

AMNESTY INTERNATIONAL PRESS RELEASE

AI Index: ACT 77/018/2004 (Public)
News Service No: 026
6 February 2004

Embargo Date: 6 February 2004 01:00 GMT

International Zero Tolerance to FGM Day: Effective measures needed to protect girls from female genital mutilation

As the world observes the first International Zero Tolerance to Female Genital Mutilation (FGM) Day, Amnesty International is appealing to all governments to ensure effective protection of girls from female genital mutilation (FGM).

"Governments are responsible for protecting women and girls' physical and mental integrity. Moving against FGM should be part of a comprehensive approach to protect women from violence and assert their equal status in society," Amnesty International said.

During its last meeting in February 2003, the Inter-African Committee on Traditional Practices Affecting the Health of Women and Children (IAC) adopted a "Declaration of Zero Tolerance to FGM on the African Continent". The Declaration stresses that the "zero tolerance forum will be an initiative which will bring all [our] efforts to celebrate, reflect and deliberate on FGM and to renew [our] commitment to protect African women from cultural and traditional belief systems that are inimical to the sexual and reproductive rights of women in the continent".

The February 2003 meeting also adopted a *Common Agenda* to provide a common framework for all organizations and actors to intensify and coordinate activities at different levels while respecting their diversity.

"The Declaration and the Common Agenda are welcome signs of determination to eliminate FGM. The IAC should act decisively to spur governments, NGOs and other stakeholders to coordinate efforts to eradicate FGM and other harmful traditional practices which contribute to the perpetuation of violence against women".

So far, only 14 African countries have adopted laws banning the practice. Despite the fact that enforcement of the laws is made difficult by social pressure to undergo the ritual, Amnesty International believes that legislation is an important tool in creating a protective environment for girls and women affected by this practice and asks African governments to accompany legislative efforts with measures that will promote the status of women with regards to their internationally protected human rights, especially, the right to life and physical integrity and the right to health.

On this first international day, Amnesty International urges African governments to comply with

the obligations they have contracted by ratifying international instruments such as the Convention on the Rights of the Child, the Convention for the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women and the African Charter on Human and People's Rights.

Amnesty International also calls on all African governments to ratify the Additional Protocol on Women Rights in Africa adopted at the African Union Summit in Maputo in July 2003. The Protocol is the first international instrument which explicitly protects women's reproductive rights including an explicit call for the legal prohibition of female genital mutilation.

Background

Female Genital Mutilation comprises all procedures involving partial or total removal of the external female genitalia or other injury to the female genital organs whether for cultural, religious or other non-therapeutic reasons.

The immediate and long-term health consequences of female genital mutilation vary according to the type and severity of the procedure performed. Immediate complications include severe pain, shock, haemorrhage, urine retention, ulceration of the genital region and injury to adjacent tissue. Long-term complications include, recurring urinary tract infections, pelvic infections, infertility (from deep infections), scarring, difficulties in menstruation, fistulae (holes or tunnels between the vagina and the bladder or rectum), painful intercourse, sexual dysfunction, and problems in pregnancy and childbirth (the need to cut the vagina to allow delivery and the trauma that results, often compounded by re-stitching).

Female Genital Mutilation is practiced in 28 African countries as well as in Asia (Indonesia) and the Middle-East (Yemen). It is increasingly found in Europe, Australia, Canada and the USA, primarily among immigrants from these countries.

Today, the number of girls and women who have undergone female genital mutilation is estimated at between 100 and 140 million. It is estimated that each year, a further 2 million girls are at risk of undergoing FGM.

Public Document

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