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## **2005 International Women's Rights Prize Honors Work in Burma and Thailand**

### **The Peter Gruber Foundation Celebrates Two Groups' Courageous Efforts to Help Women and Children**

St. Thomas, U.S.V.I., June 23, 2005 – The Shan Women's Action Network (SWAN), which runs community-based programs for refugee women and children who have fled the civil war in Burma's Shan State, and the Women's League of Burma, an association of eleven women's groups that SWAN helped to establish, have been selected by an international panel of experts to receive the 2005 Women's Rights Prize of the Peter Gruber Foundation.

Each year the Foundation presents a gold medal and a \$200,000 unrestricted cash award to individuals and/or groups that have made significant contributions, often at great risk, to furthering the rights of women and girls and advancing public awareness of the necessity of these rights in achieving a just world. This year's prize, which will be shared by SWAN and the Women's League of Burma, will be presented in New York City in September.

Burma is ruled by a repressive military junta, a regime that for many years has kept the charismatic Nobel Peace Prize laureate and democracy advocate Aung San Suu Kyi in detention. Over half of Burma's population of 43 million consists of diverse ethnic groups, with many members of those groups living beyond its borders. The Shan state, on the border of Thailand, makes up 9% of the population, and, since 1996, hundreds of thousands of its villagers have been forcibly relocated from their homes.

SWAN is a non-governmental organization established in 1999 by a group of Shan refugee women in Thailand. In an effort to stop the junta's brutality against women, SWAN published a report called *License to Rape* in 2002, detailing incidents of rape and other forms of sexual violence committed by the Burmese army and used as a "weapon of war" in Shan State between 1996 and 2001. The report shocked the world and moved many sympathizers, including those in the U.S. Congress, State Department, and the United Nations, to action. In response the Burmese regime pressured Thai authorities to shut down the SWAN office. Undeterred, SWAN has continued to operate discreetly ever since and supports and encourages the growth of similar organizations.

The Women's League of Burma is an umbrella organization comprising eleven women's groups representing different Burmese ethnic backgrounds. Formed in 1999 in response to human rights abuses, including sexual violence against ethnic women committed by the Burmese military regime, it advocates for economic gender equity, peace and reconciliation, and women's participation in decision-making processes and the pro-democracy movement. It also works to oppose violence against women through its "State Violence against Women in Burma" campaign.

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The official prize citation reads: "The Women's Rights Prize of the Peter Gruber Foundation is hereby proudly presented to SWAN, the Shan Women's Action Network, and the Women's League of Burma, an association of eleven women's groups, which SWAN helped to establish in 1999. In awarding this prize, the Foundation celebrates the unique accomplishments of a group of young women leaders who, at great personal risk, are challenging human rights violations under a repressive military dictatorship. Their groundbreaking report, *License to Rape*, brought to world attention the systematic sexual abuse of Shan women, an ethnic minority in Burma. SWAN works with refugee women, many of who are trafficked into Thailand and remain vulnerable to violence, disease, and continued assaults upon their human dignity. The Women's Rights Prize also honors the Women's League of Burma, an umbrella group that provides a forum and the resources for small grassroots women's organizations that work tirelessly to assist and educate Burmese refugees, regardless of their ethnicity."

Peter Gruber, Chairman of the foundation that bears his name, said, "It is a great disadvantage that women, who represent half the world's population, are restricted by laws, or customs, that hinder not only their basic human rights, but their contributions to the welfare of all. The work of SWAN and the Women's League of Burma gives new life and hope to the women of Burma and to thousands of refugees. We are pleased to honor their outstanding efforts to achieve freedom and human dignity."

The Foundation's Women's Rights Advisory Board, a group of eminent individuals known for their expertise and commitment to women's rights, selects the annual winner or winners of the prize. Current members are: **Dr. Linda Basch**, Executive Director, National Council for Research on Women, New York City; **The Honorable Bernice Bouie Donald**, U.S. District Court, Western District of Tennessee; **The Honorable Claire L'Heureux Dub\***, retired Justice of the Supreme Court of Canada; **Professor Shadrack Gutto**, Director, Centre for African Renaissance Studies, University of South Africa; **The Honorable Navanethem Pillay**, Judge, International Criminal Court, The Hague, and Women's Rights Prize laureate 2003; **Kavita Ramdas**, President, Global Fund for Women; and **Zainab Salbi**, President, Women for Women International.

The Women's Rights Prize was established in 2003 and is recognized as the leading international prize in the field. The co-recipients in 2004 were visionary educator Sakena Yacoobi and the Afghan Institute of Learning, which annually serves more than 350,000 Afghan women and children; in 2003 the co-recipients were The Honorable Navanethem Pillay, the South African judge noted for her leadership of the United Nations' International Criminal Tribunal for Rwanda, and Pro-Femmes Twese Hamwe (Women Together for Women), an umbrella organization of Rwandan grassroots women's groups.

### **The Peter Gruber Foundation**

The Peter Gruber Foundation was founded in 1993 and established a record of charitable giving principally in the U.S. Virgin Islands, where it is located. In 2000 the Foundation expanded its focus to a series of international awards recognizing discoveries and achievements that produce fundamental shifts in human knowledge and culture. In addition to the Women's Rights Prize, the Foundation presents awards in the fields of Cosmology, Genetics, Neuroscience, and Justice. Further information about the Peter Gruber Foundation and its awards is available from [www.petergruberfoundation.org](http://www.petergruberfoundation.org).

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