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## Actors for change: The growth of human rights institutions

*Defending human rights has a new tool in its arsenal. More than 100 national institutions have emerged in recent years to protect the rights of vulnerable groups. They are increasingly active in a wide range of human rights causes, from the prevention of torture and discrimination to conflict resolution.*

### **The Story**

What does an improved status of the Tsaatan minority in Mongolia have in common with the rescue of child soldiers in Uganda, the probe into decades-old cases of forced disappearances in Mexico or documents on the training of police in Northern Ireland? All of these examples reflect a promising trend -- a growing role and effectiveness of national institutions for the promotion and protection of human rights. "Building strong human rights institutions at the country level is what in the long run will ensure that human rights are protected and advanced in a sustained manner," Secretary-General Kofi Annan stressed in a 2002 report. And that's what -- away from the media spotlight -- appears to be happening.

Since the UN General Assembly unanimously adopted in 1993 the so-called Paris Principles -- minimum standards concerning national human rights institutions -- many countries have worked with the UN to establish or enhance such bodies. What often goes unnoticed, however, is that these institutions, already numbering more than 100, are increasingly active in a wide range of human rights causes.

### **The Context**

- The majority of existing national institutions can be grouped in two broad categories: "human rights commissions" and "ombudsmen." Less common, but no less important, are the "specialized" national institutions which function to protect the rights of a particular vulnerable group.
- Such national institutions are not set up to replace the UN human rights organs or non-governmental organizations working in the same area. Their role is complementary, and a strengthening of such institutions can only enhance the effectiveness of both national and international human rights machinery.
- In January 2005, the Independent Human Rights Commission of Afghanistan launched a report, *A Call to Justice*. Thanks to this bold initiative, for the first time Afghans were asked to express their views on vital issues of peace, security and justice.
- The Danish Institute for Human Rights is creating a knowledge database to raise awareness of the specific impact and consequences of anti-terrorism legislation.
- The official probe into the forced disappearance of 532 people in Mexico during the 70's and early 80's had limited results until the Mexican National Human Rights Commission intervened and was able to throw light on that tragic episode.
- Established as an outcome of the Belfast (Good Friday) Agreement 1998, the Northern Ireland Human Rights Commission has investigated and supported through courts key cases on issues covering all political and religious viewpoints.
- The National Human Rights Commission of Mongolia has made a significant contribution to securing the rights of the Tsaatans, the smallest ethnic minority in the country, residing in an isolated mountainous area.

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- Despite the challenges of working in conflict areas, the Ugandan Human Rights Commission has investigated reports of recruitment of child soldiers and made recommendations on their reintegration into society.
- The National Human Rights Commission in India has been making efforts to create an environment in which economic, social and cultural rights could be better promoted and protected.

**FOR FURTHER INFORMATION:****Office of the UN High Commissioner for Human Rights (OHCHR):**

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**USEFUL WEB LINKS:****Office of the UN High Commissioner for Human Rights (OHCHR):**

<http://www.ohchr.org/english/countries/institutions/index.htm>

**National Human Rights Institutions Forum:** <http://www.nhri.net/>

**Minorities in Mongolia:** <http://www.nhrc-mn.org>

**United Nations Development Programme (UNDP):**

<http://www.undp.mn/modules.php?name=Content&pa=showpage&pid=20>

**Forced disappearances in Mexico:** <http://www.cndh.org.mx/Principal/document/portada.htm>

**Child soldiers in Uganda:** <http://www.uhrc.org/>

**A call for justice (Afghanistan):** [http://www.aihrc.org.af/pressreng28\\_1\\_05call.htm](http://www.aihrc.org.af/pressreng28_1_05call.htm)

**Platform of knowledge by the Danish Institute for Human Rights:** <http://www.humanrights.dk>

**Economic, social and cultural rights in India:** <http://www.nhrc.nic.in/>

**Peace process and national institutions in Northern Ireland:** <http://www.nihrc.org/>