involved as 'traitors' or 'terrorists'.

Many Governments have also been using more sophisticated strategies to try to control the activities of human rights defenders including denial of legal registration, an increase in bureaucratic regulation and reporting as well as fabricated legal cases on non-political charges such as fraud or tax offences that can tie up people and financial resources for months or years.

In Ireland, November is the month¹ in which we remember those who are dead. This tradition began in Pagan times with the feast of Samhain and continued in the Christian calendar with All Souls day, which is also celebrated this month.

Since the last platform in 2005 we have lost many friends sadly to many to mention them all. People who, like many here, had devoted their lives to fighting for human rights. We remember **Heraldo Zuñiga and Roger Ivan Cartagena**, members of the Environmental

¹ In case this turns into another 'Christians are always buried with their heads in the west' dispute, the traditional feast of Samhain, and also All Souls Day, both of which celebrate the faithfull departed, fall in November.

Movement of Olancho, who were extrajudicially executed in Honduras in December 2006. National Police Agents murdered the two companeros in front of local residents. These brave men were killed for campaigning to protect their environment and local communities from logging and mining companies. With their deaths, the motto of the Environmental Movement of Olancho-**Because Life is Defended With Life**-rings particularly true.

In February of this year, **Hy Vuthy**, President of the Free Trade Union of Workers of the Kingdom of Cambodia was shot dead by two unidentified gunmen travelling by motorcycle. He is the fourth member of the FTUWKC to be killed in relation to his work with the trade union. Former Presidents of the FTUWKC, Chea Vichea and Ros Sovannareth, were both murdered in similar attacks in 2004.

Somalian Human Rights defender **Isse Abdi Isse** was shot dead last March outside a hotel in which he was staying while attending a human rights seminar on the psychosocial affects of civil war and floods on children. He was the Chairperson of the Kisima Peace and Development Organisation, based in Kismayo, an organisation that promotes and protects human rights and gender equality while using a rights-based approach to empower local communities to become self-sufficient through development.

In June, Iraqi journalist **Sahar Al-Haidari** who was on a death list was murdered in her home town of Mosul. A mother of three children she worked as a news reporter. Sahar courageously documented subjects such as the increasing attacks against women in Iraq, the fears and trauma of the "lost generation" of Iraqi youth, and the escalating bloodshed. Shortly before her death she said that her only wish was that her end would be swift and painless: "One bullet in the heart". Sahar had previously been kidnapped in 2005 by a militant group and escaped by 'miracle' and in 2006 she was shot and badly injured.

Just 2 months ago, in September 2007, **Ricardo Murillo Monge**, Mexican human rights defender and founder of the Sinaloa Civic Front was found dead in the passenger seat of a vehicle having been shot in the head. Ricardo was renowned for working to advance the human rights of prisoners, as well as for bravely exposing grave human rights violations allegedly carried out by the police and military in Mexico. Cases Ricardo took included the killing of three women and two youths who were murdered by soldiers when their family

car approached an army checkpoint in June and families of victims who had allegedly been killed by military soldiers at a barracks.

Just one month ago, **Valmir Mota de Oliveira of the Landless Workers movement** was murdered on 21 October in southwestern Brazil when approximately forty armed men entered the encampment and allegedly began to open fire on the 150 agricultural workers gathered there. Valmir Mota de Oliveira was shot twice in the chest at point-blank range and subsequently died from his injuries. Valmir had been threatened for the previous six months

It is our privilege in Front Line to travel in solidarity to you to witness your work and to respond to whatever security and protection needs you express, as best we can, but everytime I come back, although I am energised, I feel guilty and upset that we cannot do more. In Eastern Congo – a country devastated by violence and poverty . 3.8 million people have already died as a result of the conflict and 1,200 people die every day from disease, including HIVAIDs, as well as from hunger and violence. Thousands have been raped . I met many wonderful human rights defenders working day in day out in heartrending situations in precarious and insecure environments. Deep within me I carry the images of hopelessness – the demobilised young soldiers who come down from the hills to be paid but have to wait around for weeks on borrowed credit with nothing to do ; a little purple coffin carried by an older child with only other children following – no adults; another child in rags whose parents have been massacred living hand to mouth , covered in a skin disease with a distended tummy and eyes full of pain.and the terrible stories of gender based violence against women and children. And in the midst of this, so many grassroots women defenders connected through organisations like SOFAD and AMCAV research and campaign against sexual violence, educate local communities on women and children's rights and lobby the government to deliver justice and reform discriminatory laws. These women human rights defenders face the same security risks that all hrds face but additional risks because of their gender. The message they gave us was “teach us how to protect ourselves – we are always afraid we will be attacked when we go to the villages “. Gege Katana, the winner of the 2007 Front Line Award said she continues the work because ”The women have confidence in me, they come to see me. It is impossible to abandon them. My heart is committed”

In response to requests from women human rights defenders in DRC and

elsewhere we have been trying to strengthen our work on the specific and additional risks faced by women human rights defenders and you will hear later in the platform about the report we are publishing together with Kvinna till Kvinna and Urgent Action Fund on this subject.

We have also been seeking to develop our work together with defenders of lesbian, gay, bi-sexual and transgender (LGBT) rights. They face not only oppression from the authorities because of their human rights work but also hostility from within their societies simply because of who they are .

Unfortunately they also do not always receive much support from other human rights organizations. We were pleased to hold a workshop on security for LGBT defenders just before this platform and we hope that some of the key messages and lessons can be shared and discussed by us all over the next three days.

We wanted Jaber Wishah from the Palestinian Centre for Human Rights to be here but the Israelis have not allowed him to leave Gaza. Jaber spent 15 years in prison and suffered horrific torture. During that time he made the journey from political and military resistance to becoming a human rights defender. PCHR denounces atrocities by all sides, Fatah, Hamas and the Israelis - in their work for the people of Gaza. Board members travelled to Gaza in September to see the situation first hand. Gaza is under blockade. No one can get in or out and hrds cannot meet with colleagues from Israel or the West Bank 70% the population are living below the poverty line - 90% of the factories have shut down because the Israelis have closed all the border crossings and won't allow raw materials or spare parts in or the export of the superb fruit and vegetables out – even to the West Bank . There is a shortage of drugs in the hospitals and the machines are breaking down. 1.5 million people live in an area 6 miles wide by 25 miles long - effectively an open prison where people have been corralled and abandoned by the International community allowing the Israelis to practice collective punishment on a whole people and ensuring that in so doing ensuring that support for Hamas will grow.

As we saw in the video, of the successes this year was the release of Mohammed Abbou from Tunisia after more than 2 years of unjust imprisonment. However although he has received an Irish visa, the Tunisians have blocked him joining us here in Dublin.

We also hoped to have Hu Jia here today.

In China, this year I met Hu Jia who was under house arrest. He and his wife Zeng Zinyan are human rights defenders who work on environmental and HIV/Aids issues. They are gentle and committed people who have been persecuted and monitored since 2002. He and his wife were prevented from travelling abroad last May and in June the police took Zeng Zinyan's passport away.

On November 9th Hu Jia, was leaving his house to visit his pregnant wife at the hospital when he was stopped, beaten by state security officers sustaining injuries to his head and face. But today the news is joyful for them -last week Zeng Zinyan gave birth to this beautiful baby girl.

And today, around noon, we will hear the verdict on Two Ethiopian human rights defenders, Netsanet Demissie and Daniel Bekele, who have been detained since November 2005, Daniel Bekele is the head of Policy and Research and Advocacy Department of ActionAid Ethiopia, and Netsanet Demissie is the Executive Director and co-founder of the Organisation for Social Justice (OSJE). defenders,

Netsanet Demissie and Daniel Bekele were charged with conspiracy and an attempt to overthrow the constitutional order, following a series of demonstrations.

My last trip a few weeks ago was to Colombia - a very dangerous place for human rights defenders - a place where President Uribe stigmatises human rights defenders by saying they are guerrilla supporters or guerrillas thus creating a legitimacy for them to be targetted by death squads including the paramilitary who continue to operate despite the official line that they have been demobilised. The government also use politically motivated criminal charges to harass, detain, stigmatise and endanger the lives of hrds. In Colombia, we met defenders under death threat. A woman defender from Yira Castro went home on 15th Oct to find this threat in her mail box "You are going to die December 24th" Jose Gomez from

(CPDH)The Permanent Human Rights Committee received a threat in September which said” Terrorists like you deserve Death, don’t think that shielding yourself in an NGO is going to save you, son-of-a-bitch guerrilla. We declare you to be a military target and we will be carrying out our threat”.

In September 18 arrest warrants were issued for all but one of the Board members of the the peasant organisation ACVC - 4 of them are already in prison. The have had to elect a new Board. The goal of the ACVC is to fight for a life of dignity of the peasants in the Cimitarra valley but the armed forces and illegal paramilitary groups aligned to the government have targetted peasants in the valley in the last 10 years. We travelled up river to the Cimitarra valley to meet both the new and the former president. The former president is one of the people wanted by the authorities – he told us he did not want to go into hiding as he had done nothing. The new president said “What is most fundamental is the struggle for the right to life; not just life, but a dignified life.

In each of us there is a core of pain which activates when those we love suffer through heartache, serious illness or death. We struggle to make sense and find courage to cope with our natural griefs and the stress that such situations bring. But for human rights defenders who choose the path of exceptional courage, there is another layer of unbearable stress so well described by Sahar the brave Iraqi defender, who just months before her murder said“Our psychological state is unbalanced because we live and think in fear and worry”. So dear friends, you need to find time to soothe and heal the brokenness within., to go as Eckhart describes to that “place in the soul that neither time, nor flesh, nor no creative thing can touch.”

Over the last couple of years many human rights defenders have told us how they need to be able to manage their stress and sustain their well-being in order to be more effective at their work. To this end we hope to develop a program to help human rights defenders stay well, because stress and burnout paralyse at worst and at best make someone ineffecient. Later on there will be feedback from a stress management meeting we held this year but it will be up to you how we develop it . You will have noticed on the agenda that we have introduced some fun options like Tai Chi, Indian Head Massage, Capacitar Training - we also have a psychotherapist here if anyone would like to talk to her. You can sign up for any of this at Registration.

It is always so difficult for me to try to find the words to explain properly what you mean to us in Front Line, how we carry you around like our shadows. I love the name of Mutabar Tadjibaeva's NGO "Club of Fiery Hearts". Mutabar was arrested as she was about to come to the last Platform in 2005 and remains in prison. To me that's what you are fiery hearts filled with passion, compassion and care displaying the kind of unconditional love that Rilke talks about when he said "Love consists in this, /that two solitudes protect, / and touch, and greet each other.

We drown in your spirit, unworthy in our safe privileged lives looking on with awe at the way you live with the smell of fear and the uncertainty of life.

Nowhere is this spirit – your spirit- more evident than in the words of Anna Politkovskaya the Russian HRD murdered in October 2006 because she fearlessly spoke out about violence, poverty and injustice in Chechnya

"So each time I go there, people tell me things. They do so in the sincere hope that, if I record what is actually happening, it will lead to change, to peace. Obviously, I am not to blame for what is going on, but the more I think about it, the more I would be betraying these people if I walked away. The only thing to do is to take this to the bitter end, so that no one can say that when things became difficult, I ran away."

Friends when you feel that your contribution isn't acknowledged and your expertise ignored, remember you do this work because it is a vision beyond you yet of you

You do it and you move from the ordinary to the sublime.

You do it because it earths you in the things that matter and teaches you to let go of the things that don't.

You do it because you burn against injustice. You do it because as Aung San suu Kyi from Burma says "no matter the regime's physical power, in the end they can't stop the people, they can't stop freedom. We shall have our time"

You are golden people who bring light, hope and change to the darkest corners of the world.

Thank you

