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STATEMENT

By Dr Agnès Callamard, Executive Director

**USA: Obama Meets Human Rights Defenders, including ARTICLE 19,
in Human Rights Discussion**

On 18 February, I was amongst a handful of human rights activists who met with US President Barak Obama and senior members of his administration to discuss the role of the US in countering the global deterioration of human rights.

I was taking part in the 2010 Human Rights Summit in Washington DC organised by Freedom House and Human Rights First where a group of some 20 activists were selected to meet the president.

In the meeting, human rights activists described the increasing repression around the world and encouraged the president to lead by example in defending the fundamental freedoms of association, assembly and expression. In particular, the group urged that he follows through on his promise to close down Guantanamo, and ends the practice of indefinite detention. We insisted that terrorist suspects be brought to justice in civilian trials.

President Obama agreed with our comments and highlighted the importance of re-aligning counter-terrorism efforts with human rights standards and the rule of law.

But he also commented that this was a difficult task and a messy process. He admitted that despite his Cairo speech promising a new beginning, there may have been disappointment in the lack of progress.

The president was careful not to make claims or promises which he could not deliver. In fact, in addition to his attention and commitment, what struck me most was probably his acknowledgement of the difficulties he is confronting in pushing his agenda. He told us that while the power of the US should not be under-estimated, neither should it be over-estimated.

President Obama was warm and approachable. He listened to us attentively. He came across as knowledgeable and committed. He spent some 30 minutes in our company – a generous time for the President of the USA. Some 15 senior members of his National Security Council were also present, and met further with our group. This, I hope, testifies to the commitment of the American administration to strengthen human rights protection and to engage with the human rights community. President Obama urged us to keep pushing and this we most certainly will continue doing.

ARTICLE 19 in particular hopes the US administration will see through their commitment to human rights in some of the key current challenges to Freedom of Expression. Specifically, ARTICLE 19 urges the US to protect freedom of expression in their security and counter-terrorism policies; combat Internet censorship; and oppose attempts to limit free expression in the name of religion, including within international fora.

NOTES TO EDITORS:

- ARTICLE 19 at the 2010 Human Rights Summit can be seen at: http://www.humanrightssummit.org/live_blog?page=9
- For more information please contact: Agnès Callamard, +44 20 7324 2500
- ARTICLE 19 is an independent human rights organisation that works around the world to protect and promote the right to freedom of expression. It takes its name from Article 19 of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, which guarantees free speech.