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FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE

Advancement of Social Responsibility within Rajasthan Prisons: Interactions among Civil Society Organisations and Corporates

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The Prison Reforms Programme of Commonwealth Human Rights Initiative (CHRI) jointly with Rajasthan State Human Rights Commission (RSHRC) organised a one day roundtable on ‘Civil Society and Corporate Participation in Prisons’ today. The panel of speakers consisted of Dr. M.K. Devarajan, Member of the RSHRC, Ms. Maja Daruwala, Director of CHRI, Mr. R.K. Saxena, Retd. IG Prison, Rajasthan and Mr. Nigel Akkara, Entrepreneur, Kolkata Facilities Management. This was held over the issues regarding prison reforms in Rajasthan, where CHRI has been working for the last 4 years. Over thirty civil societies groups and six corporates, from the districts of Jaipur, Ajmer and Jodhpur from Rajasthan and from Delhi, took part during the interactive sessions to discuss civil and corporate interventions in prisons.

Dr. Devarajan shared the manifold impacts of collaborations by the Tamil Nadu Prisons with NGOs and corporates on cultivating skills. This sparked responses from the participants on problems regarding strictly defined CSR mandates that make it difficult for corporates to invest in the vocational training and skill development of prisoners. The Hon. Secretary General of the Rajasthan Chamber of Commerce, Mr. K.L. Jain said that the list of areas where CSR investment may be done does not yet have prisoners’ livelihoods as a priority area and that he would take up this issue with the corporates in his organisation so that this may be rectified. Members of the Rajasthan Chamber of Commerce were also present to share their ideas of engaging corporate sectors into working inside of prisons.

Mr. Saxena said that “Society creates as many criminals it deserves.” Only a few corporates and civil society groups are to be found working in prisons are is reflective of society’s overall lack of social responsibility towards prisoners.

Sister Mariola from Prison Ministry expressed the concern of how to hold accountable borstal and other detention homes which let trade tools rot when they could easily be used to impart vocational skills to inmates. She raised the important question why the government was not appointing them as Non-Official Visitors for prisons. Dr. Manjul Mehta, Indian Medical Association, stated that adequate representatives of the government must be present where discussions over prison policy, such as passing the Rajasthan Prison Bill, are being made.

A heartfelt testimony was heard from speaker Mr. Nigel Akkara on his personal transformation and difficulties in reintegration into society upon release from West Bengal Correctional Home. He said that all prisons should benefit from becoming a “correctional home” rather than creating an environment of recidivism for prisoners.

Ms. Maja Daruwala discussed on the issue of rights of the prisoners. She stated that it is mandatory for those working on prisoners’ rights to have some knowledge of the law, the jail administrative procedures and the constraints of jail officers.

Among these discussions, various other topics were covered. These included access to jails, counselling and therapy for prisoners, medical services, prison visiting system, periodic review committee and the enactment of the Rajasthan Prison Bill. By the end of the interactive sessions, the civil society participants came to agree that joint meetings should be held in future with the same body of people, for more discussions on how to create a stronger impact and support to prison reforms work, particularly, in Rajasthan.

About CHRI and its Prison Reform Programme: The Commonwealth Human Rights Initiative (CHRI) is an independent, non-partisan, international non-governmental organization mandated to ensure the practical realization of human rights in the countries of the Commonwealth. Commonwealth Human Rights Initiative was founded in 1987 by Commonwealth professional associations; it is headquartered in New Delhi, India since 1993, and has offices in Accra, Ghana and London, UK.

CHRI advocates for better respect for protection and promotion of international human rights standards and ensuring greater adherence to Commonwealth Harare principles. Issues relating to accountability and participation in governance – access to justice and access to information – are at the heart of CHRI’s work. It also overviews the human rights situation in countries of the Commonwealth, looking especially at human rights defenders, compliance with international treaty obligations and monitoring the performance of Commonwealth members of the United Nations Human Rights Council.

The *Prison Reforms Programme* of CHRI has its focus on early safeguards against unnecessary detention and addresses overcrowding of prisons. Currently the programme is working collaboratively with the West Bengal and Rajasthan Prison Departments and the respective State Legal Services Authority to provide legal assistance to various categories of undertrial prisoners for availing early access to counsel, legal aid safeguards and suitable non-custodial measures.