

0001 hrs gmt Wednesday 12 May 1993

@INDIGENOUS PEOPLES STILL AT RISK AROUND THE WORLD

People from indigenous communities around the world remain prime targets for human rights abuse, said Amnesty International today.

"They have been massacred and terrorized, forced from their ancestral lands, caught up in bitter civil conflicts, and left without redress for the abuses they suffer," said the human rights organisation.

In more than 70 countries, from the US to Vietnam, the world's 300 million indigenous people are at grave risk of human rights abuse.

One night in June 1988 Indian army soldiers attacked a tribal woman, Banapati Deb Barma, in her house, repeatedly raping her until she lost consciousness. That night, they raped 13 other women from the same tribe, including a 12-year-old girl.

In April 1992 scores of tribal villagers in Bangladesh were reportedly shot dead by armed civilians and paramilitaries who had set fire to their homes. Babies were snatched from their mothers' arms and thrown into the flames. In August last year, state officials in Tanzania tried to force an indigenous boy to have sex with his mother and beat him severely when he refused.

"Indigenous people have been abducted, tortured and killed by hired gunmen for their lands or the resources on them, often with the tacit support of state authorities", said Amnesty. In Brazil in December 1992, an Indian leader was shot dead because he opposed logging operations inside indigenous areas. Although the identity of his killer was known, no arrests were made and no inquiry opened.

Across the world, indigenous communities are caught in the crossfire between government troops and armed opposition groups. In March and April 1992 more than 40 villagers from the Nuba mountains were killed by Sudanese forces -- part of an ongoing pattern of gross human rights violations during counter-insurgency operations which has seen hundreds of Nuba villagers extrajudicially executed and tens of thousands more forcibly relocated.

The indigenous communities of Peru, caught in the conflict between government troops and the armed opposition, have suffered abduction, torture and killing on a mass scale. In September 1990 the security forces killed villagers from several small communities, because they had refused to join civil defence patrols. The officer in charge was absolved of all responsibility by a military court.

"Cases like this, where those guilty of killing, abducting and torturing indigenous peoples are shielded from justice, are common in many countries around the world", said Amnesty.

Discrimination renders indigenous people more vulnerable to abuse than other sectors of society. Racial prejudice also results in a lack of official respect for their lives and their culture.

In Australia in 1991, an official commission reported that Aboriginal people were arrested at 29 times the rate of other Australians. Aboriginal communities are often overpoliced. Police harassment and provoked arrests are widely reported, contributing to the disproportionate arrest rate.

Discrimination in a criminal justice system which retains the death penalty can cost indigenous peoples their lives. In the US, where the poor often have inadequate legal representation, some 44 Native Americans are on death row.

In Vietnam, tribal peoples have suffered discrimination because of their religious beliefs, and many have been imprisoned without trial.

The United Nations has designated 1993 as the International Year of the World's Indigenous People, which will be commemorated at the UN World Conference on Human Rights in Vienna in June. However, many indigenous people remain at risk.

"Despite last year's publicity surrounding the 500th anniversary of the Europeans' arrival in the Americas, governments on that continent have taken few practical steps to protect indigenous rights," said Amnesty. "Unless the international community acts urgently there is a danger the UN's International Year will also pass without significant progress towards protecting indigenous peoples from human rights violations."

Amnesty is urging governments of every country where indigenous people live to use this year to initiate an independent national review of the extent to which indigenous peoples' fundamental human rights are respected.

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