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LETTER TO EDITORS

Tanzania: Appeal for government to act against female genital mutilation

Female genital mutilation "initiation" rituals (FGM - also known as female circumcision) are about to begin or are currently being carried out in many regions of Tanzania. During the school holidays, between now and early January 1999, thousands of girls are at risk of being genitally mutilated in communities where these traditional cultural practices remain common.

Amnesty International considers every form of FGM to be a violation of human rights, and the organization's members in many countries in Africa, including Tanzania, are working with local non-governmental organizations to eradicate it.

In a letter to Tanzanian President Benjamin Mkapa and other government members, especially the Ministries responsible for women's and children's health, Amnesty International has asked the government to honour its obligations under national and international law by taking immediate measures to prevent female genital mutilation from taking place in these widespread seasonal rituals.

The organization is calling on President Mkapa to take the lead in publicly condemning female genital mutilation, in supporting the work of the relevant government departments and NGOs in raising awareness about this human rights abuse and in ensuring respect for the new law which prohibits FGM.

Tanzania has ratified both the United Nations (UN) Convention on the Rights of the Child and the UN Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women, and it signed the African Charter on the Rights and Welfare of the Child on 23 October 1998 (parliament has not yet ratified it).

Article 21 of the African Children's Charter states that: "*States Parties to the present Charter shall take all appropriate measures to eliminate harmful social and cultural practices affecting the welfare, dignity, normal growth and development of the child and in particular: (a) those customs and practices prejudicial to the health and life of the child...*".

In July 1998, new legislation was enacted in Tanzania under the Sexual Offences Special Provision Act (1998) to outlaw female circumcision of children under 18 (though unfortunately not against adults too, who can still be subjected to FGM if they have escaped it at a younger age) and to make it a serious criminal offence, punishable by imprisonment.

The government and NGOs in Tanzania have undertaken some educational work against FGM. However, the government has not yet said what steps it is taking to ensure respect for the new law. The present "FGM season" is the government's first major challenge and opportunity, since the new law was enacted and since Tanzania signed the African Children's Charter, to set out and implement a policy and strategy for eradicating FGM throughout the country.

To receive Amnesty International's FGM Information Pack, please call AI's Tanzania Section (tel: (255) 51 131 708) or AI's Marketing and Supply Department in London (tel (44) 171 413 5507, or e-mail: ppmsteam@amnesty.org), quoting the above AI Index no.