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CHARGES AGAINST FIJIAN HUMAN RIGHTS DEFENDER DISMISSED

Chiang Mai - Asia Pacific Forum on Women, Law and Development welcomes the Fijian High Court's decision today to dismiss all charges against Fijian lawyer and prominent human rights defender, Imrana Jalal.

"We applaud the decision today to dismiss the charges but remain concerned about the erosion of human rights and the rule of law in Fiji" says Kate Lappin, Regional Director of APWLD who returned today from Fiji where she was observing the hearing with a host of other concerned international agencies.

APWLD believes the long campaign of harassment and persecution against Ms. Jalal was an attack on her as a vocal human rights defender and critic of the Fijian Military Regime. Bringing minor regulatory charges against Ms Jalal in the High Court after dismissing the original Magistrate who queried the charges exposed this case as politically motivated. As the Judge in this case noted, the attempt to amend charges that had been previously stayed was "an abuse of process".

"Women's rights activists are at the forefront of the movement to restore human rights and the rule of law in Fiji" said Ms Lappin. "Consequently they are most likely to face harassment and intimidation". "The use of seemingly innocuous legal provisions to harass human rights defenders is a technique we increasingly see employed by repressive regimes" she said.

Whilst the decision today is a positive step for Fiji, APWLD believes that continued international scrutiny is vital to ensure human rights defenders are not isolated in their important work in Fiji.

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APWLD is Asia Pacific's leading feminist, membership driven network. We hold consultative status with the Economic and Social Council of the United Nations. Our 180 members represent groups of diverse women from 25 countries in the region. For nearly 25 years APWLD has been empowering women to use law as an instrument of change for equality, justice, peace and development. We use research, training, advocacy and activism to claim and strengthen women's human rights.