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A moratorium on politics

55th UN Commission on Human Rights

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Amnesty International's Secretary General
(Please check against delivery)

Amnesty International is here to issue a challenge to the Commission of Human Rights members: in your first session post UDHR 50, declare a moratorium on politics and focus on human rights action.

At times, the Commission members have seriously hampered the effectiveness and credibility of the Commission by putting powerful political and economic interests above their obligation to protect and promote human rights.

This has been the case even when it comes to countries where violations are grave and persistent, and this will be on the conscience of many Commission members.

The time has come to stop this behaviour.

Victims in places like Algeria, Cambodia, Turkey and the Great Lakes Region of Africa have been let down by governments' failure to match human rights rhetoric with adequate support for action. The Commission has a duty to ensure that action is taken.

During this year's session, Amnesty International will highlight these four examples together with the USA -- where a persistent and widespread pattern of human rights violations appears to disproportionately affect people of racial or ethnic minority backgrounds.

In Algeria, the government has repeatedly broken its promises to cooperate with the mechanisms of the Commission and has continued to refuse access to the country to the UN special rapporteurs on torture, and on extrajudicial, summary or arbitrary executions.

And yet, the international community -- and particularly the Commission on Human Rights -- has failed to take concrete action to address the situation.

Amnesty International will recommend the appointment of a Special Rapporteur on Algeria and the fulfilment of the government's promise to allow access to the Special Rapporteurs on

torture and on extrajudicial, summary or arbitrary executions, as well as a much needed visit by the Working Group on Enforced or Involuntary Disappearances.

The authorities in Cambodia have ignored the recommendations made by different UN bodies and mechanisms over the last six years.

Human rights defenders -- including those working for the Cambodia Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights -- have been subjected to death threats, arbitrary arrest and physical attacks by uniformed police.

Amnesty International will call on the Commission to urge the Cambodian government to initiate full and independent inquiries into recent human rights violations -- including the killings of opposition demonstrators by the security forces in September 1998.

We will also urge the Commission to give due consideration to the proposal of the Group of Experts concerning the creation of an international tribunal.

The human rights situation in the Great Lakes Region -- Burundi, the Democratic Republic of Congo and Rwanda -- is treated by the Commission as three separate cases. But the cycle of conflict and gross human rights abuses in the region -- and the resulting mass displacements -- have become so internationalized that only a regional approach could have any impact.

Amnesty International will ask the Commission to renew the mandate of the Special Rapporteurs on Burundi and the Democratic Republic of Congo, and strengthen the role of the Special Representative on Rwanda by including human rights monitoring as a key component of the mandate.

We will also ask for the UN High Commissioner for Human Rights to convene another extraordinary coordination meeting, involving the participation of Commission experts on the Great Lakes region, with the purpose of drawing up recommendations aimed at preventing a further deterioration of the human rights situation.

In Turkey, six years after the UN Committee against Torture took the unprecedented step of issuing a public statement on the incidence of torture, its recommendations have still not been implemented.

But in spite its legacy of grave and widespread human rights violations, Turkey might be at a turning point. The country is showing tentative signs of change with regard to human rights.

Such change can only be consolidated if the government strengthen legal safeguards and other structural measures to protect human rights, brings them fully in line with international standards, and ensures their strict application.

The Commission should not miss the opportunity to strongly encourage these steps. The Turkish government should be urged to fully implement the recommendations made by UN special mechanisms and the Committee against Torture.

The United States of America, despite its claims to international leadership in the field of human rights and its many institutions to protect individual civil liberties, is failing to deliver the fundamental promise of rights for all.

Human rights violations in the USA are persistent, widespread, and appear to disproportionately affect people of racial or ethnic minority backgrounds.

Ill-treatment in detention and police brutality are common across the country. Asylum seekers are increasingly detained without judicial review and are often held in jails with criminals. Application of the death penalty fails to meet minimum international standards,

Among other things, the Commission must urge the USA to declare an immediate moratorium on executions with a view to totally abolishing the death penalty.

In addition to our recommendation for the five countries mentioned, during this year's session, Amnesty International will also urge the Commission to act on "**disappearances**", **human rights defenders**, **child soldiers**, **torture** and the **death penalty**.

People everywhere should have the right to express their views without the fear of torture or "disappearance".

Amnesty International will ask for a strong draft convention on disappearances, for the Optional Protocol to the Convention against Torture to be finalized, and for the appointment of a **Special Rapporteur on Human Rights Defenders** to oversee the implementation of the Declaration adopted by the General Assembly last year.

Children should not be fighting wars or be executed for their crimes. Amnesty International will ask for a resolution reaffirming the international consensus against the imposition of the death penalty for people under eighteen at the time of the offense, and reiterates the call for a moratorium on executions with a view to complete abolition.

At the 1998 session, the Commission requested its Bureau to undertake a **review of the Commission's human rights mechanisms** and report to this year's session.

Amnesty International welcomes the report's stated purpose of enhancing the UN's capacity to promote and protect rights, and its recognition that to do this, the Commission's mechanisms must operate "**free of influence from extraneous political and other considerations**".

We oppose, however, the recommendation that the Working Groups on Arbitrary Detention and on Enforced or Involuntary Disappearances should be replaced by Special Rapporteurs.

Only a working group of experts can do justice to the specific requirements of the Working Group on Arbitrary Detention's complex mandate. The Working Group on "disappearances" should be in force as long as there is no other group or committee to deal with these issues on a global basis.

The Bureau's review is, in many aspects, a positive step. But there is a serious risk that it may overshadow discussion of actual human rights situations at this session of the Commission.

The review could even be used as an excuse for inaction, pending final decisions on the report's recommendations.

In the spirit of the report, the Commission should not allow itself to be distracted by its own self-examination.

We should not lose focus of the fact that lives are at stake in many countries. Governments refusing to cooperate fully should not be allowed to get away with it.

Let us refocus the work of the Commission on human rights action, and – for once – keep politics at bay.

ENDS.../