

# AMNESTY INTERNATIONAL

## External Document

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## Amnesty International's Response to The Times (UK) Article & Editorial

Amnesty International welcomes public attention given to the promotion and protection of human rights. However, the article and the editorial on Amnesty International in The Times of 29 May 2004 was a curious and puzzling package.

There was much praise for the organization. It pointed out that Amnesty International has worked tirelessly for one of the truly great causes, has made human rights a mainstream concern and is one of the most trusted organizations in Europe. But worryingly the articles also contained much that was inaccurate, misinformed and misleading.

The Times asked whether Amnesty International has forgotten the ideals that gave it its original purpose. Nothing can be further from the truth. Our commitment to the ideals that gave birth to Amnesty International - universality and indivisibility of human rights, the independence and impartiality of our organisation, our solidarity with individual victims, and democratic decision-making by our 1.8 million members around the world - remains as strong as ever. Our work to bring an end to torture, the death penalty, unfair trials and the imprisonment of prisoners of conscience remains as important as ever.

Our 2004 annual report, published on 26 May and covering 155 countries, is replete with evidence of injustice and abuse, and our determination to secure fair treatment for individuals the world over, regardless of origin, identity or social status. It highlights the plight of prisoners of conscience in 44 countries, including people like Sing Chanthakoummane and Pangtong Chokbengboun in Laos, who were arrested in 1975, detained without charge or trial for 17 years for "re-education", before they were sentenced to life imprisonment after an unfair trial in 1992.

In accusing Amnesty International of pushing aside old issues in favour of new ones, The Times failed to appreciate that our mission has never been frozen in time. Our work has continuously evolved, and our priorities have been set, through a democratic process of consultations with our members, to encompass the human rights challenges of the current day - whether of "disappearances" in the 1980s, abuses by armed groups in the 1990s, or economic and social rights, and violence against women, today.

The right to health, violated when rape victims in Rwanda are denied access to essential treatments against HIV/AIDS. The right to food, violated when food shortages are used as a political weapon in Zimbabwe or North Korea. The right to housing, violated through forced evictions in Angola or the punitive destruction of homes in the Palestinian Occupied Territories. These are basic human rights, recognised by international law for decades but neglected in practice by governments across the globe. And they are subject of recent Amnesty International reports and campaigns.

Violence against women, whether perpetrated during war or at home, is a human rights scandal. International law places a duty upon governments to do everything in their power to respect, protect and fulfil a woman's right to live free from violence in her home or elsewhere. Our global campaign to stop violence against women focuses on the cases of hundreds of individual women victims and survivors of violence, from Congo to Colombia, Spain to Swaziland.

And suggestions that we are somehow soft-peddling on Russia, in particular regarding Chechnya, or neglecting to work for particular individuals due to their wealth, carry no weight. Our recent campaign on Russia drew international attention to a range of serious human rights issues in that country, and we are continuing to highlight individuals at risk both in Chechnya and in Russia as a whole. Our determination to secure respect for the human rights for all, regardless of origin or status, remains undimmed.

While The Times in 2004 has repeated its editorial tactics of 1993 by attempting to personalize to the Secretary General of the day the changes that AI has embraced through its formal decision-making, simply accusing someone or some organization of something does not make fabrication fact.

Our decision to fight to abolish the death penalty was as controversial when taken as is our decision now to promote economic, social and cultural rights, or to work to protect women from violence. But criticism and controversy have never deterred Amnesty International members from working on issues that shape the human rights agenda of the day.

The Times editorial and article accuse Amnesty International of partiality and politicization in our statements on the United States and the "war on terror". The Times would have done well to check its facts and assumptions.

We did not say, as The Times editorial claims, that "America has damaged human rights more than any country in the past 50 years". Rather, our concern is that violence by armed groups and violations by governments (please note the plural here!) have combined to produce the most sustained attack on the framework and values of human rights and international humanitarian law in 50 years.

Nor did we remain "virtually silent about terrorist abuses", as The Times editorial claims. Our reports and statements over the past few years show that we have consistently condemned cruel, callous and criminal attacks by armed groups such as al-Qua'ida, and made it clear that these attacks amount at times to war crimes and crimes against humanity.

Have we been "quick to condemn the United States for real and imagined improprieties during the Iraq conflict"? No. We have documented a pattern of abuse by US agents against detainees, including in Iraq, Afghanistan and Guantánamo Bay, stretching back over the past two years. We have presented well-researched and corroborated allegations of brutality and cruelty to the highest levels of the US Government, including the White House, the Department of Defence and the State Department.

Is it "political" to point out that the principles of human rights and international law are being undermined, marginalized and destroyed by powerful governments? Is it "political" to document the way in which the "war on terror" has encouraged a new wave of human rights abuse and diverted attention from old ones? Is it "political" to ask that the world's governments - including the USA and the UK - abide by their international obligations? We do not think so.

An organisation committed to the release of prisoners of conscience must remain true to its own conscience: that an absolute insistence of respect for basic human rights by all is right in both principle and practice. That is why we will continue to denounce atrocities and abuses whenever and wherever they are committed, and no matter by whom.

Signed

Paul Hoffman  
Chair  
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Amnesty International

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