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## **Statement by Pierre Sané, Secretary General of Amnesty International**

### **Amnesty International Press Conference on the Kosovo Crisis Hague Appeal for Peace, 12 May 1999**

It is 1999. The brink of the twenty first century. The place is Europe. The place is Kosovo. A village is surrounded by Serbian forces one afternoon in late March. The ethnic Albanian inhabitants are told they have just one hour to leave. As a column of the dispossessed makes its way out of the district, a group of about 10 men - masked, but in uniform - opens fire on the refugees with automatic weapons. A woman watches as a 15-year-old relative is killed. Her nine-year-old son receives a bullet wound to his neck. This woman is one of the scores of refugees in Albania and Macedonia who have told their stories to Amnesty International researchers working there. Her terrifying journey out of Kosovo has brought her to the relative safety of a refugee camp. But can she be sure of finding justice at the end of her journey?

The tragedy of Kosovo is a tragedy for the idea of human rights itself. The pattern of gross human rights violations which the world has witnessed there in recent months reminds us that the whole concept of inviolable, universal human rights as defined by the Universal Declaration of Human Rights just over fifty years ago remains a very fragile presence in our world. That forcible expulsion, extrajudicial executions, and "disappearances" can still occur on such a scale at this century's end should shock us out of any complacency we may feel about what the international human rights protection system has achieved over the past five decades. Those seemingly endless columns of humanity streaming out of Kosovo remind us of how much work remains to be done.

Amnesty International is committing the strength of its one million strong global membership to an unrelenting campaign for justice for the victims of gross human rights violations in Kosovo. This determination to end the long reign of impunity which has so plagued this region will be reflected in our commitment to ensure that the work of the International Criminal Tribunal for Former Yugoslavia here in The Hague is given every necessary form of financial and political support to carry out this essential task. This issue must be placed firmly and irrevocably on any settlement agenda. The absence of any mention of impunity or the critical role of the Tribunal in creating the conditions for enduring peace in the region in the recent statement of the G8 nations is indeed worrying.

Regretfully, the human tragedy in Kosovo has come as no surprise to Amnesty International. For more than a decade, the organization has been documenting and publicizing its concerns about the systematic violation of human rights in the province. Throughout this period, few of the scores of victims of human rights violations in Kosovo whose names and cases appeared in Amnesty International reports received any form of redress for the crimes which had been committed against them by the Yugoslav police and security forces. In providing the international community with a carefully-researched record of the denial of many of the most fundamental human rights of Kosovo's ethnic Albanian population since the 1980s, Amnesty International has consistently warned the international community of a human rights disaster waiting to happen.

The two volumes we are launching here today provide a detailed picture of the decade of torture and ill-treatment, “disappearance” and death in Kosovo which preceded events beginning in March 1999. It can be argued that the chronic neglect of the warning issued in these reports and the almost complete absence of redress for all Kosovo’s people has been one of the chief catalysts for the current conflict. Only by ensuring that all those responsible for human rights violations and breaches of international humanitarian law are held accountable for their actions in Kosovo - in the present situation and during the preceding decade - can we hope to see future conflicts averted and a genuine culture of rights take root in the region.

As we publish this collection today, Amnesty International would like to pose some challenging questions to the international community. There is much talk at inter-governmental meetings about the need for early warning systems in order to prevent armed conflict in the world today. But here is a situation where ample early warning had been provided. Why were these insistent warnings of impending human rights disaster unheeded? Where was the imagination and energy needed to address this situation more effectively - in 1995, in 1991, in 1989? In agreeing and implementing any form of peace settlement, will the kind of human rights guarantees that could prevent a repetition of this tragic history be insisted upon? Will the regional and local human rights and democracy NGOs and other civil society actors whose voice and vision has too often been ignored in the past be guaranteed a seat at the negotiating table?

Ten years after the transformative events of 1989, we have perhaps one last chance to get it right in Europe. Getting it right in Europe means an end to gross human rights violations - an end to forcible expulsion - an end to the repression of human rights defenders, journalists and other civil society actors - an end to impunity. But we can only get there if we commit ourselves to creative, preventative action.

In a recent article published in *The Guardian*, one of Britain’s leading television journalists confessed that in the light of recent events, “...I should have been ‘thinking Kosovo’ far more intensively and for far longer than I have. When history visits the Balkan catastrophe, the media will find itself in the frame for its complicity in events - complicity born of boredom. All the Balkan media experts...spoke regularly for years of the Kosovo crisis to come, and we did almost nothing...If we were bored by Bosnia, we were still more un-hungry for Kosovo. And if *we* were uninterested, how could we the media hold politicians to account.”

The time for accounting is about to begin. And part of that accounting must include the international community’s recognition of the cost of signals unheard, the price of opportunities missed, and the consequent need for the kind of preventative diplomacy that puts human rights first. Only then can the long road from Kosovo lead at last to justice and peace.

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