International Human Rights Commission to Review Racial Inequality in U.S. Justice System

FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE

March 1, 2006

WASHINGTON, DC—The Inter-American Commission on Human Rights will hear testimony about the impact of current sentencing policies on communities of color within the United States, on Friday, March 3, 10:15 a.m. at the Organization of American States. The hearing is open to the public and witnesses will be made available to the media immediately following the hour-long hearing.

Testifying before the Commission are:

- **Judge Patricia Wald**, Member of the American Bar Association’s Committee on Effective Criminal Sanctions; former judge on the International Criminal Tribunal in the Hague; and Chief Judge for the US Court of Appeals for the DC Circuit (1986-1991);
- **Professor Charles Ogletree**, Executive Director of Harvard Law School’s Charles Hamilton Houston Institute for Race and Justice;
- **Gay McDougall**, Executive Director of Global Rights and the first United Nations Independent Expert on Minority Issues;
- **Kemba Smith**, who was sentenced to a mandatory minimum 24 year term for her minor role in a crack cocaine drug conspiracy and was granted clemency by President Clinton in 2000.

The hearing is in response to a petition filed by the Justice Roundtable, a broad network of civil and human rights organizations, that includes: the American Civil Liberties Union, Global Rights, the Open Society Policy Center, the Leadership Conference on Civil Rights, the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People, and The Sentencing Project. Signers are asking the Commission to examine the discriminatory impact of mandatory minimum sentencing in the federal criminal system, particularly the disparity between crack and powder cocaine. These sentences are widely viewed as the cause of unprecedented growth in the federal prison population and the disproportionate incarceration of people of color. Witnesses at Friday’s hearing will ask the Commission to determine whether the United States government is violating international law and norms protected under the American Declaration of the Rights and Duties of Man through the implementation of mandatory minimum sentences.

The IACHR promotes the observance and defense of human rights within the Americas. Any person, group of persons or non-governmental organization may present a petition to the Commission alleging violations of the rights protected in the American Convention on Human Rights and/or the American Declaration of the Rights and Duties of Man. The United States is a
signatory to the American Declaration. Each year only a fraction of the petitions filed with the Commission are selected for a hearing.

The Organization of American States is headquartered at 1889 F Street, N.W. in Washington, DC. A press conference in front of the OAS building is scheduled to immediately follow the hearing at 11:30 a.m. Hearing witnesses and other national experts on sentencing policy will be available for questions from the media. Additional experts available for comment are:

- Jesselyn McCurdy, Legislative Counsel for the American Civil Liberties Union;
- Chandra Bhatnagar, Field Organizer for the American Civil Liberties Union;
- Eric Sterling, Executive Director of the Criminal Justice Policy Foundation;
- Marc Mauer, Executive Director of The Sentencing Project;
- Mary Price, General Counsel for Families Against Mandatory Minimums;
- Nkechi Taifa, Senior Policy Analyst for the Open Society Policy Center;
- Carmen Hernandez, Vice President of the National Association of Criminal Defense Lawyers.

To RSVP, please contact Kara Gotsch at 202-628-0871 or kgotch@sentencingproject.org.