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INDIA FAILING TO ADDRESS ITS FARMER SUICIDE CRISIS

CHRGJ Urges Indian Government to Respect and Protect Farmers' Human Rights

(NEW YORK, May 11, 2011)—The Indian government must uphold its human rights obligations by responding immediately to its farmer suicide crisis, said the Center for Human Rights and Global Justice (CHRGJ) in a new report released today. The report, [*Every Thirty Minutes: Farmer Suicides, Human Rights, and the Agrarian Crisis in India*](#), looks critically at India's farmer suicide epidemic—which has been claimed the lives of an estimated 250,000 farmers since 1995—and proposes steps that the government should take toward upholding the human rights of this vulnerable population.

“On average, one farmer commits suicide every 30 minutes in India,” said CHRGJ Faculty Director and report co-author Smita Narula. “It’s simply unacceptable to ignore a tragedy of such epic proportions and go on with business as usual. The Indian government’s limited interventions have failed to adequately assess or address this deepening crisis.”

Over the past two decades, economic reforms—which included the removal of agricultural subsidies and the opening of Indian agriculture to an increasingly volatile global market—have increased costs, while reducing yields and profits for many farmers, creating widespread financial distress. As a result, smallholder farmers are often trapped in a cycle of insurmountable debt, leading many to take their lives.

The report focuses on the impact of the agrarian crisis on the human rights of cotton farmers in India. The cotton industry, like other cash crop industries in India, has increasingly come under the control of foreign multinational corporations that promote genetically modified Bt cottonseed and often wield considerable influence over the cost, quality, and availability of other agricultural inputs. Bt cottonseed, which now dominates the Indian cotton sector, requires an abundance of two resources that are already scarce for many smallholder farmers: money and water. Farmers take out loans to purchase the seeds, but when the crop fails due to lack of access to water, they often fall into debt. Many kill themselves by consuming the very pesticide they went into debt to purchase.

Farmer suicides also have a ripple effect, spreading both debt and despair. Often, as the farmer’s family inherits the debt, children drop out of school to become farmhands, and surviving family members’ may themselves commit suicide out of the same desperation.

The Indian government has failed to adequately assess the crisis and farmer suicide statistics—high as they already are—grossly under-estimate the problem. In fact, women, Dalit (so-called untouchables) and Adivasi (tribal community members) farmers who commit suicide are often not counted because they do not have formal title to land.

The Indian government has also failed to provide immediate or long-term relief. Limited debt relief and compensation programs reach few farmers and do not sufficiently repair financial harms. The Indian government has also done little to address underlying factors that have contributed to the crisis, such as lack of access to irrigation and rural credit. Crucially, it has also failed to regulate the conduct of multinational corporations who have enjoyed free reign to conduct business in the country without proper regulatory oversight or accountability mechanisms.

“It’s not uncommon these days for Indian farmers to address their suicide notes to the Indian Prime Minister and President,” added Narula. “This is a direct plea to the government to step in and take decisive action to save the plight of small-holder farmers in India. The Indian government must act now to regulate multinational activity and put farmers’ rights at the center of its agricultural policies.”

The report culminates with a human rights-based analysis of the crisis concluding that the crisis deeply affects a number of human rights of farmers and their families. These include the rights to: life, food, water, health, an adequate standard of living, non-discrimination and equality, and the right to an effective remedy when rights violations take place.

In the report’s conclusion, CHRGG calls on the Indian government to uphold its human rights obligations by implementing effective preventive and compensation programs, undertaking necessary structural reforms, gathering more information on the suicide crisis and agrarian disaster, and regulating the activity of agribusiness firms. Agribusinesses must also, as a baseline, respect human rights by ensuring that their products and services do not infringe on the human rights of Indian farmers.

For more about CHRGG’s work on business and human rights, and on economic, social and cultural rights, see: <http://www.chrgj.org/publications/reports.html#escr> For CHRGG’s work on caste discrimination in South Asia see: <http://www.chrgj.org/projects/discrimination.html>

About the Center

The Center for Human Rights and Global Justice (CHRGG) at New York University School of Law was established in 2002 to bring together the law school’s teaching, research, clinical, internship, and publishing activities around issues of international human rights law. Through its litigation, advocacy, and research work, CHRGG plays a critical role in identifying, denouncing, and fighting human rights abuses in several key areas of focus, including: Business and Human Rights; Economic, Social and Cultural Rights; Caste Discrimination; Human Rights and Counter-Terrorism; Extrajudicial Executions; and Transitional Justice. Philip Alston and Ryan Goodman are the Center’s Faculty Chairs; Smita Narula and Margaret Satterthwaite are Faculty Directors; Jayne Huckerby is Research Director; and Veerle Opgenhaffen is Senior Program Director.

The International Human Rights Clinic (IHRC)—a project of the Center—is directed by Professor Smita Narula. Amna Akbar is Senior Research Scholar and Advocacy Fellow and Susan Hodges is Clinical Administrator. *Every Thirty Minutes* was researched and authored by IHRC 2010-11 members Lauren DeMartini, Colin Gillespie, Jimmy Pan, and Sylwia Wewiora, as well as by Faculty Director Smita Narula.