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1998 UNITED NATIONS COMMISSION ON HUMAN RIGHTS

STANDING UP FOR THE VICTIMS?

GENEVA -- In the 50th anniversary year of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, the United Nations Commission on Human Rights must put the victims of violations at the centre of its decision-making, Amnesty International said at a press conference today.

“The needs of victims of human rights abuses must guide the Commission’s deliberations,” said Nicholas Howen, Director of Amnesty International’s Legal and International Organizations Program. “But governments look set to ignore some acute human rights situations. For the victims the anniversary will be little cause for celebration.”

The European Union’s decision not to support any resolution on China’s human rights record has already cast a shadow over the Commission, by sidelining it in favour of behind the scenes dialogue with China. This dialogue should not displace scrutiny by the Commission of China’s human rights record. Discussions between states must not displace the Commission’s role of confronting governments which violate human rights, according to Amnesty International.

“The decision not to scrutinize China’s human rights record in the Commission has more to do with policy splits between EU member states and lucrative markets than any real improvement in the human rights situation,” Mr Howen said.

“Governments also look set, yet again, to ignore six years of human rights atrocities in Algeria. There is no other country where human rights abuses are so extreme but where there is no international scrutiny, let alone action, by the international community.”

An estimated 80,000 men, women and children have been killed since the start of the conflict in 1992. Thousands have been hacked to death, tortured or “disappeared”. Security forces, state-armed militias and armed Islamic groups have all been responsible for these human rights abuses.

The UN Secretary-General, the UN High Commissioner for Human Rights as well as other senior UN officials have expressed their concerns about this human rights tragedy but it has not led to any concrete action.

The gravity of the human rights situation in Algeria requires an international investigation into the responsibility for the killings and other gross human rights abuses. Amnesty International is calling on the Commission to play its role and appoint a Special Rapporteur on Algeria supported by the Commission's thematic mechanisms and other technical experts. The immediate priority for the Special Rapporteur is to carry out an on-site investigation into the massacres and other abuses and to report urgently to the Commission with recommendations for further action.

“When faced with such horrors why is the Commission silent? How much death and mutilation does it take for the Commission to act?” Mr Howen said. “How the Commission, the UN's main human rights watch dog, can turn its back year after year on Algeria is beyond belief.”

“Silence is not an option for the Commission. In this 50th anniversary year it must take decisive action to protect the human rights of the Algerian people or risk becoming irrelevant to the problems of the real world.”

At the Commission, which runs from 16 March to 24 April, the organization will raise the cases of countries where there is a pattern of systematic, persistent and severe human rights violations. Although it will focus in particular on Algeria, Cambodia, Colombia, Kenya, Saudi Arabia and Turkey, Amnesty International will also raise other countries where there are gross violations of human rights.

COUNTRY BACKGROUNDS:

Algeria

An estimated 80,000 people have been killed since the start of the conflict in 1992. In recent months alone, around 2,000 men, women and children were killed or injured. The civilian population has been increasingly trapped in a spiral of violence. Armed groups who define themselves as “Islamic groups” have killed thousands of civilians often with unspeakable brutality. The Algerian security forces have increasingly violated human rights, including extrajudicially executing individuals and groups. Other victims of the security forces have been killed in detention, tortured and many have simply “disappeared” after arrest.

Cambodia

Despite massive investment in rebuilding Cambodia's institutions after years of civil war, the gains made have been undermined by the Royal Cambodian Government's failure to protect human rights. The UN's Special Representative has said that a climate of impunity in the country casts serious doubts on the fairness of upcoming elections. There has been no serious investigation into alleged official complicity in a grenade attack on a peaceful opposition march which killed 16 people and injured another hundred on 30 March 1997. No proper investigation has taken place into at least 43 political killings of people linked to the opposition following the July 1997 coup.

Colombia

The human rights crisis in Colombia continues to deteriorate with widespread extrajudicial executions, “disappearances” and torture. Although the number of violations directly attributable to the armed forces has fallen, there has been a corresponding increase in abuses committed by paramilitary groups acting with their tacit or active support. Armed opposition groups continue to commit numerous violations of international humanitarian law. Human rights defenders are harassed, intimidated and violently assaulted, with at least 10 killed in 1997. Little progress has been made in identifying their killers and bringing them to justice.

Kenya

The government’s violent crackdown in mid-1997 on pro-democracy campaigners led to at least 13 deaths, and brutal attacks by the security forces on peaceful demonstrators. In recent years, the police and security forces have tortured or killed hundreds of Kenyans. Arbitrary arrests are widespread and there are more than 700 prisoners under sentence of death. Human rights defenders have been detained for their non-violent activities, and some tortured while in custody. This year, more than 100 people have been killed and thousands fled their homes in the Rift valley in what appears to be politically instigated violence.

Saudi Arabia

In Saudi Arabia hundreds of people are detained on political grounds. Torture and ill-treatment are widespread. Executions are commonplace and carried out with a total disregard for even the most basic human rights safeguards. Flogging and amputation are imposed for certain offences. Women are subjected to human rights violations based on their gender, either because of discriminatory laws or by virtue of discriminatory attitudes and practices. The Commission examines Saudi Arabia under the so called confidential ‘1503 procedure’ but this has not resulted in any significant improvement in the overall human rights situation.

Turkey

Torture of men, women and children continues to be widespread throughout Turkey, and people have “disappeared” or died in police custody. There are frequent reports of electro-shock torture and sexual torture. The security forces have also unlawfully killed alleged members or supporters of armed opposition groups, particularly in the south-east of the country. Throughout 1997, the government arrested trade unionists, journalists, students and other peaceful demonstrators, and many political prisoners remain in jail after grossly unfair trials. Members of one religious minority are serving long jail sentences apparently because they had appeared in public wearing turbans and cloaks.

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