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Human Rights Watch honors Nepali activist

(New York, October 18, 2006) – Mandira Sharma, a leading human rights advocate from Nepal, will receive Human Rights Watch's highest honor on November 2.

In 2001, Sharma helped found Advocacy Forum, a Nepali NGO that has played an instrumental role in defending the rights of Nepali people caught in the brutal civil war between Maoist insurgents and the Nepali government, during which more than 13,000 Nepalis were killed, most of them by government troops.

The Royal Nepali Army engaged in killing noncombatants, torturing prisoners, and illegally detaining more than 1,200 Nepalis, gaining Nepal the sorry distinction of having the highest number of reported "disappearances" in the world.

The Maoists engaged in public execution of their enemies and brutal torture of those they viewed as traitors or collaborators. The Maoists also forcibly recruited children as soldiers; knowledgeable observers estimate that up to a quarter of Maoist forces are juveniles, or were younger than 18 when they were recruited.

Since April 2006, when the two sides declared a cease-fire and engaged in peace negotiations, Sharma has focused on achieving accountability for abuses committed by both sides during the fighting. She has also led the call for the release of thousands of child soldiers believed to be among Maoist troops. "Mandira and her colleagues are struggling to make sure that any peace talks address the needs and demands of the Nepali people, not just their political leaders," said Sam Zarifi, Asia research director for Human Rights Watch. "Mandira and Advocacy Forum stand for justice, and bitter experience from around the world shows that peace without justice is illusory."

Nepal's 10-year-old civil war entered a potentially hopeful phase in April 2006 when a popular uprising, led by Nepal's small but active civil society, ended the autocratic rule of Nepal's King Gyanendra, who had usurped all executive authority in February 2005 with the help of the Royal Nepali Army. The government jailed hundreds of political party members and civil society activists, tightly censored all media, and unleashed the military.

During the year of royal rule, Sharma and her colleagues were harassed and threatened by government forces because of their work in documenting and challenging abuses. Despite the tremendous pressure, Advocacy Forum continued to file lawsuits on behalf of victims of torture by government forces, investigated cases of deaths in government custody, and filed numerous habeas corpus petitions to free prisoners illegally detained by the government. "Mandira and her colleagues showed remarkable personal courage by standing up to forces with horrendous records of abuse," said Zarifi. "They faced the threat of personal persecution and physical violence, but never stopped their work on behalf of the Nepali people."

Sharma grew up in the remote western region of Nepal. She was the first woman in her village to become a lawyer. After completing her legal degree in Kathmandu, she gained a LL.M. degree from the University of Essex in the United Kingdom. She ran a rehabilitation program for incarcerated women and their dependent children, where she saw first-hand the unfairness and brutality of the justice system. Since its founding in 2001, Advocacy Forum has established offices in all the regions of Nepal, as well as a reputation for credibility and fairness.