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KENYA: GOVERNMENT IMAGE CONCEALS HUMAN RIGHTS ABUSES

PARIS -- Human rights abuses against women reflect a pattern of repression in Kenya, where government critics, human rights activists and ordinary citizens face harassment, detention, torture and death.

As a meeting of donor countries opened in Paris today to review Kenya's use of foreign assistance, Amnesty International asked donor governments to examine the government's poor human rights record and use their links with the Kenyan authorities to insist on safeguards for human rights for both women and men. The organization takes no position for or against the imposition of economic sanctions

In a report released today in Paris, Amnesty International documents how women in Kenya who are government critics, opposition activists, members of the human rights movement and relatives of government opponents have been persecuted.

Women have also been harassed, raped and tortured by Kenyan security forces, or deliberately and arbitrarily killed in political violence apparently initiated or condoned by the government, according to the 21-page report Women in Kenya: Repression and resistance.

Such human rights violations could be prevented by strong action at the Fourth United Nations World Conference on Women, to be held in Beijing in September 1995, which should reaffirm governments' commitments to international human rights standards, the organization said.

Although many foreign governments, foreign journalists, and international aid agencies have political or economic interests in Kenya or use it as a convenient base of operations in the region, they should not remain "silent witnesses" to human rights violations there. Without international pressure, the government is unlikely to heed internal demands to end the abuse.

Human rights activists, many of them women, are currently campaigning for a new constitution, an independent judiciary and the repeal of repressive laws. Yet such dissent has meant reprisals. Since the beginning of 1995, opposition members of parliament have been arrested and detained for up to three months, an opposition journal has been fire-bombed and its printing press put out of action, and human rights organizations have been harassed, with one organization fire-bombed six times and two others banned.

Meetings organized by women's groups have sometimes been violently broken up or even prevented from going ahead at all. On 18 June 1994, for example, armed police attacked a women's seminar at which a local opposition member of parliament spoke. Over 100 women were beaten by police officers.

Other women have been harassed or imprisoned because they are relatives of government opponents, such as the mother of activist and former politician Koigi wa Wamwere. Currently on trial for his life, Koigi wa Wamwere has been accused, falsely in Amnesty International's view, of

raiding a police station with three others, including his brother and brother-in-law. His mother, activist Monica Wangu Wamwere, has had her house surrounded by police several times. Twice it has been demolished.

The sister of a prominent government critic was held illegally and incommunicado for 22 days before being charged with robbery with violence, which carries the death penalty. Josephine Nyawira Ngengi said that police tortured her, forcing blunt objects into her vagina until she bled. Released and re-arrested three times, Josephine Nyawira Ngengi faces a mandatory death sentence if convicted.

Truphena Obwaka Shirako was arrested in January 1994 for allegedly stealing money from her employer, an international non-governmental organization. Four policemen beat her for hours and pushed a bottle into her vagina. The 51-year-old woman was eventually taken to hospital with extensive injuries. Two of the policemen were later arrested and charged. Both denied the charges and were released on bond.

Other methods of torture used by police to obtain confessions include rape, beatings and whipping, suspension upside down by chains and submersion in water.

The majority of people internally displaced by political violence are women and children. Women have been abducted and raped during attacks, as well as deliberately and arbitrarily killed. In one incident, five women were reportedly abducted and raped by members of the General Services Unit, a paramilitary police unit in the area.

Amnesty International calls on the Kenya government to translate its stated commitment to human rights into effective action by, among other things, investigating human rights violations and prosecuting those responsible.

In particular, Amnesty International asks the Kenyan government to increase protection for women by:

- publicly committing itself to safeguarding women's human rights
- taking effective steps to prevent rape, sexual abuse and other torture and ill-treatment in custody
- ensuring that all political prisoners charged with a criminal offence receive a prompt and fair trial by a competent, independent and impartial tribunal
- guaranteeing that women activists can carry out peaceful activities without risk of jail or harassment
- protecting refugee women and asylum-seekers from torture, including rape

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