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Press Advisory

June 4, 2008 (Ottawa) – The Canadian Association of Elizabeth Fry Societies (CAEFS) and the Native Women's Association of Canada (NWAC) join the women in prison and other community based groups in calling on the Minister of Public Safety to reconsider the decision to remove tobacco from the federal prisons.

In addition to the reality that many prisoners “live” in the federal prisons for many years, approximately one third of the women are Aboriginal. The ban on tobacco will significantly infringe on their spiritual practices of smudging, as tobacco and any instruments used to light tobacco are now considered contraband in the federal prisons. In addition to regulating spiritual practices via this ban, access to sacred ceremonies is being treated as though it is optional, like a privilege or a program, rather than a constitutional and human right. Furthermore, the Correctional Service of Canada has taken the cynical and hypocritical move of allowing tobacco use by staff.

“Initially, we were all advised that the tobacco ban was being implemented for health reasons,” indicated Maître Lucie Joncas, President of the Canadian Association of Elizabeth Fry Societies. “As this matter has progressed, however, it is clear that what was originally raised as a health issue, has now become yet another tool in the arsenal of Correctional Services to withhold rights that prisoners should otherwise enjoy. The reality is not lost on any of us that the disproportionate impact of this ban will be experienced by Aboriginal women and men in prison. It appears to be yet another form of discriminatory treatment, one that the marginalized and the criminalized population knows all too well.”

“We recently became aware of the fact that the Correctional Service of Canada is planning to create smoking areas for staff, while simultaneously prohibiting all prisoners from accessing tobacco, except through extremely limited means and with the authority of an employee of the Correctional Service of Canada. If this sort of limitation on spiritual practices was imposed on any other group, the uproar would be deafening,” continued Beverley Jacobs, President of the Native Women’s Association of Canada. “We are always concerned about anything that will compromise the health and safety of the women inside, but to allow staff to smoke outside and to not permit women the same access to smoking is one thing. To severely curtail their access to spiritual practices, such as smudging and other ceremonies where tobacco should be freely available to them, is to essentially promote the continuation of the cultural and spiritual genocide our people have experienced for far too long.”

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