**Rafto Prize 2017**

**Award ceremony at the National Theater (DNS) Bergen, Norway**

**Sunday, 5 November 2017**

**Speech of the Head of the Rafto Prize Committee, Lise Rakner**

Your excellencies, dear Rafto laureates, ladies and gentlemen — dear friends!

It is a great honour for me to introduce this years’ Rafto Lauderates, Parveena Ahangar and Parvez Imroz for their struggle for human rights in the Indian state of Jammu and Kashmir.

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70 years ago- this year - the former princely state of Kashmir was divided between two new counties – India and Pakistan. In the 70 years that have passed since then, no solution has been reached regarding the legality or legitimacy of the partition. Many devastating wars have been fought and around the turn of the millennium, the world was on the verge of a nuclear war as tension ran high between the two nuclear powers.

Today, when the Kashmir conflict is raised, most people shudder. We hear words like “an unsolveable conflict”, “there is no solution”, “The UN is hamstrung”, “ it is a lost cause”: Kashmir is so complex, so violent, the conflict so locked, there is no right or wrong- and it is so easy to go wrong. Let us look the other way.

And while the world looks the other way, the volatile political situation in the region has led India to establish a comprehensive military presence in Jammu and Kashmir, with an around 700,000 soldiers deployed.

Fearing terrorism and secessionist movements, the Indian government has enacted a series of laws and established a system of military courts that have replaced India’s democratic constitution. In Jammu and Kashmir, this is the state of democracy- 70 years after India reached its independence and enacted its democratic constitution.

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But suppose for a moment that you cannot walk away. Suppose that this happens to be your home, that your life happens to be in the most militarized zone in the world.

- Where children and husbands are abducted, and disappear on their way to school or work- for never to reappear.

- Where the basic human rights of security, safety, and the right to organize are not guaranteed.

- Where the conflict has reached a level of distrust of the “enemy”- or “the other” - that you deprive them of any claims to your empathy.

- Where a young man- on his way home from voting in the April local election - is randomly picked up by soldiers, tied to a jeep, and used as a human shield to protect the soldiers from young people throwing stones.

THIS is what life in an intractable conflict feels like. Where fear, violence and anger dehumanizes the other side- your enemy is no longer a person- but a shield against stones. This is the life of everyday people in Jammu and Kashmir.

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In this situation- that the international world has chosen to forget- brave individuals have been working for decades for human rights and a peaceful solution to the conflict. Together- our price lauderates fill significant positions in the non-violent human rights movement in the region, fighting for the right to a peaceful life and to own their history.

As a mother, Parveena Ahangar turned her grief from losing her teenage son who was abducted by the authorities in 1990 to never reappear - into a fight for all grieving mothers and wives- as she herself has said:

*“I am not only fighting for my son. I am fighting for all of us”.* (Parveena Ahangar)

Parveez Imroz has joined her in this struggle. A key part of the human rights struggle is simply to have the right to own your history- and Parveez Imroz have tirelessly fought for information, to build a history of disappearances and, to use judicial means to prosecute the cases. As – he says:

“*I believe that at least some people have to stand and say no; this is not acceptable, and we will campaign against it*”

Parveena Ahangar and Parvez Imroz - the mother and the lawyer – you have dedicated your lives to the struggle for basic human rights and dignity for the peoples’ of Jammu and Kashmir. With this award, the Rafto foundation wants to highlight the courage you have shown by giving a voice to ordinary citizens, in the most militarized and volatile parts of the world – Kashmir.

With this prize, we urge the human rights movement in Norway and internationally to learn and be inspired by the exemplary work of Parveena Ahangar and Parvez Imroz. You have created and maintained a non-violent movement committed to the struggle for basic human rights and a decent life for the people of Jammu and Kashmir. Your voices remind us that no conflict should take precedence over the right to a life free from violence, torture and fear.

Parveena Anaher and Parveez Imroz please accept our recognition for your long campaign to expose human rights violations, promote dialogue and seek peaceful solutions to the intractable conflict in Kashmir. Your work has inspired new generations across communities. I call on you to come to the podium and receive the 2017 Thorolf Rafto Prize for Human Rights.