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## Non-Governmental Action Alert June 1998, No. 5

On June 15, 1998, over 150 nations will meet in Rome for a five-week Diplomatic Conference to create an International Criminal Court (ICC). The proposed ICC will be a permanent Court to investigate and prosecute individuals accused of genocide, crimes against humanity and serious war crimes where national courts are either unavailable or ineffective.

While the ICC will not be a panacea for all human rights abuses, its jurisdiction will possibly extend to the kinds of ethnic conflict and suppression of minorities which are unfortunately so prevalent today. The Court will also have the effect of extending the rule of law, bringing national courts up to the standards of international law, and limiting impunity.

The draft statute for an ICC has been the subject of intense negotiations by governments since 1994. Nevertheless, there still remain numerous unresolved issues in the statute that will determine the independence and effectiveness of the future Court. While there is a multitude of complex and overlapping issues involved in these negotiations, Human Rights Watch believes that the following seven benchmarks must be met if the ICC is to be an independent, fair and effective judicial institution.

- 1) The jurisdictional regime of the Court must exclude any requirement of state consent. The decision to eliminate the opt-in/opt-out acceptance of jurisdiction over particular crimes, and consent on a case-by-case basis, is the most fundamental choice the conference must make. Requiring state consent would paralyze the Court.
- 2) The Court must be independent of the Security Council or any other political body. A court which is seen as an appendage of the Security Council will lack credibility. While the Security Council has an important role in referring cases to the Court, it should not be given control of the Court's docket. Virtually every delegation, except four Permanent Members, see individual Permanent Member veto over the exercise of the Court's jurisdiction as unacceptable political interference in the exercise of a judicial function.
- 3) The Court must have an independent prosecutor. The prosecutor must be empowered to initiate investigations on his or her own, in the light of information from any reliable source. If the ICC can only be "triggered" by state complaints or Security Council referrals, it will be dependent on the political motivation of states and the Security Council for the execution of its judicial mandate.
- 4) The principle of "complementarity" should ensure that the Court will not operate as a supranational institution with the power to substitute itself for national legal systems, but that the ICC is able to investigate and prosecute when national systems fail to do so. The impetus for the establishment of the ICC is the failure of national systems to hold the perpetrators of genocide, crimes against humanity, and war crimes accountable. Excessive deference to state investigation or prosecution, without appropriate ICC review and the power to take necessary measures to preserve evidence, will jeopardize the

prospect of justice.

- 5) The ICC must be able to prosecute those responsible for serious war crimes, whether committed in international or internal armed conflicts. If the ICC is to be relevant and effective in the contemporary world, in which the vast majority of conflicts are non-international, it must have sufficiently broad jurisdiction over crimes committed in this context.
- 6) The statute must clearly establish the obligation on state parties to comply with requests from the Court, and prohibit unilateral refusal to do so. While the statute should make provision for dealing with legitimate concerns, such as serious national security concerns, the Court must retain ultimate authority to determine whether an exception to the general rule should be made in any concrete case.
- 7) The ICC must respect the rights of the suspects and accused persons enshrined in international human rights instruments, and take measures to protect witnesses that testify before the Court.

In the past three years of negotiations, advocacy by non-governmental organizations (NGOs) with government officials and delegates has highlighted human rights concerns and influenced state positions. During the Diplomatic Conference, from June 15 - July 17, NGO monitoring of the negotiations will be extremely important. It will be essential for activists to maintain contact with their Foreign Affairs and Justice Ministries. Advocacy by NGOs during this period could be more important than ever. We urge your organization to do the following:

- **Monitor the progress of the Diplomatic Conference.** The Coalition for an International Criminal Court (CICC), an association of more than 600 international and domestic NGOs advocating an effective and independent Court, also maintains a webpage at <http://www.igc.apc.org/icc>. Furthermore, the CICC will be issuing an electronic newsletter from Rome, entitled "On the Record." Your organization can subscribe to the newsletter by sending the message "subscribe icc-info" to [majordomo@igc.org](mailto:majordomo@igc.org). The United Nations has also established a webpage on the ICC at <http://www.un.org/icc>. This website contains background information, information for participants and the media, a daily program, speeches, press releases, and U.N. documents.
- **Coordinate with NGOs who will be attending the Diplomatic Conference.** Organizations attending the Diplomatic Conference should keep NGOs back home apprised of the developments of the conference and the role of their governments. Advocacy efforts in the home capital will be particularly critical in bolstering governmental commitment to an effective and independent ICC.
- **Request periodic updates on the developments of the Diplomatic Conference from officials in Foreign Affairs and Justice Ministries.** Express your organization's views on the role of your government in the Diplomatic Conference. Urge ministry officials to include the seven benchmarks as essential elements in the final package for the ICC Statute and to reject unprincipled compromises that would jeopardize the effectiveness of the Court. If government officials are unavailable for personal meetings, make your views known in a fax or letter.
- **Raise awareness of the ICC through the media.** The Diplomatic Conference will be an important and timely news topic because of both the historic significance of the institution to be created and the highly-politicized nature of the negotiations. Where appropriate, contact the editorial boards and columnists of major newspapers about the importance of the ICC and your government's position on this issue. Bring statements made by your government during the Diplomatic Conference to the attention of journalists, as well as your organization's comments on such statements. Where appropriate, write letters to the editor or op-ed articles to express your organization's support for a strong Court.