

Dimitrij Rupel,
Minister of Foreign Affairs for Slovenia
Slovenian EU Council Presidency

6 March 2008
Our ref : B755

Dear Mr Rupel,

Amnesty International Report: Safe Schools, Every Girl's Right

Girls of school age are more likely to be the victims of certain types of violence. The new EU Guidelines for the Promotion and Protection of the Rights of the Child (Guidelines) underline this fact and state that "girl children face specific risks and need particular attention." Building on the adoption of the Guidelines in December 2007, Amnesty International wishes, ahead of the International Women's Day, to bring to your attention the findings of our latest report published today examining violence in schools and its impact on girls' right to education. We would strongly encourage the Presidency to take into account the evidence in this report in the implementation of the Guidelines. Give that violence against children has been identified as a priority theme for the first phase of implementation of the Guidelines, the various types of violence against girls in schools identified in this report must be tackled as part of this process.

The attached report supports World Health Organisation findings that the most common place where sexual harassment and coercion are experienced by young women is in school (*World Report on Violence and Health*, 2002). It highlights worrying trends of violence against schoolgirls in and around educational institutions, in a number of countries:

- Girls continuously face the risk of being sexually assaulted, harassed or intimidated on their way to school or once inside school premises. According to a 2006 study of schoolgirls in **Malawi**, 50 per cent of the girls said they had been touched in a sexual manner "without permission, by either their teachers or fellow schoolboys". A study in the **USA** found that 83 per cent of girls in grades 8 through 11 (aged around 12 to 16) in public schools experienced some form of sexual harassment.
- Teachers are responsible for an alarming number of cases of sexual violence. The results of a national survey in **South Africa** revealed that 32 per cent of reported child rapes were perpetrated by a teacher. A ground-breaking 2002 report by UNHCR/Save the Children UK highlighted how teachers were taking advantage of their positions and their authority over girls in camps in West Africa, offering good grades and other school privileges in return for sex. Local NGOs report that sexual harassment and abuse of girls by teachers is so common in **Togo** that an entire vocabulary has evolved to describe it. The phrase "notes sexuellement transmises" (sexually transmitted marks or grades) is used to refer to good marks that are the result of a sexual relationship with a teacher. "Cahier de roulement", literally a shared exercise book, describes a girl who is presumed to have sex with several teachers.
- Although schools for girls have reopened in parts of **Afghanistan**, many girls are still missing out on a formal education. The reasons for this include attacks on schools and teachers resulting in school closures, as well as parents' reluctance to send their children to school for fear of attacks. Burning down schools, particularly girls' schools, and threatening or assaulting girls who attend school have become increasingly common in recent years. At least 172 violent attacks on schools took place in the first six months of 2006. Cultural factors also play a part – many parents don't believe education is necessary for girls once they reach a marriageable age.

- School fees keep many children out of school. Women in the **Solomon Islands** who faced difficulties in meeting with school fees told Amnesty International that they made hard choices to send only sons to school, believing that boys were more likely to require education for a job. When the costs of education are steep, girls may consider sexual relationships that they would not otherwise. These exploitative relationships put girls at risk of physical and emotional injury, unsafe sex, unwanted pregnancy, and sexually transmitted infections. Studies sponsored by the UN women's fund UNIFEM and by government aid agencies, for example, report that some girls in **Fiji, Ghana and Jamaica** engage in sex with older men in exchange for transport to school, school fees and other costs associated with their education.

Discrimination against girls on the basis of their gender is compounded by other forms of discrimination, such as that based on ethnicity, indigenous status, sexual orientation or disability. Schoolgirls from such groups may be targeted for violence and face particular barriers to education. For example, Romani girls in several European countries face obstacles to education, resulting in lower expectations for girls and early drop-out rates, increased family obligations, and early marriages.

Given the EU's commitment to mainstreaming a gender perspective in its external action and to protecting children's rights in its overall human rights policy, Amnesty International asks you to use all relevant opportunities to call for progress in making schools a safe environment for girls. The 2000 Millennium Development Goals relating to education include calls for universal primary education and gender equality, but they measure progress by the number of girls in class. In progressing towards this goal, special attention must be paid to addressing violence and discrimination that keeps or pushes girls out of school. While supporting the EU's efforts to achieve the Goals, Amnesty International calls on the EU and other international organisations to address violence and discrimination against girls in schools and recognise that it constitutes a major obstacle to securing universal primary education and gender equality.

Thank you for your attention to this important matter. As always, we are ready to provide any further input that would be helpful to you.



Natalia Alonso

*Acting Director
Amnesty International EU Office*

Cc : Javier Solana, High Representative for the Common Foreign and Security Policy
Benita Ferrero-Waldner, Commissioner for External Relations
Louis Michel, Commissioner for Development
Riina Kionka, Personal Representative of Javier Solana for Human Rights