

From: Visionaries in Action-RFK Memorial  
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**ROBERT F. KENNEDY MEMORIAL**  
 A Center For Human Rights

**VIA- VISIONARIES IN ACTION-** October

VIA is the monthly publication of the Robert F. Kennedy Memorial Center for Human Rights (CHR). It is an overview of the work we do with our partners, the RFK Human Rights Laureates – work that is tailored to complement their projects and contribute to the achievement of their social justice goals.

**A Message from the Director**

"For too much and too long, we seem to have surrendered community excellence and community values in the mere accumulation of material things. Our gross national product . . . if we should judge America by that – counts air pollution and cigarette advertising, and ambulances to clear our highways of carnage. . . . Yet the gross national product does not allow for the health of our children, the quality of their education, or the joy of their play. It does not include . . . the intelligence of our public debate or the integrity of our public officials. It measures neither our wit nor our courage; neither our wisdom nor our learning; neither our compassion nor our devotion to our country; it measures everything, in short, except that which makes life worthwhile. And it tells us everything about America except why we are proud that we are Americans." *Robert F. Kennedy, 1968*

As economic reports for third-quarter earnings come in, most analysts are surprised by the lack of an impact hurricanes Katrina, Rita, and Wilma have had on our country's short-term economic growth. It is important to reflect on RFK's words, especially in these days leading up to our commemoration of his 80th birthday, and to remember that the nation's GNP misses quite a lot of what we Americans value.

Thousands of displaced Americans are homeless as a result of the hurricanes and do not know if they will ever have the opportunity to return to their communities. In farming communities like Immokalee, Florida, crops and homes have been destroyed, further threatening the livelihood of the already destitute farmworkers in the region.

The US government has an obligation under international human rights law, as well as a moral obligation and practical reasons, to involve the intended beneficiaries of government expenditures in the planning and implementation phases of restoration, development, and income-generation projects. So far, this participation has been woefully inadequate. For example, salaries being paid by our federal taxes have not always offered a living wage with health benefits.

RFK challenged Americans to work together to protect the rights of our most vulnerable citizens. This year's RFK Human Rights Award Laureate Stephen Bradberry has been a voice for years for the low-income communities of New Orleans. He has fought to protect the economic, political, and social rights of these marginalized citizens through campaigns targeted at promoting a living wage, preventing predatory lending, preventing lead poisoning in children, and increasing voter participation. With the onslaught of the hurricanes this year, he has been

working tirelessly to unite hurricane survivors to have a voice in the rebuilding of their communities and protect the rights of displaced citizens. For more information, please visit the ACORN site. Citizens and civic leaders like Stephen must make their voices heard and work together with government to make sure the rebuilding process does not lose its focus and devolve into no-bid contracts, corporate handouts, and political favors.

We hope you will join us at our special events on 16 November in DC; alternatively, please tune in via C-SPAN to watch our events and get active to help us live out RFK's legacy of social justice.

Visit the Robert Kennedy 80th Birthday Commemoration Website

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**Delphine Djiraibe (2004, Chad)**

*Advocating for World Bank accountability, corporate social responsibility, access to justice, and governmental transparency in Chad.*

- CHR sent a letter to Senator Dianne Feinstein (D-CA) urging her to withdraw a recent bill she introduced that would have seriously undermined the Alien Tort Claims Act (ATCA), a law that can help hold corporations such as Exxon Mobil liable for its wrong-doing in Chad.
- Exxon Mobil reported the highest profits ever for an American company last quarter. Still, the problems created by Exxon in Chad are worsening, including ongoing environmental issues, inflation, and grave health problems, namely an increase in HIV/AIDS. The CHR issued a response to these issues asking Exxon to take responsibility for the consequences of its actions in Chad. See the Response

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**Coalition of Immokalee Workers (2003, USA)  
Lucas Benitez, Julia Gabriel & Romeo Ramirez**

*Ending modern-day slavery and exploitation of migrant workers in the U.S. agricultural industry.*

- In preparation for a European tour, CHR staff traveled to Immokalee with an Advocacy Team (AT) member to prepare trip strategy. The AT member from the National Economic and Social Rights Initiative produced an informational document, used during the European meetings, relating the economic and legal situation in

- US fields to international standards. See the Document
- CHR staff traveled with several members of the CIW on a highly successful European tour, taking the battle for farmworker human rights across the Atlantic to the birthplace of the fair trade movement. The group traveled to Switzerland, France, the Netherlands, and Norway. Please see [www.ciw-online.org/2005EuropeanTour.html](http://www.ciw-online.org/2005EuropeanTour.html) to view daily reports and pictures from the tour. A highlight of the trip occurred in Oslo, Norway, home of the \$260+ billion Norwegian Petroleum Fund. Recently Norway passed a law requiring the Petroleum Fund to invest its funds ethically. Currently the fund invests in McDonald's and Wal-Mart, both massive consumers of produce picked by underpaid and unprotected farmworkers. The delegation met with the person in charge of ethical oversight, Henrik Syse, to discuss advocacy strategies.
  - Following the tour, Lucas Benitez spoke at Columbia Law School as part of the Bringing Human Rights Home program there. The talk was facilitated by the CHR.
  - On 22 October, CHR staff gave the keynote presentation at the Responsible Endowment Coalition's annual conference of student shareholder activists at the Wharton School of Business. The speech addressed the Taco Bell victory, the changing field of corporate ethics, as well as the need for creative collaboration between consumer and shareholder activists led by grassroots movements.

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**Loune Viaud (2002, Haiti)**

*Realization of the human right to health for all Haitians.*

- CHR staff and AT member Warren Allmand held high-level meetings in Ottawa to discuss Canada's policy toward Haiti and specifically its support for a new mechanism for the international community to concretely contribute to improving the human rights situation in Haiti. The Canadians demonstrated interest in the proposal. In December we hope to know whether Canada will take a lead on this initiative.

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**Darci Frigo (2001, Brazil)**

*Promoting rights of the landless and sustainable agriculture in Brazil and combating modern-day slavery.*

- The CHR circulated an amicus curiae brief developed by Raven Lidman, a professor at the International Human Rights Law Clinic at Seattle University School of Law, and her students, to environmental, social justice, and human rights organizations. The brief supports one of Frigo's cases before the Inter-American Commission on Human Rights (IACHR), dealing with the murder of a landless rural worker during an extra-judicial eviction led by a rancher with strong ties to local authorities. The brief will be submitted to the IACHR in November.
- Frigo and partners from Justiça Global and the Pastoral Land Commission traveled to Washington, DC from 16-22 October for a special thematic hearing at the IACHR on the history of human rights violations and impunity in land-access cases in the state of Pará, highlighting the case of murdered American nun Dorothy Stang. Frigo released a preliminary version of a detailed report; a final version and its English-language translation will be available in November.
- The CHR, in partnership with the Washington Office on Latin America (WOLA), planned a full week of meetings with Members of Congress, the Inter-American Development Bank, and the Brazilian Embassy, as well as hosting the launch of the International Campaign Against Rural Violence in Brazil. Great interest exists on Capitol Hill to undertake follow-up actions, such as Congressional letters to the World Bank (regarding its funding of market-based land reform rather than one that is environmentally sustainable and respectful of human rights) and to the Lula Administration and judicial authorities (regarding pressing for due process in the Stang case).
- Congressman Tom Lantos and the Congressional Human Rights Caucus sponsored a briefing on the issues provided by Frigo and his colleagues.

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**Martin Macwan (2000, India)**

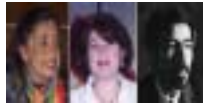
*Ending human rights violations and discrimination against dalits (commonly referred to as "untouchables").*

- CHR staff and AT member Christian Davenport traveled to Gujarat, India to work with Navsarjan on the Information Management Project. They met with enumerators from all survey groups to address problems that arose during the pilot phase, ensure that project objectives were being met and that research methodologies adhered to social science standards, and to plan large-scale implementation across the

state. The surveys tested included “untouchability” practices, domestic violence, manual scavenging, womens' health, burial land, labor, primary education, and atrocities. The aim of the project is to gather data from the 3,100 villages where Navsarjan works in order to better assess the efficacy of its campaigns. The team met with Professor Thorat from the Indian Institute of Dalit Studies and Mr. Ghanshyam Shah to discuss survey methodologies. The team laid the groundwork for digitally managing data and information for Navsarjan.

- CHR staff attended the National Campaign on Dalit Human Rights' Gujarat strategy meeting where Martin Macwan and Manjula Pradeep (Navsarjan's director) were featured speakers.

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#### **Berenice Celeyta, Gloria Flórez & Jaime Prieto (1998, Colombia)**

*Protecting human rights defenders, promoting displaced and rural Colombians' human rights, and defending labor rights.*

- On 13 October, a card was sent to the office of Colombian Congressman Alexander López Maya in Bogotá expressing condolences at the “deaths” of the Congressman, Berenice Celeyta, former SINTRAEMCALI labor union president Luis Hernández, and others of their colleagues. This latest threat is most disturbing, as the ongoing assassination plot against Berenice and others mentioned in the card, known as “Operation Dragon,” has remained unresolved despite the fact that sufficient evidence points to the involvement of individuals in the Colombian military. Please see a copy of the Action Alert in Spanish concerning this latest threat. See the Document
- The CHR has met with officials of the Colombian Embassy and Department of State concerning the condolence card and is working closely with the Senator Kennedy's office and other Congressional leaders to press for an investigation of these abuses and prosecute those responsible. Senator Kennedy has sent a letter to Secretary of State Rice, asking that she urge her Colombian colleagues to thoroughly investigate and prosecute the perpetrators of Operation Dragon and this latest threat, as well as provide regular updates concerning the investigations.
- The CHR met with members of Minga (Association for the Promotion of Alternative Social Policy), a Colombian human rights organization co-founded and led by Gloria Flórez. The meeting forms a concrete step toward reengaging our partnership with laureates

Gloria Flórez and Jaime Prieto.

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**Sezgin Tanrikulu (Turkey, 1997)**

- The CHR is contacting potential funders and institutions to collaborate on the Diyarbakir Bar Association English Program. The Diyarbakir Bar Association has a great need to improve language skills among its members in order to work on international human rights cases. The CHR's aim is to find financing for teachers to work in Diyarbakir for twelve months starting in Fall 2006. The teachers would have a certification in TESL (Teaching English as a Second Language), or TESOL (Teaching English to Speakers of Other Languages).



**Dr. Nguyen Dan Que (1995, Viet Nam)**

*Advocating for political reform and freedom of expression in Viet Nam.*

- Based on conversations with Dr. Que following his release from prison, the CHR learned that he believes legal reform, along with change brought about by Viet Nam's accession into the WTO, will help establish the necessary legal framework and infrastructural capacity to improve human rights in Viet Nam.
- The CHR has initiated a dialogue with the Vietnamese government. The CHR has offered to assist the government in developing a legal project to facilitate conformity of its national laws with its international human rights obligations. The CHR has offered to provide all technical assistance necessary to realize this project.
- The CHR has initiated correspondence with major US investors requesting that they work with appropriate parties in Viet Nam to help conform local laws and practices to international legal standards, similar to the way in which investors and Vietnamese lawmakers are developing legal reforms necessary to facilitating trade expansion policies and WTO membership.
- The CHR regularly communicates with appropriate international and US institutions regarding Dr. Que's situation, including UN committees; UN Special Rapporteurs of freedom of expression, information, and other relevant areas; Bush Administration; and Congress requesting that they correspond with the government of Viet Nam regarding progress in human rights.

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**Bambang Widjojanto (1993, Indonesia)**

*Promoting self-determination and control of natural resources by West Papuans.*

- Click here for the October 2005 West Papua Report developed by the RFK West Papua Advocacy Team.

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**Gibson Kamua Kuria (1988, Kenya)**

*Championing for Kenya's legal and constitutional reform.*

- Had substantive discussions with Dr. Kuria to strategize on our further collaborations and also develop ideas for funding proposals for the International Center for Research and Governance (ICCRG) for 2006.

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