

AMNESTY INTERNATIONAL

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First Session of the Human Rights Council: A step in the right direction

Amnesty International welcomes the many substantive outcomes of the first session of the new Human Rights Council, meeting in Geneva 19-30 June 2006, which has laid important groundwork for a stronger and more effective United Nations (UN) human rights political body.

Amnesty International welcomes the following main achievements of the first session of the Human Rights Council (the Council):

The Council's consensus adoption of the International Convention for the Protection of All Persons from Enforced Disappearance and its decision, by majority vote, to adopt the UN Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples. The new Convention will fill a major gap in existing human rights standards, and the Declaration will set human rights standards crucial for the dignity and well-being of the world's indigenous peoples. The Council has referred both instruments for adoption by the General Assembly later this year.

The Council's decision enabling its Special Procedures to continue with the implementation of their mandates for one year, subject to the completion of the review of these independent thematic and country experts. This reflects their importance as the cornerstone of the UN's human rights efforts -- "the frontline troops", as noted by Secretary-General Kofi Annan in his address to the Council, "to whom we look to protect human rights and give us early warning of violations". Amnesty International also welcomes the Council's decision to consider the reports of the Special Procedures at its second session (September 2006) and urges the Council to act promptly and effectively on their recommendations to protect human rights in specific countries.

The Council's decision to create two open-ended Working Groups: the first will develop the modalities and time allocation for the novel mechanism of Universal Periodic Review to monitor the human rights performance of all UN member states. The second will undertake a review of the Special Procedures which Amnesty International expects to strengthen their functioning, including by filling any gaps in existing mandates. Amnesty International is pleased to note that both processes are required to combine flexibility with transparency and inclusiveness involving the participation of all stakeholders, including non-governmental organizations. Both Working Groups must complete their mandate within one year.

The Council's decision to take a further step towards the creation of a complaints mechanism in the form of an Optional Protocol to the International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights by extending the mandate of the open-ended Working Group to prepare a draft text. The Optional Protocol will be a key mechanism to enhance the effective implementation of all economic, social and cultural rights.

On the last day of the session, the Council decided to convene a Special Session to consider the situation on human rights in the Occupied Palestinian Territories. The resolution establishing the

Human Rights Council stipulated that it may convene in Special Session to consider human rights emergencies with the support of a third of its members. Amnesty International calls on the Council to commit to concrete action to address the serious violations of human rights taking place in the Occupied Palestinian Territories.

Amnesty International welcomes the Council's decision to convene a Special Session on human rights in the Occupied Palestinian Territories and calls for concrete action to address the gross human rights abuses currently taking place there. Amnesty International hopes that the Council will find constructive ways of addressing other equally serious human rights situations around the world such as the deteriorating situation in Sudan which has already spilt over into neighbouring Chad.

Amnesty International renews its call on all members of the Council to make every effort to rise above the selective politicised practices of the former UN Commission on Human Rights. The constructive approach demonstrated in connection with standard-setting and institution-building must be carried over to the Council's work on all pressing country situations.