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Irene Khan – Biography

Irene Zubaida Khan joined Amnesty International as the organisation's seventh Secretary General in August 2001.

Taking the helm in Amnesty International as the first woman, the first Asian and the first Muslim to guide the world's largest human rights organisation, Bangladeshi national Irene brought a new perspective to the organisation. As an individual, she brought experience and enthusiasm for putting people at the heart of policy.

Irene took up the leadership of Amnesty International in its 40th anniversary year as the organisation began a process of change and renewal to address the complex nature of contemporary human rights violations, and confronted the challenging developments in the wake of the attacks of 11 September. She has also been at the helm of broadening the work of the organisation in areas of economic, social and cultural rights, and initiating a process of internal reform and renewal to enable the organisation to respond flexibly and rapidly to world events.

Irene reformed AI's response to crisis situations, personally leading high level missions to Pakistan, Afghanistan, Israel/Occupied Territories, Colombia, the Democratic Republic of Congo, Brazil, Mexico, Turkey, Spain, Thailand, the Darfur region of Sudan and Nepal. Deeply concerned about women's human rights, she initiated a process of consultations with women activists to design a global campaign by Amnesty International against violence on women, which was launched in March 2004.

Irene has been keen to draw attention to hidden human rights violations. In Australia, she heightened attention to the plight of asylum seekers in detention. In Burundi, she met with victims of massacres and urged President Buyoya and other parties to the conflict to end the cycle of human rights abuse. In Bulgaria, she led a campaign to end discrimination of those suffering from mental disabilities. In Mexico, she met the mothers of young girls who had been murdered in Ciudad Juárez and took their claims for justice to President Fox. In Spain, she met survivors of the March 11 attacks in Madrid. In Nepal, she met King Gyanendra to discuss the country's deteriorating human rights situation.

Interested in working directly with people to change their lives, Irene helped to found the development organisation, Concern Universal, in 1977, and began her work as a human rights activist with the International Commission of Jurists in 1979.

Irene joined the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees in 1980, and worked in a variety of positions at Headquarters and in field operations to promote the international protection of refugees. From 1991-95 she was Senior Executive Officer to Mrs. Sadako Ogata, then UN High Commissioner for Refugees. She was appointed as the UNHCR Chief of Mission in India in 1995, the youngest UNHCR country representative at that time, and in 1998 headed the UNHCR Centre for Research and Documentation. She led the UNHCR team in Former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia during the Kosovo crisis in 1999, and was appointed Deputy Director of International Protection later that year.

Irene studied law at the University of Manchester and Harvard Law School, specialising in public international law and human rights. She is the recipient of several academic awards, a Ford Foundation Fellowship, the 2006 City of Sydney Peace Prize, the Pilkington "Woman of the Year" Award 2002, and the John Owens Distinguished Alumni Award of the University of Manchester. She has been awarded honorary doctorates by Ferris University (Japan) and Staffordshire University (UK). She has been voted one of the 100 Most Influential Asians and one of the 100 Most Influential Muslims in the UK.

Irene is a citizen of Bangladesh.