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UNCHR: Permanent open door for human rights experts

As the United Nations' leading human rights body begins its annual session, Amnesty International is calling on the member states to use its thematic experts effectively to prevent major human rights crises.

"Thematic experts were introduced to tackle grave human rights violations such as torture, "disappearances", and violence against women, yet they are forced to waste valuable time and scarce resources seeking invitations from governments whose prime obligation is to cooperate with them,"Amnesty International said.

This year, Amnesty International is urging all states to issue standing invitations to these thematic experts to visit their country, removing the need for experts to seek permission. Under the present system, some states respond promptly, others block invitations and yet other states don't respond at all. Three Special Rapporteurs were asked by the Commission to visit Chechnya for example and none of them have been successful in gaining access.

The Russian Federation/Chechnya is one of the countries which Amnesty International is singling out for decisive action by the Commission. The others are Colombia, Indonesia, Saudi Arabia, Sierra Leone and Togo (see background briefing).

In most of these countries people continue to "disappear", causing extreme anguish to the victims and their relatives who may spend the rest of their lives searching for them in vain. Existing UN standards prohibit the practice, but do not provide specific means to halt, prevent and punish "disappearances".

The draft Convention on the Protection of All Persons from Enforced Disappearances, currently before the Commission, describes enforced disappearances as an international crime and provides for a Committee Against Disappearances which would conduct on-the-spot investigations. Amnesty International is calling on the Commission to establish a working group with non-government organization participation to strengthen this draft.

Amnesty International will also continue to highlight the death penalty as a violation of the right to life and urges the Commission to again adopt a resolution for a general moratorium. Since 1990 the Democratic Republic of Congo, Iran, Nigeria, Pakistan, Saudi Arabia, the USA and Yemen have executed people who were under the age of 18 when they committed their crime. The Commission should confirm that this is against customary international law and urge all states to prohibit the execution of juvenile offenders in law and practice.

Amnesty International will also be lobbying for the adoption of a strong optional protocol to the Convention against Torture which would allow for inspection visits to places of detention.

In the lead up to the World Conference Against Racism in South Africa in September, the Commission should urge all states, which haven't yet done so already, to ratify without the reservations the conventions against racism and genocide; the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Racial Discrimination and the Convention on the Prevention and Punishment of the Crime of Genocide.

For more information please see "2001 UN Commission on Human Rights: Bridging the gap between rights and realities" (December 2000)

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