

The Wire

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Oil fuels fear in Colombia

“Your father has been killed, your brother as well, what are you waiting for? You have eight hours to leave the city or you will smell of corpses...”

This was the message received by Francisco Rojas on his mobile phone on 7 January. Rojas, the former president of Asociación de Educadores de Arauca (ASEDAR), Teachers' Association of Arauca, had good reason to take the threat seriously. Teachers in Colombia are threatened and killed by army-backed paramilitaries and guerrilla groups because their work often brings them into contact with both sides in the conflict.

Trade unionists, peasant leaders and human rights defenders have repeatedly been labelled as subversives by the Colombian security forces and their paramilitary allies and targeted during “counter-insurgency” operations. Trade union members have been threatened, forbidden to participate in union activities and ordered to resign from their union. In 2003, over 70 trade unionists were killed, mainly by paramilitary groups.

This situation is particularly acute in the oil-rich department of Arauca on the border with Venezuela. Because of its strategic, economic, military and geographic importance, control of Arauca is seen as vital by all those involved in the conflict which has ravaged Colombia for four decades. Over the last few years, paramilitary groups have strengthened their hold over Arauca in an attempt to defend powerful business and domestic interests in the region – particularly those of US oil companies.

As part of their attempts to “cleanse” Arauca of any perceived threat to oil interests, the military and their paramilitary allies have sought to keep the population under control by instilling fear, through massacres, “disappearances”, torture and mass detentions. Those trying to defend the rights of civilians have been targeted for intimidation and attacks. The paramilitaries have undertaken a systematic campaign of threats against and killings of human rights defenders, peace activists, journalists and trade unionists, many of whom had previously exposed human rights violations allegedly committed by the security forces.

The armed opposition have responded to the increased presence of paramilitaries in the region by boosting their efforts to attack and intimidate sectors of the local population, especially local state officials. The result has been a rise in civilian casualties.

Colombia is the third largest recipient of US military aid in the world. Despite compelling evidence that the Colombian military are violating human rights, either directly or in collusion with paramilitary groups, the US government has agreed to allow its military assistance to be used for counter-

insurgency activities, with one clear and tragic result – a greater targeting of the civilian population. While the armed groups which should be the focus of military attention continue to go unscathed, trade unionists, and others who fight for the rights of the people of Colombia, are threatened and abused by the very people who should protect them.

See *Colombia: A Laboratory of War – Repression and Violence in Arauca* (AMR 23/004/2004).

Trade unionists under threat in Belarus

Life is becoming ever more precarious for independent trade unionists in Belarus. Activists have increasingly been obstructed, harassed and intimidated, culminating at the end of 2003 in short-term prison sentences for a number of people whom AI considered to be prisoners of conscience.

In October 2003 the chair of the Belarusian Automobile and Agricultural Machinery Workers' Union (AAMWU), Alyaksandr Bukhvostov, was detained by police in central Minsk for staging a peaceful protest action against the government's alleged interference in the trade union's internal affairs. He had organized a picket to prevent local members of the AAMWU from being coerced – allegedly ordered by the Ministry of Industry – into leaving the union and affiliating with the government-sponsored Belarusian Trade Union of Industry Workers.

Alyaksandr Bukhvostov reportedly announced his action by saying: "I will be at Oktyabrskaya Square at 4pm. This is imperative. I want to say openly what is happening. The authorities are relentlessly exerting colossal pressure on the Automobile and Agricultural Machinery Workers' Union. People are inciting against my comrades and against the leadership of the trade union. They are being crushed psychologically. They need defending. We have turned to the Prosecutor General's office and other organs informing them that pressure is being put on the union. However, to date we have not received a reply from the Prosecutor General's office or from the Ministry of Industry."

On 30 October 2003 Tsentralny District Court in Minsk convicted Alyaksandr Bukhvostov in a closed hearing of staging an unsanctioned demonstration and sentenced him to 10 days' imprisonment. AI considered him to be a prisoner of conscience.

The International Confederation of Free Trade Unions (ICFTU) has denounced attacks on independent trade unionists in Belarus, saying that, "Democratic rights are not respected in Belarus, least of all trade union rights. The government has sought by every means to undermine, if not eliminate, the trade unions. Workers are actively discouraged from joining independent trade unions... Those who do, face continual pressure at the workplace to leave the union or risk losing their jobs... Trade union leaders are particular targets for harassment. Threats are taken very seriously in a country where political opponents to the regime have disappeared."

These concerns have been shared by several other international trade union organizations which promote and defend trade union rights including the International Labour Organization (ILO). In November 2003 the Governing Body of the ILO established a Commission of Inquiry into ongoing violations of workers' rights, stating that "the procedure is invoked only in cases of persistent violations and has only been used on 10 occasions previously."

Please see back page for more information and action you can take.

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Liberia – the promises of peace for 21,000 child soldiers

"To hold guns is not good for children. You cannot sleep good, you cannot eat good food... Now I see that I will have a good future by going to school." Nine-year-old former child soldier

The lives of Liberia's children have been blighted by 14 years of almost continuous conflict. They have been killed, made orphans, maimed, abducted, deprived of education and health care – and recruited and used as child soldiers.

In May 2004, the UN Committee on the Rights of the Child will consider implementation of Liberia's obligations under the Convention on the Rights of the Child. This is an opportunity to highlight the plight of Liberia's children, to urge the National Transitional Government of Liberia

(NTGL) to take concrete measures to improve children's lives and to encourage the international community to support the NTGL's efforts to meet its commitments.

There are an estimated 21,000 child soldiers – both boys and girls – in Liberia. They have been forced to fight, carry ammunition, prepare food or carry out other tasks. Girls have been raped and forced to provide sexual services. Many were given drugs and alcohol and, with little or no training, sent directly to the front-line where they were killed or wounded. Those resisting recruitment or refusing to comply with their commanders' orders risked being beaten or killed.

All parties to the conflict – the former government of Liberia and the two armed opposition groups, the Liberians United for Reconciliation and Democracy and the Movement for Democracy in Liberia – have used child soldiers. A peace agreement in August 2003 and the UN Security Council's decision the following month to deploy a large peace-keeping operation offered hopes of finally ending the conflict.

Many challenges remain, however, and one of the most urgent is meeting the needs of former child soldiers. Many left their commanders after the peace agreement and deployment of peace-keeping troops but an unknown number remain in areas only recently or yet to be reached by UN forces. Priority must be given to their swift disarmament, demobilization, rehabilitation and reintegration (DDRR).

The DDRR program devised by the UN and other agencies includes specific arrangements for children, ensuring health care, education, skills training, family-tracing and reunification, and responding to the particular needs of girls, many of whom struggle with the psychological, physical and social consequences of sexual and other forms of physical abuse, forced "marriage", pregnancy and childbirth.

While immediate disarmament and demobilization is a priority, the needs of former child soldiers, their families and communities do not end there; rehabilitation and reintegration are complex and long-term and require sustained funding and support. Education is crucial and is invariably the priority of former child soldiers themselves, as many of them told AI delegates visiting Liberia in November 2003.

Recruitment and use of child soldiers violates children's rights and is a war crime. The international community and the NTGL have, however, shown little political will to bring to justice the perpetrators of crimes against humanity, war crimes and other serious violations of international law committed during the conflict. Lasting peace – which Liberia's children deserve – will remain elusive unless those responsible for these crimes are held accountable.

For further information, see *Liberia: The promises of peace for 21,000 child soldiers* (AFR 34/006/2004).

UK's response to events of 11 September 2001

In the aftermath of the 11 September 2001 attacks on the USA, the UK government asserted that the threat posed to the UK by the al-Qa'ida network amounted to "a public emergency", making it necessary for the authorities to enact new "anti-terrorist" laws. As a result the Anti-terrorism, Crime and Security Act 2001 (ATCSA) was passed by the UK Parliament and enacted on 14 December 2001.

Part 4 of the ATCSA allows the indefinite detention without charge or trial of foreign nationals who cannot be deported or removed from the UK – principally on the basis of secret evidence. In addition, evidence extracted under torture of a third party can be relied upon in proceedings under the ATCSA.

The law effectively allows non-UK nationals to be treated as if they have been “charged” with a criminal offence, “convicted” without a trial, and “sentenced” to an open-ended term of imprisonment. The result is a shadow criminal justice system for non-UK nationals which fails to meet international standards for a fair trial.

At the time of writing 13 foreign nationals are being detained under the ATCSA as “suspected international terrorists”. They are held in high-security facilities under severely restricted regimes.

The Special Immigration Appeals Commission (SIAC) is the tribunal empowered under the ATCSA to hear appeals, grant bail, and review the certification of individuals as “suspected international terrorists”. In October 2003 the appeals brought in May, June and July by 10 individuals against their certification as “suspected international terrorists” under the ATCSA were all dismissed.

In the course of the SIAC appeals the individuals concerned did not benefit from the presumption of innocence, given that the SIAC, disconcertingly, ruled that under the ATCSA the standard of proof that the Home Secretary had to meet to justify internment is not the criminal standard of “beyond reasonable doubt” but, instead, was even lower than that in a civil case. This meant that anyone involved in a civil claim to recover damages (for example as a result of a car accident) must prove their case to a standard higher than that required of the Home Secretary under the ATCSA in order to have his decision to intern people – potentially indefinitely – confirmed by the SIAC.

When the SIAC has decided in favour of detainees, the UK government has refused to accept its judgment. In January the SIAC accepted that one detainee’s mental and physical health had deteriorated severely as a consequence of his detention for more than two years and ruled that he should be released on bail under strict conditions amounting to house arrest. The UK government challenged the SIAC decision and – at the time of writing – the man remains in detention, awaiting a further hearing.

In March the SIAC found that “reasonable suspicion” that a Libyan man, who had been held for 16 months, was a “suspected international terrorist” was not established and the detainee should therefore be released. The government sought to appeal, delaying the release of the man. Its challenge was denied by the Court of Appeal of England and Wales which refused permission to appeal.

In December 2003, the Committee of Privy Counsellors recommended an urgent repeal of ATCSA powers allowing non-UK nationals to be detained indefinitely. Instead the UK authorities have sought and obtained the renewal of Part 4 of the ATCSA for a further 12 months.

Time to make human rights a reality in Libya

“I am not against the regime, nor do I have any political aims,” Abdullah Ahmed ‘Izzedin told AI delegates who met him in Abu Salim Prison, Tripoli. “I just wanted to work towards reforming society and to making it a better place.” Abdullah Ahmed ‘Izzedin is under sentence of death after an unfair trial, solely for the peaceful expression of his ideas. He is accused of affiliation to the banned Muslim Brotherhood, which is not known to have used or advocated the use of violence.

AI delegates visited Libya in February for the first time in 15 years. As well as meeting the head of state, Colonel Mu’ammar al-Gaddafi, and government officials, they were given an unprecedented opportunity to meet political prisoners and prisoners of conscience.

In a new report AI concludes that laws, institutions and practices violating human rights continue to operate in Libya and the truth about past events remains undisclosed. Perpetrators enjoy impunity and victims suffer, often in silence.

The legal system continues to create prisoners of conscience, like Abdullah Ahmed ‘Izzedin, likely to spend decades behind bars. Critics of the system are forced to operate in secret. They are heavily punished and even face the death penalty. Most Libyans are afraid to engage in human rights activities, and legislation restricting freedom of association makes it almost impossible for independent human rights associations to emerge.

The security forces continue to detain people for prolonged periods incommunicado and resort to torture and ill-treatment to extract confessions; the death penalty remains a punishment for the exercise of peaceful political activities; political opponents continue to be sentenced to long-term prison sentences after grossly unfair trials before special courts, particularly the People’s Court; and forms of “collective punishment”, including house demolition, are permitted. The rhetoric of the authorities has changed in recent years, using the “war on terror” as an excuse to continue old practices at the expense of human rights.

Scores of families who were informed recently that their relatives died in custody continue to be denied information regarding the circumstances of the deaths. There has still been no investigation into reported killings of prisoners in Abu Salim Prison in 1996. Other families of political prisoners do not know whether their relatives are alive or dead, having received no news for years. Their suffering is shared by the families of those who have “disappeared” over the years; the authorities have failed to establish independent mechanisms to disclose information. These families live with the daily reality of not knowing whether they will ever see their detained relative again or whether they should mourn for them.

In a speech in April, Colonel Mu’ ammar al-Gaddafi called for AI’s specific concerns in a number of areas to be addressed by the Libyan authorities. AI welcomed his intervention and called on the authorities to undertake without delay institutional reforms and other measures to address fully the grave human rights concerns outlined by the organization during its visit to Libya. There is an urgent need for the truth to emerge in respect of events of the past and for new foundations to be laid for a future of justice.

For further information see AI’s report, *Libya: Time to make human rights a reality* (MDE 19/002/2004) to be issued this month.

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Worldwide appeals

RUSSIAN FEDERATION

Teacher ‘disappears’ in Ingushetia

Bashir Mutsolgov was last seen in December 2003 as he was forced into a car by several men in camouflage in Karabulak, Republic of Ingushetia in the Russian Federation. His family has since heard that he was taken to the headquarters of the Ingush Federal Security Service in Magas, where he was reportedly kept for two days. He was reportedly then taken to the Military Headquarters of the Russian Armed Forces in the North Caucasus in Khankala, Chechnya. It is not known what has happened to him since.

A maths and physics teacher, Bashir Mutsolgov was on his way home from his father’s house when he stopped to speak to one of his pupils. It has been reported that several men got out of a car, hit the boy with their assault rifles and dragged Bashir Mutsolgov into their car and drove off.

A witness tried to get the Ingush traffic police to stop the car and another car, which was also involved in the incident. However, both cars had a special permit to travel and the police did not attempt to stop them.

Bashir's father, Adam Mutsolgov, and his five other children have written many letters to the Russian and Ingush authorities, to the President of the Republic of Ingushetia and to Russian President Vladimir Putin, but have not received any further information from these authorities. The family does not know why he was detained. It is thought that the security services may have interpreted his studies of Arabic as implying that he is a supporter of Chechen fighters.

Please write, calling on the authorities to investigate the "disappearance" of Bashir Mutsolgov and bring those suspected of involvement to justice. Call for guarantees that, if he is in custody, he will not be tortured or ill-treated. Urge the authorities to take immediate steps to end the "disappearances", extrajudicial executions, torture and ill-treatment being carried out by Russian federal forces as well as regional forces in the Republic of Ingushetia and the Republic of Chechnya.

Send appeals to: Procurator General of the Russian Federation, Vladimir Ustinov, General Procuracy of the Russian Federation, Ul. B. Dimitrovka 15a, 103793 Moscow K-31, Russian Federation. Fax: + 7 095 292 8848.

MYANMAR

Rohingya minority denied basic rights

"Muslims now live inside a cage"

Rohingya man describing travel restrictions imposed on the Rohingya people

The Rohingya, a Muslim minority who live in the west of Myanmar, suffer severe discrimination in law and practice. The Myanmar government heavily restricts their enjoyment of a range of civil, political, social and economic rights, including the rights to work and to an adequate standard of living.

The majority of the approximately one million Rohingya are not considered citizens under Myanmar law, and are effectively stateless. As non-citizens, if they wish to travel outside their village or township, they are required to seek and pay for official permission. These restrictions have tightened in recent years. Many people are therefore virtually confined to their villages and townships and unable to access medical services, employment and higher education. Their ability to earn a livelihood is further compromised by the fact that the security forces regularly engage Rohingya in forced labour, including on roads and in military camps. The Rohingya are also subjected to arbitrary taxation and land confiscation. They are required to seek and pay for official permission to marry, which in some cases may cost up to the equivalent of several years' salary.

As a result of the ongoing violations of their rights, thousands have sought asylum in neighbouring countries, including Bangladesh.

Please write, expressing concern at reports of continuing discrimination against and human rights violations of members of the Rohingya minority. Urge the authorities to grant the Rohingya full citizenship and to initiate independent, impartial and prompt investigations into all reports of forced labour of the Rohingya, and to bring those found responsible to justice.

Send appeals to: General Khin Nyunt, Prime Minister, State Peace and Development Council, c/o Directorate of Defence Services Intelligence, Ministry of Defence, Signal Pagoda Road, Dagon

Post Office, Yangon, Myanmar. Please send copies to the ministry of foreign affairs in your country.

SUDAN

Tortured for holding a meeting

Dr Ali Ahmed Daoud, a veterinary surgeon, and Ali Hussain Dossa, a member of parliament, were arrested in March for organizing a meeting in South Darfur to discuss lobbying the government to end attacks against villages in Darfur by the government-supported Janjawid militia.

Both men were allegedly so severely tortured that a doctor was sent for. They have reportedly been charged with spying for the armed opposition group, the Sudan Liberation Army (SLA), a charge that carries the death penalty if found guilty. Neither has had access to a lawyer.

The meeting in Ali Hussain Dossa's house was attended by about 20 other people, all believed to be members of the Fur ethnic group. Members of the Sudanese security forces are said to have broken up the meeting and to have detained Dr Ali Ahmed Daoud, Ali Hussain Dossa and everyone else present. The estimated 20 other people are said to have been released.

Lawyers have appealed to the Prosecutor's Office (niyaba) and the security authorities to release the two men unless they are charged with a recognizable criminal offence and their cases transferred to a normal criminal court to stand a fair trial. There has been no response from the authorities.

Over the past month scores of people from the Darfur region have been arrested. They were apparently suspected of contacts with armed opposition in the region. Those arrested have been held under a law which allows detention for up to nine months without access to judicial review.

Please write, stating that if Dr Ali Ahmed Daoud and Ali Hussain Dossa were arrested simply for holding a peaceful discussion meeting, they are prisoners of conscience and should be immediately and unconditionally released.

Send appeals to: Mr Ali Osman Mohamed Taha, First Vice-President, People's Palace, PO Box 281, Khartoum, Sudan. Fax : + 249 11 771651 / 779977

IRAN

Unfair trial and imprisonment of journalist

Ensafali Hedayat, an Azerbaijani freelance journalist, was arrested in January shortly after returning from the founding conference in Berlin of the Ettihad-e Jomhuri Khahan-e Iran, Unity for Democracy and Secular Republic in Iran, an organization which supports the establishment of a democratic and secular republic in Iran by non-violent means.

Ensafali Hedayat is said to have been charged with offences relating to national security including spying and receiving money from foreign media possibly in connection with his alleged promotion of political and cultural rights for the people of Azerbaijan.

In an open letter addressed to President Khatami and smuggled out of Tabriz prison in March, Ensafali Hedayat explains that his arrest was due to his opinions. He details the arduous conditions of being held in solitary confinement for 44 days in 2003, during which he was detained with an individual convicted of a criminal offence.

In March, Ensafali Hedayat became ill after being given an infected vaccination injection. He suffered from intestinal bleeding, but was allegedly denied medical treatment for four days. He was finally transferred to a prison medical facility, reportedly after his lawyer and others raised concerns about his condition.

On 15 April, Ensafali Hedayat was sentenced following an unfair trial to one year's imprisonment for "insulting state leaders" and to seven month's for "propaganda against the state". He was acquitted of charges in connection with his attendance of the conference in Berlin. Before charges were brought, his lawyer was not allowed to be present during interrogation sessions. Ensafali Hedayat plans to appeal against the sentence.

Please write, calling for Ensafali Hedayat to be released unless he is charged with an internationally recognizable criminal offence. Pending his release, call for the authorities to guarantee his health and well-being while in detention.

Send appeals to: His Excellency Ayatollah Sayed 'Ali Khamenei, The Presidency, Palestine Avenue, Azerbaijan Intersection, Tehran, Iran. Fax: + 98 21 649 5880. (Please mark: For the attention of the Office of His Excellency, Ayatollah al Udhma Khamenei, Qom). Email: webmaster@wilayah.org (on the subject line write: For the attention of the Office of His Excellency, Ayatollah al Udhma Khamenei, Qom).

Impunity in Haiti leads to fear and insecurity

The civilian population in Haiti is living in fear and insecurity two months after the start of the rebellion on 5 February. Despite the establishment of a new interim government and the presence of the US-led Multinational Interim Force (MIF), armed groups continue to be active throughout the country, including both rebel forces and militias loyal to former President Aristide.

Fear runs deep through all sectors of society. Armed groups are at large throughout the country. They include those who participated in the 1991 coup; the Chimères (unofficial armed pro-Aristide gangs); criminal gangs; and former military officials and rural police chiefs known to have been responsible for serious abuses in the past. Members of the abolished Haitian Armed Forces and former paramilitary leaders convicted of past human rights violations have emerged as new political actors and have taken control, especially in areas where state authority is weak.

AI's concerns continue for the safety of all those involved in prosecutions relating to past human rights abuses. Judge Napela Saintil was severely beaten in March by an armed man and threatened apparently as a result of having convicted Louis Jodel Chamblain for his participation in the 1994 Raboteau massacre in which an estimated 20 people were killed by military and paramilitary forces. One young woman has received threats from a police officer, accused of raping her, who escaped during a mass jailbreak in February. Organizations supporting her have also been threatened. Extrajudicial executions and kidnappings of supporters of former President Aristide have been reported.

Since coming to power, the interim government has arrested members of former President Aristide's Lavalas Family party suspected of acts of political violence or corruption. However, it has failed to act against a number of known perpetrators of grave human rights violations, including those named in AI's report, Haiti: Perpetrators of past abuses threaten human rights and the reestablishment of the rule of law (AMR 36/013/2004).

As a priority, determined action must be taken towards disarmament in Haiti. AI is calling on the new interim government, in coordination with the MIF and the Haitian National Police, to establish a nationwide program to disarm armed groups to ensure the security of all Haitians.

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Argentina remembers those who ‘disappeared’

To mark the 28th anniversary of Argentina’s military coup, President Nestor Kirchner revealed that the Navy’s School of Mechanics (ESMA) would become a national memorial museum of human rights.

During the years of military government (1976 – 1983) the ESMA was a secret detention centre of the Argentine Navy where “disappeared” prisoners were held and tortured for prolonged periods. Pregnant women were also taken there by members of the security forces and kept there until giving birth. Most of the women remain “disappeared”, although most are believed to have been killed shortly after giving birth. Their children were given for adoption, often to members of the security forces. The Grandmothers of Plaza de Mayo believe that up to 500 children were taken at birth from their mothers.

Thanks to the tireless work of the Grandmothers of Plaza de Mayo, 70 of those babies and children have now managed to recover their true identity.

AI’s report causes a stir

The publication of AI’s report, *Tajikistan: Deadly Secrets. The Death Penalty in Law and Practice* (EUR 60/008/2002) in September 2002 was accompanied by campaigning by AI members around the world. The impact was beyond all expectations.

After AI lobbying, the President of the European Parliament, Pat Cox, urged President Rakhmonov to introduce a moratorium on the death penalty when he visited Brussels in March 2003. Sixteen members of the European Parliament added their names to a 2,122-signature petition against the death penalty, and Armonia Bordes of the European Parliament’s committee for relations with Tajikistan accompanied an AI delegation to the Tajik Embassy in Brussels to hand it in.

Reliable contacts in Tajikistan reported that the President of Tajikistan was so incensed by constantly having to defend his country’s poor record on the death penalty during international meetings that he demanded a significant decrease in death sentences from the courts in Tajikistan and a review of their sentencing practices. In July parliament approved a draft law, proposed by President Rakhmonov, amending the criminal code. Among the amendments were the abolition of the death penalty for all women and for men aged under 18, and a reduction from 15 to five in the number of articles in the criminal code carrying a possible death sentence. The amendments became law in August.

On 12 November 2003 the UN Human Rights Committee made its first ruling on a death sentence in Tajikistan. It found that Abduali Kurbanov had been sentenced to death in an unfair trial, with inadequate right to review and following torture. In its first ruling on a death sentence in Tajikistan the UN Human Rights Committee called, in November 2003, for Abduali Kurbanov to be given a new, open and fair trial or released. The Committee found that Tajikistan had violated Abduali Kurbanov’s rights under six articles of the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights, including the right to a fair trial and the right not to be tortured. Abduali Kurbanov’s case was featured in AI’s report.

On 4 March AI launched an Urgent Action after it was reported that Abdulai Kurbanov was in imminent danger of being executed, despite the Committee ruling. Five days later President Rakhmonov decided to grant clemency. To AI’s knowledge this is the first time an execution has been stopped at such a late stage in Tajikistan.

Although there was no official reaction to the AI report – which was published in Tajik as well as English and Russian and thus reached a wider audience – reliable contacts reported that it provoked some strong “off-the-record” comments from government officials. It was very well received by those who suffer under the harsh application of the death penalty in Tajikistan: death row prisoners and their relatives.

Thai authorities’ failure to investigate ‘disappearances’ in south of country

“With martial law, soldiers have more power as they can conduct a search anywhere, any time, with no court warrant required...This has greatly hurt our sisters and brothers.”

Somchai Neelapaijit, a prominent Muslim human rights lawyer, speaking in a rally in southern Thailand on 27 February

Somchai Neelapaijit (right) went missing in Bangkok, Thailand, on 12 March and is believed to have been abducted by police. Before he went missing, he had spoken out about the alleged torture by police of his clients, suspected of involvement in an attack in January on an army camp in southern Thailand. He had also been campaigning for the lifting of martial law, declared in the country’s southernmost provinces after the attack.

According to press reports, at least 15 other people from Thailand’s Muslim south remain missing after they were taken into custody by police.

AI has urged the Thai authorities to investigate independently all reports of “disappearances”, including those that took place more than a decade ago, and bring anyone found responsible to justice.

AI has also called on the Thai authorities to ensure that the police and army observe detention procedures. All those in their custody should be given access to lawyers and relatives. Everyone deprived of their liberty has the right to challenge the lawfulness of their detention before a court, and to have the detention reviewed on a regular basis.

The Thai authorities’ failure to hold anyone to account for previous “disappearances” has fostered a climate in which security forces may commit human rights violations such as “disappearances” with impunity.

Labour leader Thanong Po-Arn, who mobilized opposition to the military authorities’ ban on state labour unions, has not been seen since June 1991, after he was reportedly abducted by members of the army.

This month marks the 12th anniversary of the “disappearance” of at least 34 men and women aged between 19 and 77 who went missing at demonstrations against military rule in May 1992. These demonstrations were forcibly suppressed by the military. Among the group of “disappeared” are a tailor, food stall owners, a student, a house painter, and an employee of an incense factory. The Thai authorities have not provided a full account of their fate and whereabouts, nor brought anyone to justice for their part in these “disappearances”.

AI campaigns for trade unionists

As part of AI’s events to mark the international day of solidarity with workers and trade unionists worldwide on 1 May, the front page of this issue of the Wire highlights news of repression of trade unionists in Belarus. For more information and action you can take see, *Belarus: Stifling the promotion of human rights* (EUR 49/004/2004) and www.amnesty.org/actnow

Please write to the Belarus government, calling on them to ensure that Alyaksandr Bukhvostov and other trade union activists will not be imprisoned or harassed by the police simply for their political beliefs or for peacefully exercising their right to freedom of assembly. Call on them to take immediate steps to review laws, regulations and administrative practices relating to the registration and activities of independent trade unions in order that they may operate freely in accordance with ILO obligations to which Belarus is a party.

Send appeals to: President of the Republic of Belarus, Alyaksandr G Lukashenka, Karl Marx Str. 38, 220016g Minsk, Belarus. Fax: +375 (172) 26 06 10 or +375 (172) 22 38 72. Email pres@president.gov.by

Art for human rights

Celebrated artist Yoko Ono will open “In the time of shaking”, an exciting exhibition of work by Irish artists at the Irish Museum of Modern Art, Dublin, on 6 May. The exhibition of over 100 of Ireland’s leading artists in support of human rights and AI is accompanied by a limited edition book of all the works in the show. The exhibits can be viewed on the website which also provides details of how to purchase them.

See www.artforamnesty.org/shaking