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Report 2004: War on global values -- attacks by armed groups and governments fuel mistrust, fear and division

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(London) Governments and armed groups have launched a war on global values, destroying the human rights of ordinary people, Amnesty International said today as it released its annual assessment of human rights worldwide.

Launching the Amnesty International Report 2004, the organization said that violence by armed groups and increasing violations by governments have combined to produce the most sustained attack on human rights and international humanitarian law in 50 years. This was leading to a world of growing mistrust, fear and division.

"Callous, cruel and criminal attacks by armed groups such as al-Qa'ida, pose a very real threat to the security of people everywhere. We condemn them in the strongest possible terms as serious crimes under international and domestic law, amounting at times to war crimes and crimes against humanity," said Irene Khan, Secretary General of Amnesty International.

Amnesty International strongly condemned armed groups responsible for atrocities such as the March 11 bombing in Madrid and the bomb attack on the United Nations building in Iraq on 19 August 2003, which killed UN High Commissioner for Human Rights Sergio Vieira de Mello.

It said that violent attacks on civilians and on institutions established to provide solutions to conflict and insecurity - such as the United Nations and International Committee of the Red Cross - represented a significant new threat to international justice.

"But it is also frightening that the principles of international law and the tools of multilateral action which could protect us from these attacks are being undermined, marginalized or destroyed by powerful governments," said Irene Khan.

"Governments are losing their moral compass, sacrificing the global values of human rights in a blind pursuit of security. This failure of leadership is a dangerous concession to armed groups."

"The global security agenda promoted by the US Administration is bankrupt of vision and bereft of principle. Violating rights at home, turning a blind eye to abuses abroad and using pre-emptive military force where and when it chooses has damaged justice and freedom, and made the world a more dangerous place."

The report details unlawful killings of civilians by Coalition troops and armed groups in Iraq. Reports of torture and ill-treatment underline the vulnerability of hundreds of prisoners, not only in Iraq but also at Guantánamo Bay in Cuba, Afghanistan and elsewhere, incarcerated by the United States and its allies without charge, trial, or access to lawyers or protection of the Geneva Conventions.

"By failing to protect the rights of those who may be guilty, governments endanger the rights of those who are innocent, and put us all at risk."

The "war on terror" and the war in Iraq has encouraged a new wave of human rights abuse and diverted attention from old ones. Hidden from the eyes of the world, Report 2004 documents festering internal conflicts in places like Chechnya, Colombia, the Democratic Republic of Congo, Sudan, and Nepal which have become a breeding ground of some of the worst atrocities. Violence in Israel and the Occupied Territories has deepened, while elsewhere many governments are openly pursuing repressive agendas.

"While governments have been obsessed with the threat of weapons of mass destruction in Iraq, they have allowed the real weapons of mass destruction-- injustice and impunity, poverty, discrimination and racism, the uncontrolled trade in small arms, violence against women and abuse of children -- to go unaddressed," said Irene Khan.

"The world is crying out for principled leadership based on the global values of human rights."

While underlining abuse and impunity, hypocrisy and double standards of governments, Amnesty International highlighted the emerging power of civil society to turn the tide in favour of human rights.

There are unequivocal signs of a global justice movement -- the millions of citizens who took to the streets around the world in solidarity with the Iraqi people, Spaniards who marched in the name of humanity after the attacks in Madrid, global citizens who gathered at the World Social Forum in Brazil.

"Governments need to listen. In times of uncertainty the world needs not only fight against global threats, but to fight for global justice," said Irene Khan.

Globally, despite the crusade by the United States to undermine international justice and ensure global immunity for its citizens, the International Criminal Court appointed its prosecutor and began its work in earnest. Slowly the courts in the United States and the United Kingdom have begun to scrutinise the executive power to restrict human rights.

"Human rights matter because they offer a powerful and compelling vision of a better and fairer world, and a concrete plan of how to get there. These global values of justice are the most effective route to security and peace," said Irene Khan.

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