

Grief must lead to change

AI Secretary General Irene Khan's eye-witness account after a visit to Israel and the Occupied Territories stresses need for impartiality

In Jenin refugee camp, an old woman sits besides a pile of stones that was her house before the Israeli incursion. She shows me the identity card of her disabled son, Jamal, who was wheelchair-bound. She tells me that when the Israeli Defence Forces started to demolish her house, the women tried to carry Jamal out, but the walls crumbled and they ran out. Jamal was buried alive under the rubble.

Nearby an elderly man describes how Israeli soldiers asked his son to hand over to his wife the four-month old baby in his arms. He tells me that then they took his son, his neighbour's son and himself to a narrow passage behind the house. They asked them to raise their shirts and then sprayed them with bullets. The old man survived, saved by the body of his son falling on him. He pretended to be dead, until the soldiers moved away and he could crawl to safety.

In the courtyard of Jenin hospital, two ambulances lie, mangled by army tanks. The Medical Director tells me that for 10 days Israeli tanks and snipers blocked the entrance to the hospital. For days he was not allowed to retrieve the dead or wounded. On 10 April, when the army finally allowed him to take his ambulance to the refugee camp, it took 11 hours of negotiations to evacuate one seriously wounded person.

Later I pick up the newspaper Ha'aretz. On the front page is the picture of a blood-covered teddy bear. It belonged to a five-year-old Israeli girl who was killed the night before in an attack by Palestinian armed men on an Israeli settlement near Hebron.

The next day I meet an Israeli who speaks proudly of his father who had devoted his life to the cause of Israeli-Palestinian friendship, but was killed in a suicide bombing in a café in Haifa on 31 March 2002. A 25-year old woman at the Sheba Tel Hashomer Rehabilitation Centre tells how, on her first day at work at the Park Hotel on 27 March 2002, a bomb carried by a Palestinian suicide bomber exploded a few yards away from her. She is now paralysed from the waist down.

The experiences of these people I met during my visit to Israel and the Occupied Territories in mid-May show that nothing justifies the targeting of civilians, the destruction of lives and livelihoods, the gross abuses of human rights and humanitarian law, whether in Haifa or Hebron, Jenin or Jerusalem. While the political debate rages about the security of Israel and the liberation of Palestine, the reality is that on both sides ordinary people are paying a heavy price for the escalating violence. Every day children are being maimed, lives are being destroyed with impunity.

Only an impartial approach, based on objective standards of international human rights and humanitarian law will break the cycle of violence in the Middle East. Establishing the facts is the first step towards justice for all victims. This is why I am deeply disappointed that UN initiatives, including establishing what happened in Jenin, appear to have been traded away in the interests of politics. AI has called for a comprehensive, independent, international investigation of all abuses of human rights and humanitarian law.

There is credible evidence of serious violations of international humanitarian law and human rights by Israeli forces in Jenin. To allow that to pass uninvestigated is an insult to the victims who deserve justice. There must be an inquiry not only in Jenin, but also in Nablus and Hebron.

By the same token the responsibility of the Palestinian Authority and Palestinian armed groups must be determined. Deliberately targeting Israeli civilians violates the fundamental right to life. Those responsible for the suicide bombings, including those who assisted these heinous acts must be held to account and brought to justice.

There are many Palestinians who are angry and want revenge. But there are also Palestinians, including people I met in Jerusalem and Gaza, who condemn the killing of Israeli civilians. There are many Israelis who are afraid for their lives and see a military response as the only solution, but there are also those who think differently. One man, whose teenage daughter, Smadar, had been killed in a suicide bombing in September 1997, said to me: "I could have made my grief a tool for hatred, but I decided to make it a platform for change." Ariel Sharon, Yasser Arafat and George Bush must listen to

the calls of the victims, and put respect for human rights and humanitarian law at the centre of political negotiations.

G8 ignores role of arms trade in Africa

The G8 countries — a grouping of the world's largest economies — have pledged to put Africa on their agenda when they meet in Canada in June. Half of the population of sub-Saharan Africa lives in dire poverty, despite the continent's rich human and natural resources, and a fifth are affected by armed conflict. Millions of people have been forced to leave their homes and livelihoods because of fighting and gross human rights abuses inflicted on civilians by competing forces.

These conflicts have been fuelled by the wide availability of small arms and light weapons and the lack of effective controls on arms and related material. Despite this, the role of the arms trade and other military, security and police transfers is unlikely to be discussed in June by the G8 countries, many of which reap huge financial rewards from exporting arms to Africa and are involved in training the armed forces of their allies.

Urgent action is needed to combat the secretive and often illicit arms trade. The UN has maintained a ban on arms transfers to Liberia since 1992 and to non-governmental forces in Sierra Leone since 1997, yet for many years these sanctions were not properly enforced. Some progress has been achieved in bringing to justice those involved in the trade, but only after the publication in December 2000 and October 2001 of two reports of UN Panels of Experts on Sierra Leone and Liberia.

The reports named three men suspected of involvement in the illicit arms trade. Leonid Minin, a Ukrainian, was arrested in Italy in June 2001, and is now in prison in Turin pending trial for illegal gun-running. Sanjivan Ruprah, a Kenyan based in Liberia, was arrested by Belgian authorities in February 2002 on charges of criminal association and using a false passport. The Belgian authorities also issued an international warrant for the arrest of his associate, Russian national Victor Bout, on allegations of money laundering.

Such developments show that it is possible to take effective action when there is political will, but we are still a long way from ensuring effective control of arms transfers to West Africa. For example, there is no effective monitoring of military assistance from the USA and other governments to the Guinean authorities, even though there is overwhelming evidence of human rights violations by the Guinean security forces and of the provision by Guinean forces of military assistance to Liberian armed opposition groups involved in human rights abuses.

International efforts to bring to justice illegal arms suppliers are an important step forward. However, without strict controls and monitoring, more detailed and systematic investigations, public reporting and concrete legal action, there will always be others ready to step in to supply weapons to armed forces that have little or no respect for human rights.

Prisoners in Laos face torture and cruelty

Ill-treatment of prisoners is a matter of routine in Laos, and some detainees have been tortured during interrogation

“They beat people with rifles on the head, and split their faces open. The people made noises like an animal.”

Testimony of former prisoner detained without trial in Laos for more than a year.

AI has collated disturbing evidence of the torture and ill-treatment of Laotian and foreign prisoners in Lao prisons. Written testimonies and interviews with former prisoners, as well as family members of people who have been arrested, paint a picture of cruel, inhuman and degrading treatment of many prisoners as a matter of routine, and of torture of some detainees, particularly during interrogations. Prisoners are not provided with adequate medical care, food supplies are limited and those without outside support suffer from malnutrition. Reports from several sources state that prisoners have been left to die, without any attempt being made to provide them with medical assistance.

Inhuman

AI has known for years that the treatment of prisoners of conscience held in isolation in the remote north of the country fell far short of minimum international standards.

New evidence points to a systemically cruel detention regime, where prisoners are frequently treated as less than human, where rules are arbitrary and not written down, and where people have no legal means of upholding their fundamental human rights.

A former detainee told AI: “If you break any of the rules, they lock you in wooden stocks for three months, sometimes you are locked together [with other prisoners].”

The use of wooden stocks for extended periods for prisoners of conscience has been known for some time. However, new information suggests that male prisoners are routinely placed in these wooden leg restraints during interrogation.

Ill-treatment and torture during interrogation, including threats, beatings and electric shocks, have also been reported. Those with no one to help them suffer especially bad treatment. One former prisoner described how African prisoners in particular were blindfolded, beaten and tortured with electric shocks.

The vast majority of those detained never have access to any legal assistance, and in many cases, they are never brought before a court.

Money

AI has been told for many years that the deciding factor in most cases is money. One person with a relative detained in Laos said:

“People don’t even know about the court or where it is. If you are arrested, you are in prison unless you have money. If you have money, you can change many things. Bail is only available to people with lots of money or to relatives of high-ranking people.”

Another former prisoner said, “every village has a jail —and in every one you must pay before you can leave.”

Scrutiny

AI and other independent human rights monitors are not allowed into Laos. There are no domestic human rights organizations, and no routine visits to prisons by neutral observers.

Freedom of expression and association is strictly controlled, and the last recorded attempt at public protest in October 1999 by a group of students led to the arrest of at least five of them, none of whom have been heard of since.

AI fears for the safety of all those detained in Lao prisons, who are at daily risk of torture and cruel, inhuman and degrading treatment.

English-speaking Caribbean: no return to executions

“Talking to people in the Caribbean, I realise that much of the support for the death penalty comes from the anger caused by the prevalence of violent crime in society. When looking for an answer to this problem, politicians put forward the death penalty and then go on to claim to be carrying out ‘the will of the people’ when carrying out hanging. I hope our campaigning in the Caribbean has gone some way to breaking this cycle.”

Sister Helen Prejean, author of *Dead Man Walking*, was speaking as a member of an AI delegation which toured Jamaica and Trinidad and Tobago in April. Other delegates were AI’s researcher, and Pat Clark, a leading member of Murder Victims’ Families for Reconciliation.

The last execution in the English-speaking Caribbean took place in the Bahamas in January 2000. Since then support for the death penalty has been vocal, with calls for the resumption of hanging on several islands. However, several politicians – most recently the Jamaican Attorney General – have talked of their “personal” opposition to the death penalty, giving hope that progress towards abolition may come soon.

Many politicians present public opinion as being 100 per cent in favour of executions but the delegation found this not to be the case. Sister Helen said: “We found there is significant opposition to capital punishment in the Caribbean. It’s like the USA; support for the death penalty is a mile wide but an inch deep. When people really think about the death penalty, they often change their views. We talked to many who were already opposed to state killing in the Caribbean before we came and others who changed as a result of our message.”

Apart from having no proven deterrent effect, the death penalty carries the inherent risk of killing an innocent person as a result of judicial error.

The delegates launched a new AI report* which shows that the judicial systems of the English-speaking Caribbean fall short of international standards governing the imposition of capital punishment. It details faults including inadequate provision for defence lawyers, both at trial and appeal, the imposition of death sentences on those suffering from mental health problems and the use of coerced confessions. The report also replies to many of the arguments put forward by the proponents of capital punishment, such as “it’s the law of the land” and that it deters violent crime.

During the tour, the delegation met the Prime Minister of Trinidad and Tobago and members of the Jamaican cabinet, conducted public meetings and media interviews. “The debate around the death penalty in the Caribbean is not well informed. In our interaction with people during the tour I have been struck by how much of what we are saying is new to them.

“As someone who has lost an uncle and a cousin to murder, my message that not all the relatives of the victims of murder want to see the cycle of violence continued via an execution has been particularly well received. I believe we have changed many peoples’ minds on this vital human rights issue” said Pat Clark.

*For further information, see: State killing in the English-speaking Caribbean: a legacy of colonial times (AI Index: AMR 05/003/2002).

Raising human rights

Irene Khan, AI’s Secretary General, visited Colombia in May during the presidential election campaign. She took part in a round-table discussion with the main presidential candidates in Bogotá and called on them not simply to co-opt the language of human rights, but to commit themselves to concrete action.

Irene Khan regretted that none of the candidates had put forward any specific proposals on how to improve the human rights situation. They did not even make any firm or unequivocal commitments to implement fully the recommendations made by the UN, the Organization of American States and several national and international human rights organizations. These recommendations include measures to put an end to impunity, to combat paramilitary groups and break their links with the armed forces, and to protect human rights defenders and the most vulnerable sections of Colombian society.

“Especially worrying were the plans put forward by at least two of the candidates to get citizens more directly involved in promoting security. Such plans could end up bringing the civilian population into the conflict even more”, she said.

The AI delegation arrived in Colombia shortly after a massacre in Bojayá, in the department of Chocó, in which over 100 civilians, almost half of them children, were killed by the armed opposition group, the FARC. Irene Khan said: “this is one of the gravest violations of international humanitarian law that has taken place in this long and terrible conflict and once again shows complete contempt for the civilian population. The parties to the conflict must make it an overriding priority to come to a humanitarian agreement to keep the civilian population out of the hostilities.”

AI strongly condemned the actions of the FARC in Bojayá and called on the FARC to stop using gas cylinders as weapons because of their indiscriminate nature. AI also condemned the use of civilians who had taken refuge in a church as human shields by the paramilitaries.

Irene Khan said that she was “more firmly convinced than ever that, given the humanitarian and human rights emergency Colombia is suffering, it would be a mistake to send further military aid without clear and inescapable human rights conditions attached to them and without any verifiable progress having been made in the protection of such rights and in particular of the civilian population.” AI is concerned at the recent reopening of the debate in the US Congress about the lifting of all conditions on the use of US military aid to Colombia.

Worldwide Appeals

Bulgaria

Residents of Dragash Voyvoda are dying as a result of gross neglect

In 2001, 22 men died in the Home for Adults with Mental Disorders in Dragash Voyvoda, Bulgaria. Another five have so far died in 2002. Most of the deaths were caused by lack of medical treatment. Conditions in this institution, in which more than 140 men with mental health disorders or developmental disabilities are held indefinitely, amount to cruel, inhuman and degrading treatment. The inmates' treatment is in violation of the international human rights standards ratified by Bulgaria. Living conditions in Dragash Voyvoda are appalling. The facilities – three separate fenced-off sections containing smaller buildings with dormitories – are in an extremely poor state of repair and are in places dangerous. Dormitories have only poor-quality coal and wood stoves for heating, and are excruciatingly cold in winter. Such conditions are inappropriate as accommodation for any human being, particularly for people with special health needs. During 2001, 17 men died in the early part of the year and five towards the end – none died during the summer. Post-mortem examinations, conducted in only some of the cases, showed the cause of death as pneumonia and malnutrition. There appears to have been no investigations into any of the deaths of Dragash Voyvoda residents. The bodies of men who died in 2001 and 2002 were buried in unmarked graves. Only the residents, who themselves dug the graves and buried the deceased, appear to know who lies there. According to a doctor who treated the two most recently deceased men, antibiotics are not provided free of charge in Dragash Voyvoda, they have to be paid for by the residents themselves. Although conditions in the institution are unsuitable for treating people with chest infections, they are not normally moved to a hospital or another more appropriate environment. The director of Dragash Voyvoda has stated that 31 residents are registered as suffering from some form of bronchial condition. Of these, 16 have been prescribed medication but are not receiving it because of lack of funds. In July 2001, nine residents were reportedly sent to a special hospital for treatment for tuberculosis.

Please write, expressing concern at the deaths of residents of Dragash Voyvoda and urging a thorough and impartial investigation into them.

Send appeals to: Nikola Filchev, General Prosecutor of Bulgaria, Vitosha Boulevard 2, 1000 Sofia, Bulgaria. Fax: +359 2 989 0110

Indonesia

No justice for deaths of human rights defenders

Nearly a year and a half after three workers for the Rehabilitation for Torture Victims in Aceh (RATA) were abducted, tortured and executed in the Indonesian province of Aceh, no one has been brought to justice. Suspects have escaped or been released, and the case appears to have been forgotten by the authorities.

On 6 December 2000, Ernita binti Wahab, Idris Yusuf and Bakhtiar Usman, along with fellow RATA worker Nazaruddin Abdul Gani, were stopped when leaving a village by three vehicles carrying around 14 armed men. The four were ordered from their vehicle at gunpoint, beaten with rifle butts, and had shots fired near their feet. They were then forcibly driven away. After about three hours they stopped and Idris and Ernita were taken from the vehicles and shot in the head at point blank range. Nazaruddin managed to escape. Bakhtiar's body was later found at the scene.

A police investigation into the case resulted in the arrest of four civilians and four members of the military. The four civilians escaped in March 2001. The four military personnel have since been released because their detention orders expired.

In January 2001 the Indonesian Human Rights Commission (Komnas HAM) announced that it would establish a Commission of Inquiry in order to investigate the killings, but has never set up an investigation team.

Please write to the Minister for Justice and Human Rights calling for those suspected of involvement in the killings to be brought to trial without delay, and for Komnas HAM to investigate ongoing grave human rights violations in Aceh. Send appeals to: Minister for Justice and Human Rights, Prof. Dr. Yusril Ihza Mahendra, Menteri Kehakiman, Jl. H.R. Rasuna Said Kav. 6-7, Kuningan, Jakarta Selatan, Indonesia. Fax: +62 21 5253095

Iran

Lawyer sent to prison after secret trial

Nasser Zarafshan, a prominent Iranian lawyer, was sentenced on 19 March 2002 to five years' imprisonment and 70 lashes following his conviction in a secret trial before a military court. He was charged with disseminating confidential information and with having weapons and alcohol at his law firm following a search of his office carried out while he was in detention and without the presence of his lawyer. He was given two years for publicizing state information, three years for possession of firearms and 70 lashes for illicitly possessing alcohol.

Nasser Zarafshan is the legal representative of two of the families of a number of writers and activists murdered in 1998 in what came to be known in Iran as the "serial murders" case. At least two of the 18 agents from the Ministry of Information and Intelligence charged with the murder of four writers have admitted the charges against them. However, it is believed that dozens more may have been murdered over a period of 10 years and that the responsibility lies with more senior officials than those being tried. Nasser Zarafshan criticized shortcomings in the official investigation and the absence of vital information from court files.

Nasser Zarafshan has denied the charges against him. He has asserted that he was simply carrying out his duties as an attorney, and alleged that the weapons and alcohol were planted in his office. On 6 April he told the Iranian Students News Agency that he would appeal against his sentence and ask for a retrial, adding that "The Armed Forces' Judicial Department does not have the competence to investigate charges against civilians". AI fears that the charges against Nasser Zarafshan may have been politically motivated.

Please appeal to the authorities, asking that Nasser Zarafshan's conviction by a military court be overturned and that, if he is charged with recognizably criminal offences, he be tried according to internationally accepted standards for fair trial. Send appeals to: His Excellency Ayatollah Mahmoud Hashemi Shahruddi, Head of the Judiciary, Ministry of Justice, Park-e Shahr, Tehran, Islamic Republic of Iran.

Bangladesh

Opposition party officials tortured

Bahauddin Nasim and Dr Mohiuddin Alamgir, senior members of Bangladesh's main opposition party the Awami League, are reported to be in poor health following severe torture in police and army custody, and are being denied medical attention.

Detained on 28 February at Dhaka Zia Airport, Bahauddin Nasim was accused of organizing an attack on a motorcade rally of Begum Khaleda Zia (now Prime Minister) in June 2001. On 1 March he was remanded in police custody. His lawyers warned the court that he might be tortured, and the court specifically told the police that he should not be mistreated in custody. Nevertheless, Bahauddin Nasim says that while in police and army custody in Dhaka, members of the security forces tied his hands and feet and covered his head with a bag, hung him upside down from a ceiling fan and spun him around while beating him with glass bottles filled with water, and gave him electric shocks.

On 3 April the High Court ordered the police to disclose where, and under what legal authority, they had held Bahauddin Nasim and ordered that he should have a medical examination. However, on 8 April an order was issued by the Appellate Division of the Supreme Court preventing the High Court from carrying out its directive. Bahauddin Nasim's lawyers are seeking its withdrawal.

Dr Mohiuddin Alamgir has been charged with sedition for urging government employees to join a rally against the government in 1996. On 24 March Dr Mohiuddin Alamgir testified before the High Court that while in police custody three masked men had beaten him with lathi (bamboo sticks) and glass bottles filled with water. He said he was beaten severely on his buttocks, feet and other parts of his body, and was not allowed his medicine for diabetes.

So far the authorities have reportedly failed to investigate his allegations, or to provide him with necessary medical care. A man armed with a knife tried to attack him in his cell at Dhaka Central Jail on 14 April.

Please write urging the government to ensure that the High Court can investigate the allegations, and calling for an immediate medical examination and all necessary medical care to be given to Bahauddin

Nasim and Dr Mohiuddin Alamgir. Send appeals to: Prime Minister Begum Khaleda Zia, Office of the Prime Minister, Gona Bhaban, Sher-e Baniha Nadar, Dhaka, Bangladesh, Fax: + 880 2 811 3243

UPDATE: USA

execution on hold – new appeal

On 22 April 2002, the US Supreme Court announced that it would hear the appeal of Abu-Ali Abdur' Rahman (see the Wire March 2002). The Court stopped his execution shortly before it was due to be carried out on 10 April. The case will be heard in or around November, and a ruling is not expected until next year. The stay of execution will remain in force at least until then. Abu-Ali Abdur' Rahman's lawyers have asked for their thanks to be sent to all who sent appeals.

The **Amnesty International Report 2002** gives detailed accounts of human rights developments and AI activities during 2001 in 152 countries and territories.

The Foreword by Irene Khan, AI's Secretary General, explores the challenges to the human rights movement worldwide of the 11 September attacks in the USA. The report records countless other human tragedies during the year: repression and violence blighted the lives of millions of people. This report shows not only the failures of human rights protection but also the indomitable determination of human rights activists.

The Amnesty International Report 2002 is available from AI in your country (see <www.amnesty.org> for details) or from: Marketing and Supply Team, Amnesty International, International Secretariat, Peter Benenson House, 1 Easton St, London WC1X 0DW, United Kingdom.

Progress against torture worldwide

June 2002 is the 15th anniversary of the worldwide treaty that bans torture. The UN Convention against Torture and Other Cruel, Inhuman or Degrading Treatment or Punishment details the steps that states which agree to the treaty must take to prohibit and prevent torture. They must make torture a crime in their own laws, prosecute alleged perpetrators and must not forcibly send anyone to a country where they might face torture.

A 10-member Committee against Torture regularly reviews the progress states have made, and can consider individual complaints and allegations of widespread and systematic torture in states which agree to it doing so. AI interviewed the Chairman of the Committee, Professor Peter Burns:

Only 129 of the 189 UN member states have ratified the Convention against Torture. Why do states ratify other international treaties but not the Convention?

There are some states where torture is systematically practised and other states where it is relatively widespread, even if it is not utilised as an instrument of repression at an official level. Such states have no incentive to ratify the Convention against Torture. As well, there are states that are economically impoverished. The obligations imposed by the Convention against Torture upon states parties to describe and report conditions internally are onerous in terms of organization, expertise and cost. Some states have neither the professional resources nor the capacity economically to carry out the terms of the Convention against Torture itself.

How has the Convention developed international human rights law on the question of torture?

The Convention against Torture has been instrumental in diminishing traditional impunity for international crimes at international law. It obliges states to prohibit torture domestically, to undertake a universal criminal jurisdiction over torturers in certain conditions and to remove traditional immunities from prosecution for torture. Even in the light of the recent decision of the International Court of Justice in the case of the *The Congo v Belgium* whereby incumbent Heads of State and Foreign Ministers are immune from prosecution at customary international law during their incumbency, the Convention has been a catalyst in the stripping away of immunities generally. I believe, too, that state practice does generally conform to the obligations contained in the Convention against Torture. In this sense, the normative effect of the Convention cannot be overstated.

What difference will the establishment of a permanent international criminal court (ICC) make to global efforts to end torture?

I believe that the creation of the ICC has been the single most significant step in the past century in regularising the fight against international crime, including torture. I see its jurisdiction as complementary to that of the Committee under the Convention against Torture. Cases of torture may be brought before the ICC as a crime against humanity directed against a civilian population on a widespread or systematic basis. The Convention against Torture will still have its institution-building role through its reporting mechanisms and its norm-creating function vis-à-vis discrete instances of torture that are neither widespread nor systematic. Whereas the ICC is concerned with investigating, prosecution and punishment, the Convention against Torture is concerned with investigation, cooperation and dialogue.

Could you cite some particular situations where you feel the Committee against Torture has made an extraordinary impact?

[I can] give two instances that I think are fairly clear. For several years, we had an ongoing dialogue with Israel concerning its interrogation methods relating to suspected terrorists. The Committee finally concluded that certain methods of interrogation would constitute torture and within 18 months the Supreme Court of Israel declared those methods of interrogation to be unlawful and unable to be justified upon the basis of necessity according to domestic Israeli law.

Some years earlier we had criticized the methods of interrogation adopted by Northern Irish authorities relating to interrogation methods concerning IRA suspects in detention, during the report of the United Kingdom. Within 12 months a number of mechanisms to protect such detainees had been or were about to be put in place and the NGO information that we received indicated that the earlier methods were no longer being practised.

[BOX:]

The following states have not ratified the Convention against Torture:

Andorra, Angola, Bahamas, Barbados, Bhutan, Brunei Darussalam, Central African Republic, Comoros, Congo, Cook Islands, Democratic People's Republic of Korea, Djibouti, Dominica, Dominican Republic, Equatorial Guinea, Eritrea, Fiji, Gambia, Grenada, Guinea-Bissau, Haiti, Holy See, India, Iran, Iraq, Jamaica, Kiribati, Laos, Liberia, Madagascar, Malaysia, Maldives, Marshall Islands, Mauritania, Micronesia, Myanmar, Nauru, Nicaragua, Niue, Oman, Pakistan, Palau, Papua New Guinea, Rwanda, Saint Kitts and Nevis, Saint Lucia, Samoa, San Marino, Sao Tome and Principe, Singapore, Solomon Islands, Sudan, Suriname, Swaziland, Syria, Thailand, Tonga, Trinidad and Tobago, Tuvalu, United Arab Emirates, Tanzania, Vanuatu, Viet Nam, Zimbabwe.

AI is calling on governments to ratify the Convention on its 15th anniversary. It is also urging all states parties to the Convention to make the necessary declaration to allow individuals to send their complaints to the Committee against Torture, and to withdraw any limiting reservations (see AI's website).

Take action now

Link to <www.amnesty.org> on or around

26 June 2002 for further information. Alternatively, send a postcard to your minister of justice urging them to ratify this important international human rights treaty.

[BOX:] Breakthrough vote on prevention of torture

The UN Commission on Human Rights has approved a draft text of the Optional Protocol to the Convention against Torture. This is a significant step forward in the fight against torture and AI's Campaign against Torture.

The next step is to move the lobbying to UN headquarters in New York, where the Economic and Social Council meets in July and the General Assembly meets in September, to persuade the higher bodies of the UN to approve this important new treaty to prevent torture.

What is the draft Optional Protocol?

The draft Optional Protocol to the Convention against Torture will establish an international sub-committee of independent experts enabled to visit any place of detention under the jurisdiction of a state which ratifies this protocol "whenever necessary and without prior consent" in order to monitor the treatment and conditions of detention of the people deprived of their liberty.

On the basis of these visits, the international sub-committee will make recommendations to the state concerned to assist it in effectively fulfilling its obligation to prevent torture and ill-treatment. It also requires states parties to create or maintain domestic visiting mechanisms. These should have access, without prior consent, to any place of detention with the same objective to make recommendations to prevent the torture and ill-treatment of people deprived of their liberty.

Take action now

Encourage your government to support the Optional Protocol at the Economic and Social Council and the UN General Assembly. Link to <www.amnesty.org> from June to September 2002 for suggested actions you can take. Help make prevention of torture a priority.

Mothers against the death penalty in Uzbekistan

Seven mothers are behind an inspiring struggle against the death penalty in Uzbekistan. Three have seen their sons executed, one has a son on death row, and three lived with the fear that their sons would be executed until the death sentences were commuted.

Tamara Chikunova began the group. Her 28-year-old son Dmitry was sentenced to death in November 1999. He was accused of murder, but she is convinced of his innocence and says he was tortured to force him to confess. She

petitioned all the relevant authorities in Uzbekistan, but to no avail. When she visited her son in Tashkent prison on 12 July 2000, she discovered that he had been executed in secret two days earlier.

From that moment Tamara Chikunova decided to support other mothers who were struggling to save the lives of their sons. She told them how to lodge a complaint with the authorities, wrote up the cases and passed them on to AI and other international organizations. "I teach them law", she told AI.

"When they go to the officials and cry they won't achieve anything. But when they come from a position of knowledge about the law and their rights, they can fight. Six of the women I gave support to stayed with me, and they are now helping other mothers with their cases."

Death penalty in Uzbekistan

The scale of the challenge facing the group is hard to quantify. In September 2001 President Islam Karimov stated that around 100 people were executed in Uzbekistan each year, but information on the death penalty is a state secret and executions rarely publicized. Many families of those sentenced to death do not know whether their relative is still alive.

In October 2001 parliament reduced the number of offences punishable by death from eight to four.

This was part of an official policy announced in 1998 to "abolish the death penalty by stages".

However, AI continues to receive reports of many new death sentences.

Successes and challenges

The mothers have known both disappointment and success.

After more than 18 months on death row, Vazgen Arutyunyan's death sentence was commuted at the end of 2001. His mother said: "When they led him out of the cell on 15 January, he thought they were taking him to the execution. From now on we are going to celebrate 15 January each year as his second birthday."

Tamara Chikunova told AI: "Any one of those commutations is like a miracle, but a miracle that would not have happened without the work of your members."

As the word has spread about the group's successes, more and more families of death row prisoners have turned to them for help. This is stretching their resources. The group wants to contact other anti-death penalty activists to learn from their experience and share ideas.

If you would like to contact Mothers Against the Death Penalty or to campaign against the death penalty in Uzbekistan, please write to: cascauc@amnesty.org