

Press Statement from the World Society of Victimology
On the Occasion of the 11th UN Congress on Crime Prevention and Criminal Justice
Bangkok, Thailand

April 22, 2005

World Society of Victimology Urges a Practical Vision for Victims

The World Society of Victimology calls on the United Nations to commit an act of justice in Bangkok.

The urgent issues needed to make that commitment are crime prevention, funding the promotion of victim services and reform of the criminal justice such that victims are included at every stage of the process and in every forum.

Our goal is to reach the public and governments around the world to address these concerns.

Victims are a silent and forgotten majority in our midst. There are over 30,000 kidnappings every year that shatter families and communities. According to US Department of Justice, 800,000 women and children are victimized by trafficking – according to UNICEF 500,000 are girls between the ages of 13-18. From 1998-2004 there were over 11,000 terrorist events (Oklahoma City National Memorial Institute), and those don't include terrorist acts in Africa.

According to the World Health Organization, 1.6 million deaths are caused by violence in the world each year. And, millions of people suffer physical and emotional injuries due to abuses of power, torture, and crimes against national laws. Criminal justice in today's world falls far short of addressing victim needs even in the best of systems.

Someone once said "The death of one man is a tragedy, but the death of millions is but a statistic." We often fail to see the tragedies behind the statistics. The names, faces and voices of those tragedies should be seen and heard and we fail to do what will make a difference..

In my thirty years of working with victims of crime I have seen and heard them.

I have seen victims, such as LaVonne X, who was raped in her home when she was 36 years old. She was beaten, mutilated and stabbed – left for dead. She took the courageous step of reporting to the police and pursuing her case in the criminal justice system. After countless insults, from when the responding police officers sought to blame her for her own assault by telling her she was stupid to have opened her door to someone she didn't know well, and that she should have fought harder than she did, to the judge who denied her an opportunity to tell her story and talk of the impact of the brutality she suffered. The jury convicted her assailant, but LaVonne lived in fear dreading the day that her attacker might be released from prison. Despite laws to the

contrary, when he was released five years after the event, LaVonne was not notified and he returned to rape and assault her again.

I have heard victims, such as Linda Z, a young incest survivor who was victimized by her father repeatedly from the time she was five years old. Over the years she reported what was happening to school counselors and a teacher. They couldn't believe her story because she was such a good student and good students do not come from a life of hell. She was impregnated twice and her father murdered the babies as soon as she was home from the hospital. One of them, he murdered in front of her eyes. She stayed in this environment for years because she wanted to protect her younger sister. On the day her sister turned 18, she made the decision to leave. I made arrangements for her to be relocated and protected when she took action. She made one fatal mistake – she told her father she was going and he killed her on the spot.

I have seen the victims and survivors of the terrorist attacks on September 11, 2001 in the United States -- working hours, days and weeks with those who survived loved ones who were killed and those who had been physically injured or who lost their livelihood, their businesses and their property. One of the most poignant things that they have said in the aftermath and continue to say until this day, is that their voices have not been heard. Neither compensation plans, nor justice forums have adequately listened to their needs. Their names and faces have been lost in the statistics of the terror and the ongoing terror around the world.

I have heard the agony of a sole survivor of a massacre in Rwanda. He lived because he hid under the bodies of the dead – his friends and family members. He escaped, and now bears a lonely vigil showing strangers the parched and whitened bones of those who died in a museum that is a ghastly memorial to the atrocities of hate.

These victims, individuals like any one of us, sought help but were ignored. They sought to speak and were silenced. They sought the protection of the rule of law and the law was twisted in violation of their humanity.

We urge you to see and listen along with me to the millions like them. And, when you do, mobilize your support and the support of your governments to take action to pass legislation that addresses victim rights, promote programs to provide victim assistance, institute policies that prevent and reduce victimization and insist that all professionals who interact with victims are trained to provide aid and respect for victims.

When justice is accorded to the offender and not to the victim, justice is denied.

Some rich governments have acted to assist some victims some of the time. They have victim services, they provide for reparation to victims from offenders, they have some compensation available from the state for the most injured victims, they allow some input from victims to the criminal justice process.

In the USA, the exemplary Victims of Crime Act raises over one billion US dollars from fines on federal offenders who are often rich corporations and individuals to stimulate action by US States to multiply victim services, state compensation and bills of rights, but even so their federal Office for Victims of Crime calls for action to go from a patchwork to universal services and programs to educate lawyers, judges and others on victim rights.

In the European Union, a mandatory standard (framework decision) has been established so that every government in the EU will provide basic services for victims, reparation and mediation. They have forced each government to report on progress. Other affluent countries have similar provisions but without the monitoring.

The challenge is to get technical assistance to developing countries where the challenge of victimization is often worse and the resources less. It is a question of priorities and victims must no longer be brushed aside.

In the 1980's, Brazil launched police stations where victims of violence against women and children could go. These stations had only women officers. Today these stations have spread across the developing world. In the State of Tamil Nadu with a population of 65 million, the woman Chief Minister has established 200 all women police stations. We call on the UN and the ministers present here to provide technical assistance, training and funds to multiply these successes across the world.

Since the 1960's in France, victims of crime have had a right to be represented by a lawyer if necessary funded by the state – just like offenders in other countries have a right to a defence lawyer. This makes justice in France inclusive of victims, offenders and the state. This obvious procedure is missing in other countries. Just last year, the renowned report on reform of the criminal law in India called for a justice system focused on the victim and where victims would be able to participate like in France. We call on the UN and the ministers present here to provide technical assistance, training and funds to multiply these successes across the world.

In 2000, Rwanda established a system of community justice – Gacaca (pronounced gachacha). Today in every part of Rwanda, village communities get together in the shade of a tree to listen to surviving victims and suspected offenders. The rules of procedure are few. Those victims and offenders were neighbors who killed, raped and often infected victims with AIDS. When the community justice is finished, the offender will often apologise, express shame and make some reparation. The offender will also receive a prison sanction but likely less and sooner than if he had waited for the classic system of justice. We call on the UN and the ministers present here to provide technical assistance, training and funds to multiply these successes across the world.

In 2004, Japan put the UN principles of justice for victims of crime and abuse of power into their national legislation. The Prime Minister established a powerful cabinet level committee to ensure that the principles would be imitated. The principles include services for victims, reparation from the offender, information about criminal justice, and a right to participate in the criminal justice process to protect their interests. We call on

the UN and the ministers present here to provide technical assistance, training and funds to multiply these successes across the world.

In our statement to this Congress we have identified seven concrete steps that the UN, its member governments and institutes could undertake. These include technical assistance to implement successful programs, training for the broad range of policy makers, practitioners, police and justice personnel as well as creating a permanent institute to ensure that victims are not forgotten again.

The UN has already produced Handbooks, Guides, a web site and work on guidelines for children as victims and witnesses. The Conventions that many governments have ratified on transnational organized crime include specific requirements for victims. These are an important foundation for action. For us and we hope for Ministers of Justice it is a time to move from talk to action.

We call on the Ministers here in Bangkok to commit an act of justice for victims in their declaration from this Congress by committing themselves to a practical vision that includes our concrete actions now in the next decade.