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WORLD AIDS DAY FOCUSES SPOTLIGHT ON LINKS BETWEEN SEXUAL VIOLENCE, BROKEN JUSTICE SYSTEMS AND HIV/AIDS PANDEMIC

Why is money not spent from President's 'Women's Justice and Empowerment in Africa' initiative?

FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE – WASHINGTON, DC – Dec. 1, 2006 – In recognition of World AIDS Day, International Justice Mission calls upon the U.S. and other international donors to help AIDS-burdened countries in Africa build judicial capacity to investigate and prosecute sexual violence against women and girls.

“Rape is an HIV risk factor for tens of millions of African women and children and yet in many AIDS-burdened countries public justice systems are broken or virtually inaccessible to poor girls and women,” says Holly Burkhalter, vice president of government relations at International Justice Mission, a Washington, D.C.-based human rights organization that strives to bring immediate relief to victims of oppression, slavery, trafficking and violence while pursuing prosecution for perpetrators. “Defeating the AIDS pandemic requires that African women and girls have the right to protection under their own countries’ laws. In addition to continuing successful campaigns to combat HIV/AIDS, these countries need hands-on help in getting rapists and batterers off the street and into jail.”

Burkhalter cites a June 2005 initiative announced by President Bush – the “Women’s Justice and Empowerment in Africa” program – that pledged \$55 million over three years to showcase successes in four African countries (Benin, Zambia, Kenya and South Africa) in creating judicial capacity to address sexual violence and increase services to victims. Burkhalter notes that to date, only \$1.2 million has been spent (in 2005), less than 3% of the money pledged in the program. No funds were used in 2006. (Initiative: <http://www.whitehouse.gov/news/releases/2005/06/20050630-5.html>)

“We urge the administration to fully implement the Women’s Justice and Empowerment in Africa program with the same effectiveness as the President’s Emergency Plan for AIDS Relief (PEPFAR). That program’s success demonstrates how quickly and effectively billions of dollars in foreign aid can be mobilized if an issue is prioritized. It is past time to make protection from rape, child abuse, and domestic violence that kind of a priority,” added Burkhalter.

An international consensus has emerged that violence and degradation of women and girls are key factors in the rapid spread of HIV among this group; and yet, investment in protection for children and women is not on the international radar screen, says IJM. The organization proposes a “build it as we go” approach to strengthening national judiciaries in AIDS-burdened Africa. This includes ramping up investigations, prosecutions and convictions from the dozens to the hundreds, then thousands, while simultaneously training, equipping and recruiting police, prosecutors and judges. As in the case of health systems, the greatest need of judiciaries is for skilled human resources, according to IJM. Local police need training, management, salary support and deployment to underserved rural villages and towns. Scaling up of rape cases requires DNA labs, rape test kits, witness protection capacity, referral systems, vehicles and computers. Corrupt or abusive police and judicial staff should be fired and prosecuted; incentives and benefits should reward excellence and confer prestige on police and prosecutors who take on sexual violence.

“When it comes to women and HIV, access to justice has to be considered AIDS prevention,” added Burkhalter. “Functioning judicial systems are the next frontier in confronting the AIDS pandemic and preventing its spread.”

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About International Justice Mission

International Justice Mission is a human rights organization that brings immediate relief to victims of violence, sexual exploitation, slavery and oppression. A multi-national team of lawyers and law enforcement professionals conduct criminal

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investigations and collect evidence to relieve victims and bring perpetrators to justice, and IJM social workers secure appropriate aftercare for victims of abuse. IJM was founded by Gary Haugen who was the Officer in Charge of the U.N. investigation into the Rwandan genocide. IJM has 11 overseas offices in Africa, Latin America and Asia.

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