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**ECONOMIC, SOCIAL AND CULTURAL RIGHTS**

**Written statement\* submitted by the Asian Legal Resource Centre (ALRC),  
a non-governmental organisation in general consultative status**

The Secretary-General has received the following written statement which is circulated in accordance with Economic and Social Council resolution 1996/31.

[26 January 2005]

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\* This written statement is issued, unedited, in the language(s) received from the submitting non-governmental organization(s).

## **Hunger in Asia**

1. While the unprecedented human catastrophe caused by the Indian Ocean tsunami has resulted in an overwhelming international response to meet the needs of the affected populations, governments in the region are usually much slower to address the food needs and other basic human requirements of their citizens. In fact, the role of many government agencies throughout Asia has been to inhibit – rather than respect and fulfil – the right to food. This year, the Asian Legal Resource Centre has submitted statements to the Commission on specific denials of the right to food by government authorities in India, Myanmar and Thailand. In this statement it wishes to address the issue more broadly.

2. During 2003, the Permanent People's Tribunal on the Right to Food and the Rule of Law in Asia was established to counter the false assertion of governments in Asia that economic and social rights can be addressed separately from civil and political rights. Since then the work of the Tribunal has been to establish the link between faltering rule of law in the region and concomitant denials of food rights.

3. The right to food has not entered explicitly into most legal jurisdictions in Asia. One place where it has is India. However, the inability of the Indian legal system to effectively enforce its directives has meant that the 'justiciability' of the right to food has been limited to the courtroom. Despite various directives and interim orders emanating from the Supreme Court of India on the right to food, authorities at all levels in the country are adept at concealing facts and evading responsibility. Hunger, malnutrition and starvation continue to be manifest in all parts of India, particularly the north.

4. Realising that work on the right to food must involve more than knocking on the door of a court to obtain a morsel of food, in 2004 the Tribunal established a Hunger Alert system, to raise individual cases of starvation and hunger caused by government actions and inaction. The Hunger Alert programme began by highlighting the case of a small boy who died of starvation in Howrah, greater Kolkata, as a result of the forced eviction of some 7000 persons from their houses by local authorities. It has since taken up cases raised in other statements on the right to food submitted to the Commission during this session.

5. One of the objectives of the Hunger Alert is to make public in a timely manner stories to expose the fallacy that starvation and malnutrition are most often the result of natural disasters. Hunger in Asia is systemic. When sharecroppers are unable to eat their own crops because the entire quantity must be given to the landowner to cover the lease, they are the victims of institutionalised poverty. Where people are found collecting the seeds from camel dung for food, there are no collapsed buildings around to explain their plight as the consequence of a 'natural' tragedy.

6. Among persons involved in food-related work, the real meaning of hunger in much of Asia is not properly understood. A surface understanding coupled with a few details and some intentions disguise a lack of genuine understanding. In part this is because of expectations that solutions to hunger will come through conventional research methods, like literature studies and empirical data obtained through fact-finding missions. These methods usually have generalised problems and answers tailored in advance. They do not touch on the real issues, nor come to the problems affecting ordinary people. A survey does not capture the sense of shame associated with hunger that may cause a parent to talk about not being able to get enough food for her child,

but not admit that she herself did not eat yesterday. A genuine understanding of hunger can only come through routine involvement with affected persons. This means talking about food by the mouthful.

7. In many places in Asia where starvation is taking place it is due to easily correctable conditions. In some cases, such as North Korea, it may be due to an entire social and political system; but in most instances it is not. In those places, quick intervention can lead to real changes. The reason that nobody intervenes is that in most parts of Asia there is no way that deep social crises can be challenged seriously. A culture of non-involvement prevails. Despite sophisticated systems for communications and management that should be preventing hunger and poverty, systemic negligence is the order of the day. This condition must be broken in order to guarantee the right to food in Asia.

8. Another reason that hunger is not readily addressed is because it is an issue over which there is a lot of denial. Food is a sensitive matter, and also big business. Internationally, various agencies try to demonstrate that they have made progress towards one goal or another through various complex strategies. All of them know that the situation is serious and will grow worse, but they persist with the same approaches and external conviction that things are, or will be, getting better. The media goes along with this, and restricts reporting to polite debate, rather than getting to the real issues. There are socially prescribed limits that are not crossed. Even human rights agencies doing research on food invariably restrict themselves to statistics, and deny the true stories, or their full extent. There is an underlying censorship whereby the most desperate issues are kept out of discussion. The topics are generally kept polite. This condition too must be broken if people in Asia are no longer to go hungry.

9. Above all, there tends to be a view among theoreticians and other researchers in the field that somehow hunger is always going to be with us, and that it is not possible to have an economic system that can eradicate hunger. From that position, talk about hunger just becomes more statistics. It is just a way to measure conditions in one country as against another. It is normalised when the general population is beguiled into believing likewise. Above all, all concerned parties must vigorously and actively oppose such nonsense if we are to secure the right to food for our children, and if our societies are to prove themselves truly civilised.

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