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Amnesty International urges members of the UN General Assembly's Third Committee to consider country situations on merit and vote against any 'No Action Motions'

The Third Committee of the United Nations General Assembly is preparing to consider draft resolutions on human rights in the Islamic Republic of Iran, the Democratic People's Republic of Korea, Syria and Myanmar.

Amnesty International appeals to Member States to consider these country situations on their merits and reject any attempt to deprive the General Assembly of its key role in denouncing human rights violations.

Concerning the situation in Syria, the draft resolution before the Third Committee would have the General Assembly strongly condemn the continued widespread and systematic gross violations of human rights and fundamental freedoms by the Syrian authorities and the Government-controlled "shabbiha" militia; urge the Syrian authorities to release immediately all persons arbitrarily detained, and regret the continued non-cooperation of the Syrian Government with the independent international commission of inquiry on Syria.

The Assembly would also stress the need to follow up on the report of the commission of inquiry and to conduct an international, transparent, independent and prompt investigation into abuses and violations of international law, with a view to holding to account those responsible for violations and abuses, including those that may amount to crimes against humanity and war crimes, and encourage members of the international community to ensure that there is no impunity for such violations or abuses.

Amnesty International has consistently called for the referral of the situation in Syria to the Prosecutor of the International Criminal Court, having compiled information since the beginning of the crisis in that country pointing to the commission of crimes against humanity and, as the conflict continued, war crimes. In the absence of decisive action in the United Nations Security Council, Amnesty International has urged the General Assembly to take a strong stand for accountability in Syria.

Regarding the Islamic Republic of Iran, the draft resolution before the Third Committee would have the General Assembly express deep concern at serious ongoing and recurring human rights violations in the Islamic Republic of Iran relating to, among other, torture and cruel, inhuman or degrading treatment or punishment, including flogging and amputations; and the continuing alarming high frequency of the carrying-out of the death penalty in the absence of internationally recognized safeguards, concerns Amnesty International shares.

The Third Committee draft recalls that none of the thematic UN human rights mechanisms has been permitted to visit the country in the last seven years, despite the standing invitation the Iranian government has issued to them.

The Iranian authorities have also publicly stated that the Special Rapporteur on Iran - appointed in February 2011 -- will not be granted access to the country.

Regarding the Democratic People's Republic of Korea, the draft resolution expresses very serious concern over the significant persistent deterioration of the human rights situation in the country. The text lists the incidence of, among other violations, torture and other ill-treatment, including inhuman conditions of detention, public executions, extrajudicial and arbitrary detention; the absence of due process and the rule of law, the lack of fair trial guarantees and an independent judiciary; the imposition of the death penalty for political and religious reasons; collective punishments; and the extensive use of forced labour.

The draft resolution also expressed deep concern at the existence of a large number of prison camps, where serious violations of human rights are perpetrated. This is consistent with Amnesty International's research regarding Yodok political prison camp, where an estimated 50,000 men, women and children are reportedly held. Throughout the country, an estimated 200,000 political prisoners and their families are imprisoned without trial or following grossly unfair trials. Inmates, including children, are tortured and forced to work in dangerous conditions.

The draft resolution on Myanmar acknowledges steps taken by the country over the past year, while calling for further reforms, including with regard to the immediate and unconditional release of remaining prisoners of conscience. The draft also expresses concern at ongoing conflict in ethnic areas, and calls for much-needed improvement of the situation of the Rohingya minority in Rakhine State.

The resolution further reiterates calls on the Government to end the practice of arbitrary detention, torture and other ill-treatment, enforced disappearance, rape and other forms of sexual violence, and forced displacement, land confiscations as well as violations of international humanitarian law. The resolution also calls on the Government of Myanmar to take necessary measures to ensure accountability and end impunity, including by undertaking a full, transparent and independent investigation into all reports of violations of international human rights and humanitarian law.

Amnesty International considers that the reality of the human rights situation in Myanmar would have warranted stronger wording, but considers the resolution an important tool in engaging Myanmar to undertake further reforms and to make tangible progress to improve human rights in the country.

As in past sessions, some states may try to keep the Third Committee from considering specific country situations through the use of the procedural device known as the "no-action motion". Adopting a motion to adjourn debate on a country under Rule 116 of the General Assembly's Rules of Procedure, a "No-Action Motion" halts discussion on the human rights situation in that country. It prevents the Third Committee from taking specific action to promote and encourage respect for human rights, one of the 'Purposes and Principles' of the UN Charter. Procedural maneuvering designed to prevent serious human rights situations from being considered on their merits should have no place in a Committee charged with promoting and protecting human rights.

Should such initiatives be brought in the Third Committee this year, Amnesty International urges all UN Member States to vote against them, as a majority did last year in defeating a "No-Action Motion" on the situation in Iran.