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OAS General Assembly: an opportunity to focus on human rights

Governments must take action at the 30th session of the General Assembly of the Organization of American States (OAS) against some of the region's human rights problems, Amnesty International said today.

The human rights organization and other Non Governmental Organizations (NGOs) will be attending the meeting of the OAS General Assembly in Windsor, Canada, from 4 to 6 June and have prepared a joint statement outlining their concerns.

These include widespread impunity for human rights violations; the persistence of practices such as torture, enforced "disappearance" and extrajudicial executions; appalling prison conditions in many countries in the region; and the continued application of the death penalty in some of them.

Amnesty International is particularly concerned by the failure of the OAS to seriously tackle the vulnerable situation of human rights defenders in the region, despite rhetoric to the contrary.

"The adoption of a resolution last year by the OAS General Assembly has not been translated into any positive improvement of the situation of human rights defenders, who continue to be the victims of human rights violations in several countries in the region," Amnesty International said.

"The OAS must look at ways to ensure that governments are held to account for violations against human rights defenders and receive support in establishing protective measures."

At a time when the OAS has been talking about strengthening the inter-American system, including by encouraging states to ratify human rights treaties, it is also worrying that there has been little or no reaction to overt steps taken by some member states to limit human rights protection.

One example of this is the withdrawal of Trinidad and Tobago from the American Convention on Human Rights, which together with its recent decision to withdraw from the Optional Protocol to the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights, has effectively whittled away all recourse to international protection in the case of violations of peoples' rights under these treaties.

"These moves were inspired by a desire to facilitate the application of the death penalty," Amnesty International said. "However, the General Assembly of the OAS should not only express its concern that Trinidad and Tobago's decisions go against the abolitionist aim of the organization, but also that they reduce the protection of a whole range of rights".

At the same time, the political bodies of the OAS have barely reacted to Peru's refusal last year to comply with decisions of the Inter-American Court of Human Rights on fair trial issues and its subsequent announcement to withdraw from the Court's contentious jurisdiction.

"The effects of a State minimizing the rights it is prepared to protect are incalculable, long lasting, and these tendencies need to be nipped in the bud," Amnesty International said.

"The failure of the OAS to respond to Peru's withdrawal from the Court, for example, surely has had no positive effect on the current situation in that country. States need to be reminded of the need to protect all rights, from the right to life to the right to vote in free elections," the human rights organization added.

On the positive side is Barbados' recent decision to accept the jurisdiction of the Inter-American Court. "We welcome this move which is certainly more in keeping with the promises of the OAS to strengthen the inter-American system for the protection and promotion of human rights," Amnesty International said.

"The adoption last December of Guidelines for the participation of civil society in the activities of the OAS is also a step in the right direction," the human rights organization said.

"However, further thought needs to be given to how the guidelines will work in practice to foster closer links with the societies the OAS represents," Amnesty International added, expressing concern that the guidelines may be over cumbersome in their current form.

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