Rape victim vindicated as Ombudsman upholds complaint against the Foreign Office

London, UK, 27 November 2013 – REDRESS welcomes the Parliamentary Ombudsman’s release of a report that upholds the complaint of a rape victim and calls for changes in the way consular officers deal with cases of violence against British citizens overseas.

The victim – Ms M, a British aid worker – was raped by a military officer at a checkpoint in Egypt in May 2011. After the incident, she contacted the British embassy in Cairo for help, but they offered little sympathy and only minimal support at a time when she was frightened and at her most vulnerable.

Contrary to their own internal guidance, consular staff did not offer to accompany Ms M to report the rape to the police, despite her fears of having to report the crime to the same authorities responsible for it, nor was she given any assistance in arranging a medical examination. When she did attempt to report the crime, Ms M was held against her will by the military.

On her return to the UK, Ms M sought help from REDRESS, and complained to the Foreign and Commonwealth Office (FCO). The FCO’s initial response was to defend the actions of the embassy in Cairo. Months of dialogue with the FCO only led to a partial apology - and an offer to review their internal guidance and improve training for staff. REDRESS then took her complaint to the Parliamentary Ombudsman, which investigates complaints of poor or unfair service from government departments and other public organisations.

The full investigation by the Ombudsman, which is the focus of their report, released on 26 November 2013, upholds Ms M’s complaint and finds multiple examples of maladministration by the FCO. As a result of the Ombudsman’s findings, the FCO has provided a full apology and monetary compensation to the victim. They have also changed their guidance on handling sexual violence complaints, have agreed to change their guidance on torture and ill-treatment, and will improve training for their consular staff.

According to the report, Ms M “should have been able to rely on them to fulfil their role and assist her when she was at her most vulnerable. We have concluded, however, that the FCO failed to give Ms M the assistance she should have reasonable expected to receive.”

“I’m really pleased with the Ombudsman’s report and very grateful to REDRESS. It was important to fight the Foreign Office on this. Not only did many of their staff fail to do their job to assist me, but their behaviour also reflected a wider pattern of blaming the victim that sexual violence victims often experience,” said Ms M. “Had they implemented their own policy of listening to victims rather than criticising them, they would have identified that this was a torture case, and not tried to send me back to the military to report military abuse.”
Carla Ferstman, Director of REDRESS, stated: “We are glad that the Ombudsman has upheld the complaint, and has called on the Foreign and Commonwealth Office to improve the way they handle such complaints, putting victims’ needs first. When the victim contacted the British embassy for help, even though she had been raped by a military officer, she was left alone to seek medical treatment and to report the crime to the very authorities responsible for it. This not only increased her anxiety and trauma further but also seriously jeopardized her safety.”

For further information or to request an interview with Ms M please contact Sarah Fulton, REDRESS’ International Legal Advisor, on sarah@redress.org or +44 20 3286 5435.

About REDRESS: REDRESS was founded by a torture survivor in 1992 in London. Since then, it has consistently fought for the rights of torture survivors and their families in the UK and abroad. It has intervened in a range of leading torture cases. More information is available on: www.redress.org.

About the Parliamentary Ombudsman: The Parliamentary and Health Service Ombudsman was set up by Parliament to help both individuals and the general public. The Ombudsman’s role is to investigate complaints that individuals have been treated unfairly or have received poor service from government departments and other public organisations. The service is free to use and open to everyone. If someone is unhappy about the service they have received from a government department or another public organisation, they can contact the Ombudsman – call 0345 015 4033 or email phso.enquiries@ombudsman.org.uk.