

The Wire - April 2003

[Afghanistan needs to rebuild its police force](#)

[AI visits Sudan after 13 years' exclusion](#)

[Children murdered with impunity in Honduras](#)

[Continuing cycle of violence in the Republic of the Congo](#)

[Germany's torturous debate](#)

[Journalist released Russian Federation](#)

[Human rights defender released in the Democratic Republic of the Congo](#)

[New human rights law in the making](#)

[An unorthodox birthday celebration for Turkmenistan](#)

[AI's campaign for children has impact on Spain](#)

[Prisoner of conscience released in China](#)

[Worldwide appeals](#)

[News in brief](#)

The Wire

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AI Index: NWS 21/003/2003

[Page 1]

Afghanistan needs to rebuild its police force

"The true and patriotic police officer is the friend of the people. People always approach them to get rid of oppression. If police officers do not have these qualities people would prefer to live under oppression and injustice rather than going to the police since they know that applying to the police will bring them additional problems."

Afghanistan President Hamid Karzai speaking on Radio Afghanistan, 21 November 2002.

"That night they... beat us with a cable until morning. It was winter, and they laid us on the ground. They put tyres and stones on our backs from afternoon until midnight. When I became unconscious they poured water on us."

"Salim" a teenager, arrested in Afghanistan at the end of 2001, describing his treatment at the hands of the police.

After 23 years of conflict, a time when human rights were routinely abused, Afghanistan is in the process of reconstruction. During the years of armed conflict, the police force, prison system, and courts were largely destroyed, and now offer virtually no protection to the Afghan people. If reconstruction is to be successful, a functioning and efficient criminal justice system must be established. The creation of a professional police force is an essential part of this process.

AI's delegates spoke to police officers during its research in Afghanistan in 2002. Many officers talked of the police force's role as "the ensurers of public security" working "to serve the people". However, this is not the reality in Afghanistan, where there is a widespread lack of public faith in the police.

The combination of problems facing the police leaves officers ill-equipped to deal with their everyday policing role in a way that respects human rights. There is a widespread lack of resources necessary to carry out policing. Salaries have been left unpaid, while police stations around the country lack such basic equipment as pens and paper. The lack of sufficient police training, including on how to protect human rights, is an enormous obstacle to developing a functioning police service.

The Afghan Transitional Administration (ATA) has been unable to assert control outside Kabul, where powerful regional commanders, who took part in the armed resistance to *Taleban* rule, continue to exert control. Many of these commanders have

been incorporated into the ATA, including as commanders in the police service. These men continue to act with a high degree of autonomy. Many have brought their former fighters with them into government, incorporating them directly into the police and other security forces. These officers have extensive military experience but little or no professional police training or experience.

In Afghanistan not only are the police unable to guarantee the protection of human rights, but some members of the police are involved in committing human rights violations. In late 2002, AI researchers found evidence of torture and ill-treatment of individuals at the hands of the police.

Currently in Afghanistan there is no mechanism for monitoring police actions or investigating reports of human rights violations by officers. This allows perpetrators to continue to commit violations without facing justice. Without adequate accountability mechanisms, the cycle of impunity will not be broken.

Without assistance to overcome the current crippling difficulties the police force will be unable to serve the community in a way that protects human rights, despite the good intentions of some police officers around the country. Public trust in the police will not be gained and human rights violations will continue.

The task of rebuilding the police force in Afghanistan is challenging but needs urgent attention as it is vital to the establishment of a lasting peace in the country. AI is calling on the international community to make a long-term commitment to reconstruction in Afghanistan, and to provide technical and financial support to the ATA so that it can work to create a police force that is able to protect human rights.

See AI's report, Afghanistan: Police reconstruction essential for the protection of human rights (ASA 11/003/2003).

AI visits Sudan after 13 years' exclusion

"We know what you Palestinians suffer. But your deaths are announced. Here we die and nobody even knows our names."

A southerner in a camp of displaced persons talking to Mazen Shaqqura, a Palestinian human rights activist and a member of AI's first delegation to Sudan in January after 13 years.

The Sudanese government and the Sudan People's Liberation army (SPLA) are engaged in peace negotiations to end the 20-year civil war which cost two million lives and left around 4.5 million homeless. Authorization for AI's delegates to visit Sudan was a demonstration of the growing openness in the country.

Despite this positive development the AI delegation found that serious human rights abuses continue to take place in Sudan.

Students, community leaders and political opponents have been held in arbitrary and incommunicado detention, often for many months. After demonstrations in Khartoum University in October, put down by excessive force, Omar Farouk, a first-year medical student, was arrested on 4 December 2002. He was taken to a security building and tortured before being transferred to Kober Prison where he was held isolated from the outside world with other students from the university. He was released on 9 January 2003 without charge after agreeing to sign a guarantee that he would not engage in political activity. AI is calling for the repeal of sections of the National Security Act which allow such incommunicado detention for up to nine months without judicial oversight and provide immunity for security officers.

In meetings with the government, human rights organizations and international agencies, AI's delegation stressed that human rights must be at the heart of any peace process and called for concrete mechanisms to strengthen human rights monitoring and protection. Numerous human rights abuses have been committed by all sides in the conflict, including the killing and displacement of civilians and the recruitment of child soldiers.

Other areas of concern highlighted by AI's visit included restrictions on freedoms of the press and association, and unfair trials. During a visit to Shala Prison in Darfur in the west of the country, the delegates met prisoners under sentence of death. One said his trial only lasted one hour. Another claimed he had been tried and sentenced without having a lawyer.

AI delegates had a positive dialogue with members of the Sudanese government and officials. They held meetings and moving reunions with the Sudanese human rights activists with whom they had corresponded for so long without being able to meet.

[Page 2]

Children murdered with impunity in Honduras

More than 1,500 children and youths were murdered in Honduras between 1998 and 2002, according to local non-governmental organizations (NGOs). The perpetrators are in most cases unidentified, although testimonies from survivors and witnesses indicate that they could be police officers or civilians acting with the implicit consent of the authorities, under circumstances suggesting a "social cleansing" campaign.

Since coming to power in January 2002, President Ricardo Maduro has promoted a series of measures to investigate these cases. However, numerous promises and government initiatives to tackle the problem have remained unfulfilled and there has been no decline in the number of deaths. On the contrary, according to data gathered by Honduran NGOs, the number of murders reported has more than doubled over the last two years.

The vast majority of victims belong to the most marginalized sectors of society. The number of female victims appears to have increased over the last two years and rapes of girls and young women by law enforcement officers have been reported. No member of the security forces has been prosecuted for these crimes.

Murders and executions are seen by some people and some of the press as the solution to the growing problem of street crime and violence. There are indications that victims of executions have been "selected" not for any alleged criminal activity but because of their clothing or because they had tattoos.

For more information and what you can do, see AI's report, *Honduras: Zero tolerance... for impunity* (AMR 37/001/2003) available from AI offices and on AI's website www.amnesty.org

In the afternoon of 25 May 1999, 14-year-old Noé Alejandro Álvarez Ramírez was being taken from the Juvenile Court in Tegucigalpa, Honduras, to a detention centre 24km away. The judge who should have signed his release papers had not been in court that day and Noé Álvarez was being returned to the detention centre with 12 other minors. Noé Álvarez was handcuffed. Five kilometres from Tegucigalpa, near the Chiquito River, Noé Álvarez jumped out of the window of the vehicle. Guards at the former national penitentiary in Tegucigalpa were sent to look for him. According to reports, the guards found him and shouted for him to stop. Noé Álvarez lifted his arms and shouted 'OK!' (¡Ya!), but one of the guards shot him on the right side of his abdomen. The guards did not assist him while waiting for the ambulance, which arrived half an hour later. Noé Álvarez later died in hospital.

An arrest warrant was issued against the guard responsible for shooting Noé Álvarez and legal proceedings were opened, but the court later dismissed the case. The Special Prosecutor for Human Rights appealed against the decision of the court and at the end of 2002, the case was in the Appeals Court.

On 23 May 2001, the bodies of 14-year-old Cintia Waleska Rivera and her 15-year-old friend Wendy (family name unknown) were found in a ravine at the El Estiquirín hill, in Comayagüela, Honduras. Both were reported to have been members of the "18" gang.

The bodies were found 20 metres below the surface with signs that they had been raped and otherwise tortured. Wendy had her hands tied with Cintia's shoelaces. According to reports, both children had been shot in the head after being raped. The last time anyone saw them alive was at a party on the night of Saturday 19 May.

In response to a query from the UN Special Rapporteur on extrajudicial, summary and arbitrary executions on this case, the Honduran authorities stated that it was being investigated and that according to the police file Cintia Waleska Rivera could have been killed by members of the "18" gang.

Continuing cycle of violence in the Republic of the Congo

Refugees who returned home in May 1999 were arrested, beaten and forced to pile up dead bodies and burn them with petrol, while singing the Congolese national anthem, according to one survivor. "Brigadier", who later escaped captivity and fled to France, said that he and 50 other returning refugees burned around 200 bodies between 18 and 24 May 1999. Brigadier was arrested on 18 May 1999 by Congolese security as he arrived at the harbour of Brazzaville, capital of the Republic of the Congo.

Tens of thousands of refugees fled from fighting in the Republic of the Congo which broke out in August 1998, many crossing the border into the Democratic Republic of the Congo (DRC). In April 1999 an agreement for their return was signed between the DRC and Congolese governments and the UN High Commission for Refugees (UNHCR). Public calls by the Congolese government for refugees to return convinced many that it was safe to go back home. However, hundreds of them were arrested when they reached Brazzaville in May 1999 and were never seen again.

Testimony from survivors, relatives and human rights groups indicates that they were killed and their bodies disposed of. In April 2002, 19 asylum-seekers, registered by UNHCR, were also forced to return to the DRC. Some of them were tortured. In January 2003, all of them were sentenced to life imprisonment by a military court after an unfair trial. The government has failed to establish responsibility for the "disappearances" and UNHCR has failed to fulfil its mandate to protect refugees.

AI delegates visiting the Republic of the Congo in January and February 2002 found that its violent past continues to haunt the country, despite official protests to the contrary.

The authorities were keen to impress on the delegates that the Republic of the Congo, and Brazzaville in particular, was a much safer place than before President Denis Sassou Nguesso returned to power in December 1997. However, the peace was shattered barely two months later by fighting in the southern Pool region and in Brazzaville.

During the fighting, both government forces and members of the *Ninja* armed political group deliberately targeted unarmed civilians, killing dozens and displacing thousands.

Successive Congolese governments have attempted to hold on to power and to build political stability on a foundation weakened by a history of impunity. The current government hoped that holding a constitutional referendum in January 2002 and a general election in June would eliminate the armed opposition. However, less than a month after the elections, armed conflict erupted in the Pool region, south of Brazzaville.

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As fighting between the government and its armed opponents escalated, both sides committed widespread human rights abuses, including unlawful killings, "disappearances" and abductions, and torture, including rape. Other abuses which continued to be reported throughout 2002 included forced displacement of local unarmed civilian populations, some of whom were reportedly attacked by government forces using helicopter gunships.

AI is publishing a report to draw the attention of the international community to continuing and unresolved human rights concerns in the Republic of the Congo. Serious abuses are being committed by both government forces and armed government opponents, while UNHCR is failing to protect asylum-seekers, refugees and returnees. AI hopes that UNHCR will take adequate measures to prevent abuses against asylum-seekers and refugees in the Republic of the Congo and the wider central African region. AI also hopes to contribute to a debate within the Republic of the Congo to end a culture of impunity and a long history of serious human rights abuses.

See AI's report, *Republic of Congo: A past that haunts the future* (AFR 22/001/2003), 9 April 2003.

Germany's torturous debate

In the early morning of 1 October 2002 Wolfgang Daschner, the Vice-President of Frankfurt-am-Main police, allegedly ordered a subordinate officer to use force against a criminal suspect believed to have been involved in the abduction and ransoming of an 11-year-old boy. The aim was to elicit information regarding the whereabouts of the boy, the son of a prominent German banker, whom the police believed to be still alive. When it came to light in February 2003, the episode unleashed a disturbing debate questioning the absolute prohibition of torture in modern-day Germany.

On 30 September 2002 police officers arrested a 27-year-old law student and family friend of the missing boy in connection with the abduction. Despite the repeated questioning of the man, officers at Frankfurt-am-Main police headquarters made no progress in determining the fate of the child. Wolfgang Daschner reportedly wrote an internal memorandum, the contents of which emerged in the German press in mid-February, stating that the suspect, after "being warned, should be questioned again, under medical supervision, with the infliction of pain (no injuries)".

Senior police officers reportedly discussed and rejected the moral objections relating to the use of force against the detainee.

The suspect stated through his lawyer that, during his questioning on 1 October 2002, a police officer facing him at a distance of approximately 10cm told him a specialist was on his way who could inflict great pain on him, which he never before would have experienced, and which would leave no traces. Shortly afterwards the detainee told the police where the dead boy was, thus dispensing with the need to torture or ill-treat him.

Wolfgang Daschner remains in office pending the outcome of an ongoing investigation into the incident. When asked, in an interview with the German newspaper *Frankfurter Rundschau*, in late February, what had been envisaged had the suspect remained silent under duress, he replied: "At some time he would no longer have remained silent. Within a very short time". In another newspaper interview this high-ranking police officer called for the use of force to be legally permitted during police interrogations as a "last resort" in order to save human life.

Despite the clear-cut, absolute and non-derogable prohibition of torture and ill-treatment in the German Constitution, as well as in domestic and international law, there ensued an intense public debate about whether there were any circumstances in which torture could be permissible in Germany. While many leading political and civil society figures and groups, including the German Police Trade Union, were quick to rebuff the very notion, others were not so inclined. In particular, a number of regional political leaders stated publicly that they could envisage exceptions to Germany's ban on torture. Fortunately, such sentiments look likely to remain securely locked in theory, while one of their foremost proponents of recent times – the Frankfurt-am-Main Police Vice-President – prepares for possible trial.

[Page 3]

Worldwide Appeals

Russian Federation

One of hundreds who 'disappeared'

Zelimkhan Murdalov left his home in Grozny, Chechen Republic, on 2 January 2001, saying he would be back in an hour. It was the last his family ever saw of him.

His father, Astemir Murdalov, discovered that a young man matching his son's description had been detained near Minutka Square in the centre of the city. At the nearest police station the deputy head told him that his son was being held on charges of possessing

cannabis. Astemir Murdalov was reportedly later refused entrance to the police station and his family and neighbours waited outside the station for two days. On 5 January 2001 staff at the station claimed that Zelimkhan Murdalov had been released that morning.

Detainees who had been held in the same cell as Zelimkhan Murdalov reportedly said that when they saw him on 3 January 2001 he was unconscious; his arm was broken and the bone was protruding from the skin; his genitals had been torn off; and his ear had been severed.

On 7 January 2001 a criminal investigation was opened into Zelimkhan Murdalov's "disappearance". In February 2002 an officer was arrested, reportedly in connection with the incident. However, he was released on 31 May 2002 by the Piatigorsk City Court. The criminal proceedings against him were later suspended after medical reports showed that the officer was suffering from bad health, allegedly after being ill-treated while being kept in pre-trial detention in Grozny. Witnesses have identified two other police officers from the Khanty-Mansiisk OMON police force that also were involved in the forcible detention, torture and "disappearance" of Zelimkhan Murdalov. However, these officers have never been charged.

Please write, calling for the authorities to establish the fate and whereabouts of Zelimkhan Murdalov and to investigate allegations that he was arbitrarily detained and tortured. Call for the perpetrators to be brought to justice in a court of law.

Send appeals to: Procurator General of the Russian Federation Vladimir Ustinov, Generalnaia Prokuratura, Rossiiskoi Federatsii, Ul. B. Dimitrovka, d15a, 103793 Moskva K-31, Russian Federation. Fax: + 7 095 292 8848

Rwanda

Political opposition repressed

Philemon Munyaneza, Gregoire Uzabakiriho, Joseph Gasasira and Emmanuel Ngayaberura are detained in Kimironko Prison. Valens Munyaneza and Damascène Nsengimana are detained in the prison in Nyamirambo, despite a court ordering their release.

All six men, who were arrested on 21 May 2002, appear to be held because of their connection with imprisoned former President Pasteur Bizimungu and former Minister Charles.

AI believes that the six men are prisoners of conscience detained solely for their political affiliations and that their health is at risk because of the harsh prison conditions. No credible evidence has been given to support the charges against them. Twenty-one others were arrested at the same time but later released. At least two of those released were tortured into making incriminating statements against Pasteur Bizimungu and his political allies.

Pasteur Bizimungu and Charles Ntakirutinka were charged with threatening state security and inciting civil disobedience as a result of their attempt to launch a new political party, the Democratic Party for Renewal-Ubuyanja, in May 2001. Their trial began on 14 October 2002. AI is calling for their immediate and unconditional release.

Rwandese President Paul Kagame has repeatedly stated that his government is prepared to respect freedom of expression and political pluralism but will not tolerate those who, in the government's view, promote sectarianism or division among the Rwandese people. However, the list of those the government refuses to tolerate now embraces large sections of Rwandese society, including journalists, advocates for peace and reconciliation and people who seek to offer an alternative peaceful political voice.

Please write, calling for the immediate and unconditional release of these six men who are detained, seemingly for their entirely non-violent and legitimate connection with imprisoned former President Pasteur Bizimungu and former Minister Charles Ntakirutinka. Call also for the immediate and unconditional release of Pasteur Bizimungu and Charles Ntakirutinka.

Send appeals to: Major General Paul Kagame, President of Rwanda, Presidency, PO Box 15, Kigali, Rwanda. Fax: +250 84769 / 84390

Egypt

Private Internet conversation used as evidence

On 16 January 2003 Wissam Tawfiq Abyad went to meet a contact he had made on an Internet website for gays. The person he met, in the Heliopolis district of Cairo, is believed to be a security officer or police informant. Wissam Tawfiq Abyad was detained and charged with "habitual debauchery". Electronic conversations which they had exchanged over the Internet in private were used as evidence against him.

On 17 February 2003 a court of appeals in Cairo upheld the sentence of 15 months' imprisonment of Wissam Tawfiq Abyad. AI considers him to be a prisoner of conscience detained solely for his perceived or actual sexual orientation.

During the examination of Egypt's report to the UN Human Rights Committee in October 2002, the Egyptian delegation stated that in Egypt, "homosexuality was not a criminal offence in itself". However, ongoing trials and imprisonment of people solely for their perceived or actual sexual orientation demonstrate that charges of "habitual debauchery" continue to be used to criminalize consensual homosexual relations in private.

Over the past year, there have been several cases of alleged gays who were detained and tried after agreeing to meet people contacted through the Internet who turned out to be security officers or police informants. Zaki Sayid Zaki 'Abd al-Malak was detained in such circumstances on 25 January 2002 in Cairo. he was sentenced to three years' imprisonment for "habitual debauchery" on 7 February. This sentence was upheld on appeal. He was reportedly ill-treated in detention. AI considers him to be a prisoner of conscience.

Please write, calling for the immediate and unconditional release of Wissam Tawfiq Abyad and Zaki Sayid Zaki 'Abd al-Malak and others imprisoned solely on the grounds of their actual or perceived sexual orientation.

Send appeals to: His Excellency, President Mohammad Hosni Mubarak, 'Abedine Palace, Cairo, Egypt. Fax: + 202 390 1998. E-mail: webmaster@presidency.gov.eg

Indonesia

Human rights defender killed

The body of Musliadi, a 25-year-old human rights and political activist, was discovered floating in a river on 3 December 2002. There were large bruises on his legs, back and chest, burns on his face and right wrist, and a stab wound at the back of his head. There are serious concerns that he may have been tortured and killed because of his activities defending human rights. It remains unclear exactly how and why he was killed.

Musliadi was the leader of the West Aceh Youth and Student Action Coalition (Koalisi Aksi Gerakan Mahasiswa dan Pemuda Aceh Barat, KAGEMPAR) in Nanggroe Aceh Darussalam Province. On 30 November 2002, Musliadi and four other people had gathered in the KAGEMPAR office to break the fast observed by Muslims during the month of Ramadan. At around 6.30pm, six plainclothes armed men arrived at the office and ordered Musliadi to accompany them. This was the last time he was seen alive.

Musliadi's body was found only days before the signing of a Cessation of Hostilities Agreement between the government of Indonesia and the armed opposition Free Aceh Movement on 9 December 2002. He was one of eight representatives of Acehnese civil society who had been selected to witness the signing of the Agreement in Geneva, Switzerland.

Please write, calling on the authorities to carry out an effective and independent investigation into the killing of Musliadi who was taken from the the KAGEMPAR office in Banda Aceh, Nanggroe Aceh Darussalam Province on 30 November 2002 and urging that the findings of the investigation be made public.

Send appeals to: President of the Republic of Indonesia, Megawati Sukarnoputri, Istana Merdeka, Jakarta 10110, Indonesia. Fax: + 62 21 526 8726 / 380 5511

News in brief

Preserve individual rights before the European Court

AI is campaigning against a proposal being discussed by the Council of Europe to reform the European Court of Human Rights. The proposed change would curtail the right of individuals to have the Court decide whether their rights under the European Convention for the Protection of Human Rights and Fundamental Freedoms have been violated.

AI supports other proposals aimed at ensuring the effectiveness of this unique regional court, but limiting the right of individual petition will reduce human rights protection. AI considers that implementation of this proposal would send a very bad signal, not only to Council of Europe member states, but also internationally at a time when states are failing to implement their human rights obligations and challenging the place of human rights, in light of "threats to security".

In January 2002, AI and a group of other human rights organizations produced a Joint Response to the proposals being discussed, which has been signed by more than 70 organizations from 22 of the 44 Council of Europe member states. AI will continue to gather signatures to the Joint Response until May 2003 when the Committee of Ministers of the Council of Europe will decide on what form the reform of the Court will take.

To find out more about this, contact EuropeIGOteam@amnesty.org

[Back page]

Journalist released in Russian Federation

On 23 January prisoner of conscience Grigory Pasko (above) was conditionally released, having served two thirds of his four-year sentence on treason charges in a prison colony in the Russian Far East.

Grigory Pasko is a journalist and environmentalist. In 1993 he filmed a Russian navy tanker illegally dumping radioactive waste and ammunition in the Sea of Japan. In this film and in a series of articles he exposed the threat to the environment caused by ships of Russia's decaying Pacific Fleet, including nuclear submarines. He also reported on corruption in the fleet.

In 1997 Grigory Pasko was arrested for passing allegedly sensitive information to the Japanese media. In December 2001 a

military court in Vladivostok, Russia, gave him a four-year sentence for treason and espionage.

AI adopted Grigory Pasko as a prisoner of conscience, believing that he had been imprisoned for exercising his basic human right to freedom of expression. AI members from all over the world campaigned vigorously on his behalf through letter-writing, petitions and lobbying. Several AI sections, including AI Netherlands and AI Spain, collected tens of thousands of signatures on online petitions in support of his release.

On 13 February 2003, Grigory Pasko and his wife, Galina, visited AI's newly opened resource centre in Moscow and talked about the support they had from AI members. Grigory Pasko said that guards in the labour colony where he was imprisoned were overwhelmed by the thousands of cards he received. They let him have some of them and he put the cards in his cell to brighten up its greyness. Galina Pasko was grateful for the support she got from AI sections and said it helped her in the years while her husband was imprisoned.

Grigory Pasko continues to fight for his acquittal. His case is with the European Court of Human Rights in Strasbourg. AI insists that the conviction must be quashed.

'Thanks to everyone'

"I am very grateful for all the help that Amnesty International gave me during my long detention. I felt very close to members from all the sections of AI in the world through the cards sending encouragement and good wishes for the year 2003... Thanks to everyone.

It's perhaps impossible to imagine, even for one second, how those cards brought me strength, moral comfort, protection and happiness. The letters landed on the desks of all the relevant officials calling for either my release or my transfer to a medical centre which I had been refused – notably by the prison authorities who would not let me be treated outside the prison. These letters were my great protection. The Director of the prison realized that he was dealing with a member of the international network of human rights defenders. Something he admitted in front of several other detainees in my prison block. From that day the random searches of my cell ended.

I was arrested on 19 April 2002 and freed on 26 January 2003 on the order of the President of the Republic. I was never charged with anything; that is to say that the military prosecutor's office never gave a reason for my detention nor specified which national law I had broken.

I will always be grateful to the friends and members of AI's sections and the team at the International Secretariat of AI. I reserve particular thanks for the French section who, on two occasions, sent me financial help without which I would not have been able to survive in prison because we had to pay for our own medical care..."

Letter to AI from N'Sii Luanda Shandwe on his release from prison in the Democratic Republic of the Congo.

AI's campaign for children has impact on Spain

One of the many reports that AI produced last year was *Spain: Crisis of identity, race-related torture and ill-treatment by public officials* (EUR 41/002/2002). The report was accompanied by campaigning action from 10 April to 30 September 2002.

One of the issues dealt with in the report and campaigned on by sections was the expulsion and ill-treatment of children in the two autonomous cities of Ceuta and Melilla (Spanish enclaves in Morocco). The children's rights organization PRODEIN has informed AI that the report has had a large impact on the way in which unaccompanied Moroccan children are now treated in Ceuta and Melilla. The president of PRODEIN told AI that its report, although publicly rejected by the authorities, had "decisively contributed" to the suspension of the summary expulsions of children taking place at the time, and had contributed to "a great extent" to a reduction in the ill-treatment (including systematic sexual harassment) to which children were being subjected in the reception centres. The two cities are now getting increased resources from central government, as AI had requested.

Congratulations to all the AI members who wrote letters to the authorities of Ceuta and Melilla, calling on them to listen to AI's concerns.

See *the Wire* November 2001.

An unorthodox birthday celebration

On 19 February, Turkmenistan celebrated President Saparmurad Niyazov's 63rd birthday with official parades and events. AI marked the occasion with a day of protest against Turkmenistan's appalling human rights record, calling for the release of prisoners of conscience, investigations into allegations of torture and an end to the clampdown on dissent.

Actions included a vigil in front of Turkmenistan's embassy in Washington DC, USA, a birthday party in front of its embassy in Ankara, Turkey, a visit to its embassy in London, UK, and a press conference in the AI Turkey office. AI members participated in a demonstration in Moscow, other demonstrations were held in Sweden and Uzbekistan.

Websites dedicated to the birthday action were created by the Swedish, Norwegian and Italian sections and the AI homepage

encouraged visitors to send a birthday card to President Niyazov. Numerous sections conducted birthday card campaigns.

AI issued a joint press release with Human Rights Watch, the International Helsinki Federation for Human Rights, the International League for Human Rights and the Moscow-based Memorial Human Rights Centre, urging President Niyazov to introduce the rule of law and respect his country's commitments to protecting human rights.

[picture caption]

"All thanks to your efforts, I have reached the other side of the Pacific – The boat in this postcard is a symbol of that.

Wishing you a Happy Chinese New Year,

Your friend Xu Wenli"

Card sent by former prisoner of conscience Xu Wenli (left) to a group in the USA, February 2003

New human rights law in the making

International human rights law is constantly evolving as new standards are developed to protect people from harm and new interpretations of existing standards become established.

One gap in the protection provided by international law is in the area of "disappearances" – when people are taken into custody, but then the authorities deny holding them and their fate and whereabouts remain unknown.

The victims are held in secret places; often they are tortured; often they are killed. Their families suffer the continuing agony of not knowing what has happened to them, and in the face of official denials, cannot use the legal system to find out.

Now a working group of the UN Commission on Human Rights has begun to draft a legally binding international treaty to protect people from enforced disappearance. During its first annual session in January, the working group made good progress in identifying the main elements of such a treaty. Several more sessions will be needed before the group will be able to agree on a text.

In a parallel development, a conference organized by the International Committee of the Red Cross in February brought together experts from about 90 countries in a bid to draw attention to the largely forgotten plight of thousands of families around the world who simply do not know what has happened to a loved one. It sought to revitalize efforts to find out what has happened to missing persons, and to provide practical guidelines for preventing "disappearances" in the first place.

AI urges the international community to develop and adopt a treaty containing strong measures for preventing "disappearances" and combating impunity, with a monitoring body capable of receiving individual cases and intervening with the authorities to trace the "disappeared".
