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**Front Line Award 2008
West Terrace
United Nations
New York
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**Speech by Mary Lawlor, Director
Front Line**

If only it were as easy as it appears in that splendid piece of animation

Last Friday I was the guest of an Irish human rights defender called Pat Rice who was given an honorary degree by Cork University. Pat Rice spent nearly forty years in Latin America working for the rights of the families of the 'disappeared.' On 11 October 1976 he himself was "disappeared" and tortured because of his work denouncing and reporting the "disappearances" of innocent civilians.

Justin Harman, then third secretary of the Irish embassy in Argentina, hearing of Pat's disappearance, worked to establish his whereabouts. Now Irish ambassador to Moscow, Mr Harman, did not give up. He was the source of a news item in The London Times on 14 October which reported Pat's abduction and led to questions at the United Nations about the whereabouts of this 'disappeared' Irishman.

As we speak Pat is a key-witness in the trial of a police chief accused of a massacre of 20 people. Today in Argentina such testimony is not without danger and Patrick is under police protection. And so 40 years later his struggle continues and through his work those who tortured and "disappeared" are finally brought to justice.

But Patrick is only one of 1500+ hrds from 132 countries on whose behalf we take action whenever needed. These human rights defenders are at risk simply because they stand up for the rights of others

They often face harassment, death threats, torture, defamation in the press,

suspension from their employment, spurious law charges or closure of their associations. Often their families are also targeted and in some countries , they are killed or “disappeared”

Human Rights Defenders must be protected because they are agents of social change who have both the vision and the power to build civil and just societies.

This is why the work of Front Line to protect human rights defenders at risk is so important and why your support is so necessary.

Here in New York, 60 years ago the UDHR was adopted by consensus. Article 1 states “All human beings are born free and equal in dignity and rights: they are endowed with reason and conscience and should act towards one another in a spirit of brotherhood” 60 years on where are we?

It is a sad indictment that every day human rights defenders are still at risk. But at the same time by their courage human rights defenders remind us of what can be achieved by those who refuse to let go of the dream.

People like Aloysius Toe

Aloysius was trapped in Liberia at the height of the civil war. His name was on a death list. He contacted Front Line who helped him hire a small fishing boat . Aloysius hid under the boat during the nightly security sweep and under cover of darkness escaped to freedom. After Charles Taylor was removed from power, Aloysius was able to go back to continue his human rights work.

Because in the end that is our goal – not the heroic gesture or dramatic statement but fast and effective work to help protect human rights defenders and above all to enable them to continue their legitimate human rights work .

Or like Mutabar Tadjibaeva

Mutabar Tadjibaeva founded an organisation to work for women's rights in Uzbekiistan. She was arrested while on her way to 2005 Front Line Dublin Platform for Human Rights Defenders and sentenced to eight years in prison. Mutabar was held in solitary confinement in the psychiatric wing of the prison - forcibly treated with psychotropic drugs and denied access to her lawyer and her family. She developed cancer. They even left a noose in the corner of the cell and told her that she should hang herself.

When all the intensive lobbying of the Uzbek authorities, the UN, the EU, the State Dept failed, we sent Mutabar flowers in prison for her birthday to show her that we had not forgotten her. Against all the odds the flowers were delivered and we heard that for a while at least the conditions had improved.

Just last week we heard that, unexpectedly, Mutabar Tadjibaeva had been released on parole.

Shortly after her release Mutabar Tadjibaeva issued this message.

“Inmates of Uzbek prisons are captives of an island of torture. They are deprived not only of freedom but also of all human rights and liberties. As a former captive of the island of torture who faced all the problems of the system, I believe it is my duty to devote myself to protecting the rights of the prisoners”

There are many more human rights defenders like those shortlisted for this year's Front Line Award which was set up to honour a hrd who had shown exceptional courage

Liu Jie, is a veteran rural campaigner and human rights defender in China who is currently serving 18 months of Re-education through Labour.

In Brazil ,Valdecy dos Santos receives death threats because of his work to protect the environment and the land rights of small farming communities in the Amazon.

Padre Andres Tamayo of the Environmental Movement of Olancho has a price of \$40,000 on his head because of his work against poverty by encouraging sustainable management of the rain forest.

Latifah Anum Siregar a human rights lawyer from Papua has had her office broken into, receives regular threats and there have been several attempts to kidnap her.

And of course the winner of the 2008 Front Line Award is Anwar al-Bunni who is currently serving five and a half years in prison because of his work as a human rights lawyer and because he spoke out about torture in Syrian prisons.

Front Line is fast and flexible in its efforts to protect human rights defenders.

We have a 24 hour emergency line in 5 languages , english,french,spanish arabic and russian. If a human rights defender has been arrested we will ring the prison or the police station. We find out if they need a lawyer or if they have been tortured and need medical attention.

We put pressure the government to release them and we lobby the international community to take action on their behalf.

We provide human rights defenders with training in personal security, risk assessment and information security so that they and their families can manage the risks they face.

Next week Front Line staff will be on mission in Afghanistan to assess the situation for women human rights defenders and train them in security.

But our capacity to respond – to be faster and more effective depends on the strength of our support. Only with your help we can build a truly international movement for the protection of human rights defenders

Nowhere is the unquenchable spirit of human rights defenders more evident than in the words of Anna Politkovskaya, the Russian human rights defender and journalist murdered for her work exposing human rights violations in Chechnya: She said “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.”

That is the spirit that drives the work of Front Line.

New York 13th June 2008 Remarks Mary Lawlor