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Report 2005: A dangerous new agenda

(London) Governments are betraying their promise of a world order based on human rights and are pursuing a dangerous new agenda, said Amnesty International today as it launched its annual assessment of global human rights.

Speaking at the launch of the *Amnesty International Report 2005*, the organization's Secretary General Irene Khan said that governments had failed to show principled leadership and must be held to account.

"Governments are betraying their promises on human rights. A new agenda is in the making with the language of freedom and justice being used to pursue policies of fear and insecurity. This includes cynical attempts to redefine and sanitise torture," said Irene Khan.

This new agenda, combined with the indifference and paralysis of the international community, failed countless thousands of people in humanitarian crises and forgotten conflicts throughout 2004.

In Darfur, the Sudanese government generated a human rights catastrophe and the international community did too little too late to address the crisis, betraying hundreds of thousands of people.

In Haiti, individuals responsible for serious human rights violations were allowed to regain positions of power. In the eastern Democratic Republic of Congo there was no effective response to the systematic rape of tens of thousands of women, children and even babies. Despite the holding of elections, Afghanistan slipped into a downward spiral of lawlessness and instability. Violence was endemic in Iraq.

At a national level governments betrayed human rights at terrible cost to ordinary people. Russian soldiers reportedly tortured, raped and sexually abused Chechen women with impunity. Zimbabwe's government manipulated food shortages for political reasons.

The betrayal of human rights by governments was accompanied by increasingly horrific acts of terrorism as armed groups stooped to new levels of brutality.

"The televised beheading of captives in Iraq, the taking of over a thousand people hostage including hundreds of children in a school in Beslan and the massacre of hundreds of commuters in

Madrid shocked the world. Yet governments are failing to confront their lack of success in addressing terrorism, persisting with failed but politically-convenient strategies. Four years after 9/11, the promise to make the world a safer place remains hollow," said Ms Khan.

The US administration's attempts to dilute the absolute ban on torture through new policies and quasi-management speak such as "environmental manipulation", "stress positions" and "sensory manipulation", was one of the most damaging assaults on global values.

Despite the US administration's repeated use of the language of justice and freedom there was a huge gap between rhetoric and reality. This was starkly illustrated by the failure to conduct a full and independent investigation into the appalling torture and ill-treatment of detainees by US soldiers in Iraq's Abu Ghraib prison and the failure to hold senior individuals to account.

"The USA, as the unrivalled political, military and economic hyper-power, sets the tone for governmental behaviour worldwide. When the most powerful country in the world thumbs its nose at the rule of law and human rights, it grants a licence to others to commit abuse with impunity," said Irene Khan.

Many governments showed a shocking contempt for the rule of law. Nigeria granted Charles Taylor, former President of Liberia, refugee status despite his indictment for killings, mutilations and rape. Israel's construction of a barrier inside the occupied West Bank ignored the International Court of Justice opinion that this violated international human rights and humanitarian law. Arbitrary detentions and unfair trials took place under security legislation in a number of countries.

There were also signs of hope in 2004 said Ms Khan.

Legal challenges to the new agenda included US Supreme Court judgements on Guantánamo detainees and the ruling by the UK Law Lords on indefinite detention without charge or trial of "terrorist suspects". Public pressure included the spontaneous turnout of millions of people in Spain protesting against the Madrid bombings, popular uprisings in Georgia and Ukraine and the growing debate on political change in the Middle East.

"Increasingly, the duplicity of governments and the brutality of armed groups are being challenged - by judicial decisions, popular resistance, public pressure and UN reform initiatives. The challenge for the human rights movement is to harness the power of civil society and push governments to deliver on their human rights promises," said Irene Khan.

For a full copy of the *Amnesty International Report 2005: the state of the world's human rights* please go to: <http://news.amnesty.org>

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