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GROUNDBREAKING REFUGEE ADVOCACY ORGANIZATION

FOCUSES ON REFUGEES FLEEING SEXUAL & GENDER BASED VIOLENCE

ORAM – Organization for Refuge, Asylum & Migration Launches Programs for Middle Eastern Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual and Transgender Refugees and Migrants

www.oraminternational.org

San Francisco, CA (June 18, 2009) – ORAM, a groundbreaking international refugee advocacy organization, announced its launch today. The Organization for Refuge, Asylum & Migration is the first non-governmental organization (NGO) to focus exclusively on refugees and asylum seekers fleeing sexual and gender based violence.

ORAM provides free legal counsel for LGBT refugees in the Middle East and North Africa (MENA), who have escaped violence, executions and “honor killings” in their home countries. Additionally, ORAM conducts wide-ranging international advocacy to advance the protection of all LGBT refugees and asylum seekers.

LGBTs often become “stuck” in their countries of first asylum, typically neighboring the places they have escaped harassment, violence, torture or death threats. With hostility toward LGBTs rampant in many areas, they are uniquely at risk, both in the countries they’ve escaped and in their “transit” countries.

U.S. Secretary of State Hillary Rodham Clinton highlighted these facts in her statement earlier this month that “gays and lesbians in many parts of the world live under constant threat of arrest, violence, even torture.” According to the International Lesbian and Gay Association (ILGA), homosexuality remains illegal in eighty-five countries and carries the death penalty in seven. Often lacking formal refugee protection, LGBT refugees are particularly at risk.

“LGBT refugees often ‘fall through the cracks’ of the international refugee regime,” according to Neil Grungras, executive director of ORAM. “They have escaped systematic hatred and violence at home, and their LGBT identity brings serious new threats to their safety and protection in countries of first asylum. Many live in a toxic mix of destitution and desperation.”

Grungras has more than twenty years experience working on behalf of vulnerable refugees and asylum seekers. He founded ORAM in January 2009 after serving as director for Europe & the Middle East at HIAS, a leading refugee and migration organization. Among his postings, he directed the U.S. Department of State Overseas Processing Entity (OPE) for Iranian refugees in Vienna, Austria.

Alongside its work helping individuals, ORAM also passionately advocates and educates on behalf of LGBT refugees as a group. Raising consciousness about their plight to governments, refugee organizations, communities and the media is critical in bringing desperately needed basic protection to this at-risk population.

The NGO hopes its community-based “Adopt a Refugee” program will create a grassroots network of inspired advocates for susceptible LGBT refugees. Supporting institutions can follow migrants and refugees through their trek to freedom, receiving case updates. Adopted refugees are invited to communicate with their sponsors, forming unique bonds of additional support.

ORAM has already assisted dozens of LGBTs who’ve escaped persecution and honor killings in the MENA region. Using communications technology to assist refugees in places where help was previously unavailable, the organization has been able to work with many LGBT refugees who have sought its help in existing project areas.

“The recent surge in homophobic violence in Iraq has shone a spotlight on the painful truths we’re dealing with first-hand in the Middle East,” said Grungras. “LGBTs are the most persecuted people in many regions of the world today. For every reported execution, there are likely tens of judicially or family sanctioned murders, often in the name of honor.”

ORAM will co-publish its first report later this month on LGBT asylum seekers and refugees in Turkey. For more information, visit www.oraminternational.org.

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