

**FERN
LEONA
HOLLAND**
1970-2004



**CHAMPIONED
IRAQI
WOMENS
RIGHTS**

Fern Holland, a Cherokee Nation citizen and women's activist, put her life on the line for Iraqi women. She was killed in the Iraqi conflict while helping Iraqi women gain their freedom.

Fern Leona Holland was born in August 1970 in Bluejacket, a small town between Vinita and Miami. In 1992, she graduated from the University of Oklahoma and then volunteered in the children's hospitals of Russia and South Africa. In 1996, she graduated from the University of Tulsa College of Law and then worked for two Tulsa law firms before joining the Peace Corps and working in Namibia, where she helped build schools and bring AIDS education to the most isolated areas. In 2002, she travelled to Guinea on behalf of the American Refugee Committee to implement solutions for dealing with widespread human rights abuses that occurred in refugee camps.

In July 2003, Holland was hired by the U. S. Agency for International Development (USAID) to investigate human rights abuses under Saddam Hussein's regime. Her efforts centered around the new role of Iraqi women in a culture in which they had historically been denied meaningful participation. At the conclusion of her tour with USAID, she was retained by the Coalition Provisional Authority to help Iraqis establish a democratic form of government.

Holland, Marine Reserve officer and civilian contractor Robert Zangas, and their Iraqi translator Salwa Oumashi were ambushed in their car while returning to base from a women's center in Karbala in March 2004. Their killers wore Iraqi police uniforms. No arrests were ever made. The New York Times Magazine reported that Holland was intentionally targeted for murder by those threatened by her empowerment of women.

In 2006, federal investigators began investigating the disappearance of \$320,000 issued by American authorities to Holland and Zangas. American investigators were trying to determine whether that money was stolen as part of a web of bribery, kickbacks, and theft. No suspicion for the missing money fell on Holland and Zangas. The corruption case resulted in the arrest of four people who had some role in handling the money or were involved in some way with Holland's projects.

American occupation official Robert Stein, Jr. pleaded guilty to five counts of bribery. He distributed the cash to Holland and Zangas and was involved in accounting for it after their deaths. American businessman Philip Bloom, who was involved in changing Holland's projects after her death, pled guilty to conspiracy, bribery and money laundering. Two Army Reserve officers, Debra Harrison and Michael Wheeler, were charged with accepting bribes.

At the core of the corruption case was a scheme in which Stein steered at least \$8.6 million in reconstruction contracts to companies controlled by Bloom, in exchange for millions of dollars in bribes, jewelry and other favors. Stein also pled guilty to federal weapons charges for using money to buy submachine guns, grenade launchers and other weapons back in the United States.

Fern Holland grew up believing that one person could make a difference in the world. She knew her work placed her at extreme risk. It was a risk she was willing to assume in order to bring some measure of hope and equality to the women of Iraq. Since 2004, the Fern Holland Award is annually given in tribute to her legacy to honor a leader who braves risks to promote peace and defends the human rights of a targeted or vulnerable community.