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PAKISTAN GOVERNMENT FAILS TO LIVE UP TO HUMAN RIGHTS RHETORIC

Islamabad -- A delegation from Amnesty International's International Secretariat today completed a round of high level talks with government ministers, senior officials, parliamentarians and legal authorities on the organisation's human rights concerns in Pakistan.

The delegation noted the many positive statements the Pakistan Government has made internationally about its commitment to improved human rights protection and promotion in the country. Regrettably, however, the delegation found that this rhetoric was not matched by the reality on the ground.

The delegation recognised that the government is making some genuine efforts to improve laws and strengthen safeguards with a view to curbing human rights violations. These include the ratification of the Convention for the Elimination of Discrimination Against Women, the partial abolition of flogging and the proposed abolition of the death penalty for children under 16.

However, the delegation was shocked at the complacency with which government ministers and officials acknowledged that torture is a fact of life in Pakistan. In its submission to the government, the delegation documented instances of torture, rape and deaths in police custody across Pakistan. The delegation also raised concerns about extra-judicial executions which continue throughout the country.

The delegation detected few signs of any sincere political will to tackle these pernicious and widespread problems at their root -- the impunity of offenders. Despite the government's stated commitment to prosecute any officer found responsible for crimes such as torture, next to none have, to Amnesty International's knowledge, been convicted. The delegation stressed that administrative disciplinary measures such as dismissal, demotion and transfer were not sufficient, Criminal offences warrant criminal penalties. Until justice is seen to be done in this way, the cycle of impunity will continue.

The delegation provided government ministers with details of 127 extrajudicial executions and deaths in custody recorded in the period from January 1995 to the present. It welcomed the government's promise to provide written comments on the status of investigations into each and every case. The delegation noted, however, that Amnesty International had received responses on only seven of 120 such cases it had raised with the government last year, most of which had been unconvincing and unsatisfactory.

The delegation registered its concern about continued use of legislation to bring charges against individuals for the non-violent practice of their religion. In some of these cases,

the government itself was the complainant. Anyone so detained is a prisoner of conscience and should be immediately and unconditionally released.

The delegation was disappointed at the widespread support for the death penalty it found among members of the government, opposition parties and the legal profession. It pressed for the abolition of the death penalty, if not in law then at least in practice.

In view of this apparent gap between rhetoric and reality, Amnesty International calls on the Pakistan Government to show good faith by:

- tackling the impunity of human rights violators in a systematic way, by investigating, prosecuting and convicting all offenders;
- taking prompt steps to bring Pakistan's laws comprehensively into line with the requirements of the newly-ratified Convention for the Elimination of Discrimination Against Women;
- strengthening and implementing substantive safeguards to prevent misuse of blasphemy laws, and taking steps to protect members of minority groups;
- ensuring meticulous adherence to all legal safeguards with respect to arrest and detention of political prisoners;
- as a first step towards abolition of the death penalty, introducing a moratorium on all executions and reducing the number of offences for which it can be imposed;
- ratifying international human rights treaties, beginning with the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights and the Convention Against Torture.

The delegation, led by Deputy Secretary General Hervé Berger, included Asia Program Director Rory Mungoven and Pakistan researcher Dr Angelika Pathak. In Islamabad, the delegation met with Chief Justice Sajjad Ali Shah, Interior Minister Naseerullah Babar, Law Minister N D Khan, Senator-in-charge of Human Rights Affairs Iqbal Haider, Attorney General Kazi Jamil, members of the Senate Standing Committee on Human Rights, Secretaries of Foreign Affairs, the Women's Division, Minority Affairs and Religious Affairs, Commander of the Pakistan National Police Academy and Head of the FIA, and members of the Supreme Court Bar Association.

The delegation regretted that Prime Minister Benazir Bhutto was unable to find time to receive them, in view of her stated commitment to human rights. Prior to visiting Islamabad, the delegation met with opposition parties, human rights non-governmental organisations and representatives of minority groups in Lahore.

The delegation had previously met with members of the MQM (Altaf) leadership in London to express deep concern about human rights abuses committed by the organisation's followers, including hostage taking, torture and arbitrary killings. It called on the

MQM (A) and all armed groups to take steps to ensure the adherence to basic standards of humanitarian law in pursuing their political objectives.

In its meetings with both government and opposition parties, the delegation called for an end to the cycle of political victimisation which had for so long wracked Pakistani political life and seen each side misuse the law against political opponents. It urged all parties to contribute constructively to debate on human rights reforms and to advance positive platforms on human rights.
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