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Dear Sirs,

The Lawyers Committee for Human Rights, a US-based non-governmental organization working to promote and protect human rights around the world, is extremely concerned by reports of recent threats against and the vilification of the National Society for Human Rights (NSHR), in Namibia. In particular, we are disturbed to learn of public statements made by officials in your government attacking the NSHR and targeting its Executive Director, Mr. Phil ya Nangoloh. Such verbal attacks are in stark contradiction of your obligations under international human rights law and contained in instruments such as the *International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights*, to respect and ensure respect for basic rights in Namibia. The work of human rights organizations such as the NSHR, and individual human rights defenders like Mr. ya Nangoloh, is crucial to ensuring respect for human rights for all persons in Namibia and assists in the fulfillment of your international obligations.

The Lawyers Committee learned today that on the night of November 17, 2003, Deputy Minister Petrus Ilonga and Public Relations Officer Sacky Namugongo, both working in the Ministry of Tourism and the Environment, spoke on an NBC program in Namibia and described the National Society for Human Rights as an “enemy,” and as an agent for the American CIA and of “Western imperialism.” The two government officials condemned the “subversive activities” of the NSHR and Mr. ya Nangoloh, and stated that these activities could “no longer be tolerated.”

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This most recent attack upon one of Namibia's most respected human rights organizations and its executive director follow numerous other incidents of threats and attacks upon human rights defenders in Namibia. Mr. ya Nangoloh himself has received numerous death threats, and in 1991 the house where he was living was attacked by soldiers. He has also been threatened publicly by government officials on previous occasions. On November 13, 2003, the NSHR was accused of having a "hidden agenda" and seeking to tarnish the image of the government of Namibia, by the Minister of Home Affairs, Mr. Jerry Ekandjo. On September 14, 2003, Mr. Ekandjo was also quoted by the Namibia Press Agency as having said that the NSHR is a tool used by "the enemy of Africa in general and Namibia in particular" in order to "destroy the unity" of the country.

These repeated verbal attacks, in addition to anonymous death threats and incitement to physically harm members of the NSHR, are particularly chilling given the recent killing of Bernard Nakale Shevanyenga. Mr. Shevanyenga, who was shot on October 11, 2003, was chairperson of the organization Age of March (TAGOMA). Prior to his death, he had reported receiving threats that he and other TAGOMA leaders would be killed.

Human rights defenders in Namibia must be protected from all forms of retaliation for their work, as required by the 1998 *UN Declaration on Human Rights Defenders*. In addition, the rights of human rights defenders to freedom of expression, association and assembly must be rigorously respected, as stated in articles 5, 6 and 7 of the Declaration. This Declaration, adopted by consensus in the General Assembly, recognizes that human rights defenders perform a vital role in any society seeking to ensure basic human rights and calls for state action to ensure that such defenders are able to work without obstruction or fear. Direct verbal attacks on human rights defenders, such as those uttered by officials of your government on November 17, blatantly contravene both the letter and spirit of the Declaration. In addition, failure to fully investigate and prosecute those responsible for acts of violence and threats of violence against human rights defenders violates article 9 of the Declaration, as well as your obligations under the *International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights* and other international instruments.

The Lawyers Committee calls upon you to ensure an immediate end to all statements and comments from government officials attacking the NSHR and its representatives. All government officials must respect the basic human rights contained in international human rights instruments to which Namibia is party and must act in accordance with the 1998 *UN Declaration on Human Rights Defenders*. Moreover, all acts of violence, threats of violence and attempts to cause injury to human rights defenders in Namibia must be fully and independently investigated and the persons responsible brought to justice. Such measures would contribute to achieving respect for basic rights in Namibia and demonstrate that human rights defenders such as the NSHR are important partners in efforts to promote and protect human rights throughout the region.

We will continue to monitor the situation for human rights defenders in Namibia closely, and appreciate any information that you can provide on measures taken in response to our concerns.

Sincerely,



Neil Hicks,
Director, Human Rights Defenders Project

Cc.

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