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Forced evictions shatter lives in Zimbabwe

For more than a decade the community of Porta Farm has struggled to assert their right to housing. In June 2005 that struggle effectively ended when heavily armed police forcibly evicted them and destroyed their homes.

The destruction of Porta Farm left thousands, including children and the elderly homeless, destitute and traumatized. They joined the hundreds of thousands of other victims of the government's Operation Murambatsvina – a countrywide programme of mass forced evictions and demolitions of homes and informal businesses. The UN has estimated that in six weeks between May and July 2005, 700,000 people across Zimbabwe lost their homes, their livelihoods, or both.

Porta Farm settlement was established in 1991 by the Zimbabwe government to provide a temporary home to thousands of people forcibly evicted from informal dwellings around Harare as part of a “clean-up campaign” in preparation for a Commonwealth Heads of Government meeting. They were told that their stay at Porta Farm would be temporary and they would be permanently resettled elsewhere. While some families were resettled, others were not and Porta Farm grew as other victims of forced evictions around Harare arrived in the hope of a permanent solution.

The majority of the Porta Farm community had nowhere else to go, yet local and national government authorities had repeatedly tried to evict them. In June 1995, with the aid of the Zimbabwe Human Rights Association (ZimRights), and in August 2004, supported by Zimbabwe Lawyers for Human Rights (ZLHR), the community obtained High Court orders prohibiting their eviction until adequate alternative accommodation was provided.

Despite these court orders, on 2 September 2004 riot police and members of the ruling party youth militia descended on Porta Farm and attempted to forcibly evict the residents. When the community tried to resist, several residents and at least one police officer were injured and the police began firing tear gas. At least 11 people died in the hours, days and weeks following the tear gas incident, including five children under the age of one. Relatives and eyewitnesses believe the deaths were a direct result of their exposure to the tear gas.

Following the events of 2 September 2004 the police withdrew from Porta Farm. Community leaders remained adamant that they would only move if proper alternative accommodation was provided, including at least sufficient infrastructure to replace what they would lose at Porta Farm, which included a primary and secondary school, an orphanage and access to piped water.

On 28 June 2005 during the height of Operation Murambatsvina, Porta Farm residents watched helplessly as heavily armed police officers in riot gear reduced their homes to rubble. During the demolitions many families lost property, including food stocks. The destruction of Porta Farm went on all day – only ending when darkness fell. The residents, including children, the elderly and the sick, were left to sleep outside in the rubble of their former homes in the cold. As the evictions continued on 29 June, ZLHR obtained a further interim order from Norton Magistrates Court, staying the evictions. But when lawyers approached police officers with copies of the three court orders pointing out that their actions were in contempt of court, in response the police officers reportedly said that they were acting on “orders from above”.

On 30 June 2005 ZLHR filed an urgent application for contempt of court on behalf of the Porta Farm residents. The High Court of Zimbabwe dismissed the Court application giving no reason for its decision. Having been frustrated in their efforts to use domestic remedies to resolve the case, Porta Farm residents have now taken the case to the African Commission on Human and Peoples’ Rights.

For the people of Porta Farm the future is very uncertain. Following the destruction of Porta Farm many were dumped by the government at Hopley Farm, left with no shelter, and almost no means of accessing food. Although they are now receiving some humanitarian aid, conditions remain poor. Porta Farm community leaders who have spoken out about the appalling living conditions at Hopley Farm have been harassed by government officials and members of the ruling party youth militia and some are now in hiding. For the Porta Farm community a safe home and a secure future seem very remote.

A new report jointly published by AI and ZLHR entitled *Zimbabwe: shattered lives – the case of Porta Farm* (AFR 46/004/2006), documents the 15-year human rights struggle of the people of Porta Farm.

Civilians live in fear in southern Thailand

Since 2004 more than 1,000 people have been killed in the ongoing violence in southern Thailand. Despite deploying extra security forces and introducing new legislation giving the military far-reaching powers, the authorities have been unable to curb the violence. Men, women and children, both Muslims and Buddhists, from all walks of life have been killed. Caught between attacks by suspected separatist insurgents and the often excessive reaction of the authorities, local people are living in fear, unable to work, trade or travel safely.

Lethal attacks and bombings are almost daily occurrences. The security forces’ tactic of arming civilians for self-defence has in practice meant that these civilians can become targets for attacks. For instance, construction worker Ma Riki Samae and his uncle, Mat Samae, were shot dead while patrolling their village on 5 April 2005 after joining a village defence group.

The Thai authorities’ response to the attacks has included arbitrary detention, torture and excessive use of lethal force.

On 28 April 2004 an armed political group attacked government facilities in Yala, Pattani, and Songkhla provinces, killing five members of the Thai security forces. In response, over 100 suspected insurgents were killed by security forces.

On 25 October 2004 at least 78 people reportedly suffocated while being transported following their arrest at a demonstration in Narathiwat Province against the arrest of villagers accused of giving arms to insurgents. Almost 1,300 people – some of them reported that they were simply onlookers – were loaded into trucks in six layers and transported to Inkayut Military Camp in Pattani Province. During the journey many on the bottom layers were crushed by people piled on top of them.

One man told AI in December 2004 that he was on the bottom layer of people in the truck and that his head was covered with a plastic bag by troops. He now has acute renal failure as a result and cannot sit or stand. His companions reported that his spine had been severely damaged.

The failure of the Thai government to prevent or properly investigate attacks by insurgents has left both Muslim and Buddhist civilians feeling vulnerable. In one village of just 24 households, AI was told that seven people had been shot dead by insurgents since February 2004. Unprotected by the security forces, who rarely visit the village, they are too afraid to work and only travel in groups. The authorities told them to buy guns and defend themselves. “We just live a meaningless existence,” they told AI. “Nothing is safe. We are just waiting for death to visit us.”

For further information see *Thailand: “If you want peace, work for justice”* (ASA 39/001/2006).

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Sufi Muslim protesters attacked in Iran

Hundreds of demonstrators, including women and children, were injured when police and organized pro-government groups broke up a peaceful protest by Nematollahi Sufi Muslims in Qom, Iran, on 13 February.

The Nematollahi Sufi, also known as dervishes or mystics, gathered on 9 February to protest against an order to evacuate their place of worship in Qom. The place of worship – known as a Hosseiniye – was next to the home of the Sufi’s principal preacher in Qom and was built three years ago, apparently legally and with the permission of the municipal authorities.

Over the following days hundreds of Nematollahi Sufis from all over the country, as well as many women and children, joined the peaceful protest, offering white flowers and cake to local residents.

Security forces, including anti-riot police, surrounded the Hosseiniye. Members of the Fatemiyon and Hojatieh pro-government groups also reportedly gathered, shouting slogans such as “death to Sufis” and “Sufi-ism is a British plot”, and distributed leaflets alleging that Sufis are enemies of Islam.

At around 4pm on 13 February the security forces, supported by the Hojatieh and Fatemiyon groups, attacked the protesters outside the centre and stormed the building, using tear gas and explosives. They beat many protesters, some so badly that they required hospital treatment and, according to some reports, set light to the centre. Eyewitnesses later described the Qom sky as polluted with tear gas, smoke and fire.

Some 1,200 protesters were reported to have been detained and taken away on buses to unknown locations. Some are reported to have been bussed to a sports stadium for interrogation, including a number with serious injuries, and tortured or ill-treated. Most were later released, reportedly on the condition that they sign agreements not to attend any Sufi gatherings in Qom.

At the beginning of March at least 173 people were still detained, including lawyer Bahman Nazari, himself a Sufi Muslim, who reportedly travelled from the city of Tabriz in north-west Iran to Qom in order to try and represent the detainees. He was arrested as soon as he approached officials and presented his practice licence. The detainees' families have been unable to obtain information about their whereabouts, legal status, health or conditions.

In the early hours of 14 February the security forces bulldozed the Hosseiniye and neighbouring houses, including the home of the Sufi preacher.

There appears to be increasing “demonization” of the Sufi Muslim group in Iran. In September, an Islamic scholar in Qom, Ayatollah Hossein Nouri-Hamedani, reportedly called for a crackdown on Sufi groups, labelling them a “danger to Islam”. Articles attacking the Sufis have appeared in national newspapers, notably Jomhuri-ye Eslami and Kayhan. On 15 February, Qom Governor Abbas Mohtaj, was reported to have confirmed to Jomhuri-ye Eslami that 1,000 people had been arrested at the protest and 200 injured, and to have accused the Sufis of participating in a foreign plot against the Iranian state. He stated, “The arrogant powers are exploiting every opportunity to create insecurity in our country and [the Sufi’s] links to foreign countries are evident.”

Albanian police official admits ‘women do not get access to justice’

Albanian authorities, including police officers and prosecutors, fail to protect women from violence in the family

At least a third of all women in Albania are estimated to have experienced physical violence within their families. In some areas of the country the figure may be much higher. One doctor in the town of Shkodra told AI, “They say in Albania, one in three women are beaten by their husbands, in Shkroda we say it’s two and a half out of three.”

There is no specific legislation against domestic violence in Albania. A general acceptance of violence in the family is embedded in Albanian society. The government’s failure to inform women of their rights to be free of violence leaves many women believing that it is their fault, or that it is a normal part of marriage. A resurgence in the application of customary law, which gives a man the right to beat

his wife, and the continuing practice of forced marriage, place women at even more risk of violence in the family.

Even when women do try to seek help, the authorities' reluctance to take action in such cases makes it almost impossible for them to gain protection or justice. In the absence of a law criminalizing domestic violence, the police generally fail to recognize violence in the family as a criminal matter and thus fail to investigate allegations of domestic violence. One woman told AI how the police failed to respond to her repeated calls for help after her husband beat her. "I called every hour, every hour and a half. The police officer said, 'Don't call us, don't you feel embarrassed?' ...and then he insulted me. I never again called the police."

Prosecutors fail to pursue complaints of domestic violence except in cases of death or serious injury or threats with firearms or other weapons, and sometimes even impede women's attempts to pursue cases. A Shkodra non-governmental organization (NGO) told AI about a woman who had come to them, her face freshly bruised after her husband had beaten her. She had been examined by a local forensic doctor, but as the authorized photo-grapher had not been present, she had her photograph taken by a street photographer. The prosecutor had refused to accept the photograph as evidence (even though it was accompanied by a forensic medical certificate), and criminal proceedings were not started. A few months later, she returned to the NGO for assistance: her husband had again beaten her, this time in the street, in front of police officers. Instead of lodging criminal complaints against their abusive partners, women tend to escape violent marriages through divorce, or receive advice and assistance from the many NGOs and two women's shelters set up to address this massive abuse of women's human rights with little or no assistance from the authorities.

When interviewed by AI, a representative of the Tirana serious crimes police admitted, "It's a problem of Albanian reality; women do not get access to justice." But there is movement for change in Albanian society. On 23 January 2006 a coalition of Albanian NGOs presented – in a citizen's petition – a draft law on the prevention of violence within the family to the legislative commission of the Albanian parliament. The petition was signed by 20,000 Albanians. The government must heed this call and take action to protect women from violence and to prosecute and punish the perpetrators.

For further information see *Albania: Violence against Women in the Family – "It's not her shame"* (EUR 11/002/2006).

Iraq: Beyond Abu Ghraib

Once again, disturbing images of abuses by members of the US-led Multinational Force in Iraq emerged in February 2006. This time it was video footage showing British soldiers dragging and beating young Iraqis inside the British military compound at al-Amarah in southern Iraq in January 2004.

Since the invasion of Iraq in March 2003, tens of thousands of people have been detained by foreign forces, mainly US forces. Most have been held without charge or trial, some for more than two years. They have no access to lawyers and no court looks at their case. Their families are not told that they are being held. In defiance of

international law, they are being interned indefinitely, often without access to the outside world. These conditions can in themselves amount to torture or ill-treatment. They facilitate abuses by guards.

Beatings, electric shocks and other forms of torture and ill-treatment have been regularly reported in facilities controlled by foreign forces and, since the handover of power in June 2004, those run by Iraqi authorities. Despite the exposure of shocking methods of torture in Abu Ghraib prison and elsewhere, and promises that such abuses would be stopped, insufficient safeguards have been put in place to protect detainees. As a result, allegations of torture and ill-treatment continue.

Karim R., a 47-year-old imam, was detained and tortured by US forces in 2003 and then by Iraqi forces in 2005. Both times he was released without charge. He told AI that in 2003 he was insulted, blindfolded, beaten and given electric shocks from a taser stun gun by US troops at a detention facility in the Kadhimiya district of Baghdad. In 2005 he was held for 16 days in an Iraqi Interior Ministry facility in Baghdad, during which he was blindfolded, beaten, doused with water and given electric shocks while suspended in an excruciatingly painful position. He said his interrogator told him he had to confess to terrorist activities to save his life.

Only a small number of cases of alleged torture and ill-treatment by foreign forces have led to prosecutions, and these have generally resulted in punishments that failed to reflect the gravity of the crimes and involved only junior personnel. Members of the Iraqi security forces have been able to torture and ill-treat those in their care with virtual impunity. An investigation by the Iraqi government into these allegations was launched in November 2005, but no findings have yet been made public.

With such little action taken to stop torture, the abuses have increased and have led to deaths. For example, on 12 February 2005, three men – Majbal ‘Adnan Latif al-Awai and his brother, ‘Ali, and ‘Aidi Mahassan Lifteh – died in custody after being arrested by Iraqi police at a police checkpoint in Baghdad. The bodies bore signs of torture. AI believes the Iraqi, US and UK authorities must take urgent steps to ensure respect for detainees’ rights, a vital measure if there is to be hope of stopping the spiralling sectarian violence in Iraq.

For more details, see *Iraq: Beyond Abu Ghraib – Detention and torture in Iraq* (MDE 14/001/2006).

A victory for human rights protection

On 16 March the UN General Assembly adopted a historic resolution establishing a Human Rights Council with a clear mandate to address all human rights situations.

The Human Rights Council will replace the UN Commission on Human Rights. It will have more frequent meetings (at least three a year) and will be able to convene special sessions more easily, allowing it to react more effectively to urgent situations. A new universal review mechanism should ensure that all countries’ human rights records are addressed periodically.

Council member states committing gross and systematic violations of human rights can have their membership suspended by a two-thirds majority of members of the General Assembly. The resolution establishes an election procedure which should create a Council more committed to the promotion and protection of human rights than the Commission on Human Rights in recent years. Each member of the Council must be elected individually and all membership terms are limited to a maximum of six years.

Key strengths of the Commission have been preserved, including its system of independent experts, known as “Special Procedures”, and its practice of allowing NGO participation.

The US government’s decision to vote against the resolution was regrettable. However, the result demonstrates unambiguous international support for the Council.

The Council is expected to hold its first session towards the end of June.

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Worldwide Appeals

United Kingdom

Guantánamo detainees abandoned

Benyam Mohammed al-Habashi has been held in US custody in Guantánamo Bay, Cuba, since September 2004 without any opportunity to challenge the legality of his detention, let alone have his guilt or innocence determined by a court of law.

An Ethiopian asylum-seeker granted temporary residency in the UK in 1994, he was arrested in April 2002 at Karachi airport by Pakistani immigration officials as he was about to return to the UK. Three months later he was handed to US officials and flown to Morocco where he was held incommunicado and, he says, systematically tortured at the behest of US authorities.

In January 2004 he was flown to Afghanistan and then taken to the “Dark Prison” in Kabul where he said that he was tortured. He alleges that he was also interrogated by US officials. In May that year he was taken to the US-run Bagram Airbase in Afghanistan and subsequently transferred to Guantánamo.

The UK government made representations on behalf of UK citizens, who were subsequently released and returned to the UK. However, it has refused to make adequate representations on behalf of Benyam al-Habashi and at least seven other UK residents.

On 16 February 2006, a judge of the High Court of England and Wales ruled that there was an arguable case to judicially review the refusal of the UK government to petition the US authorities for the release of UK residents Jamil al-Banna, Bisher al-Rawi and Omar Deghayes. A full judicial review of the refusal of the UK government was pending as of mid-March.

For the UK residents still languishing in Guantánamo, the long wait for meaningful help from the UK authorities continues.

Please write, urging the UK government to seek the return of all UK residents held at Guantánamo Bay unless they are charged promptly with a recognizably criminal offence and given a fair trial. The government should also ask the US authorities to provide adequate reparation to all those who have suffered abuses in US custody in Guantánamo Bay and elsewhere.

Send appeals to: Prime Minister Tony Blair, 10 Downing Street, London SW1A 2AA, United Kingdom. Fax: + 44 207 925 0918.

Myanmar

Human rights defenders jailed for seeking redress

Su Su Nway and lawyer U Aye Myint, were jailed in October 2005 for reporting abuses, including forced labour and land confiscation, by the local authorities. AI considers them both to be prisoners of conscience.

In April 2004 local officials illegally ordered Su Su Nway and others in her village near Yangon, Myanmar's capital, to take part in unpaid labour on a road construction project.

In January 2005, in a landmark legal case, she and fellow villagers successfully prosecuted their village administration for making them take part in unpaid labour. After winning her case, she was reportedly threatened and harassed by village officials. Nine months later she was sentenced to 18 months' imprisonment after the new village administration sued her for defamation, alleging that she had sworn at them.

AI believes that Su Su Nway's imprisonment is motivated by her successful prosecution of local officials.

Lawyer U Aye Myint was sentenced to seven years' imprisonment allegedly for helping farmers report to the authorities and the International Labour Organization (ILO) that local officials had confiscated their land. He was arrested in September 2005 and charged with infringing security legislation. This is the second time he has been imprisoned in connection with his attempts to contact the ILO.

Both Su Su Nway and U Aye Myint have suffered poor health in detention.

Please write, urging the immediate and unconditional release of Su Su Nway and U Aye Myint, imprisoned in connection with their legitimate defence of human rights. Call on the authorities to ensure that they are given adequate medical treatment.

Send appeals to: Senior General Than Shwe, Chairman of the State Peace and Development Council, c/o Ministry of Defence, Ahlanpya Phaya Street, Yangon, Myanmar.

Mexico

Human rights defender's life at risk

“Take care, all of you, and take care of Martín because a person has been hired and is going for Martín's head.” Warning to Martín Barrios' family by a friend. The information apparently came from a source close to the textile industry.

Human rights defender Martín Barrios Hernández has been warned that his life is at risk if he continues to defend and publicize the poor labour conditions of the textile workers in maquilas (assembly plants) in the State of Puebla. His family and colleagues at the Human and Labour Rights Commission of Tehuacán Valley may also be in danger.

Martín Barrios was detained and charged in December 2005 after a local textile plant owner made allegations that he had tried to blackmail him. Martín Barrios is coordinator of the Human and Labour Rights Commission of Tehuacán Valley which has recently been supporting workers from the Calidad de Confecciones textile plant in their campaign for recognition of their rights. His detention appeared to be an attempt to prevent him from carrying out his legitimate human rights work.

When released in January, after being pardoned by his accuser, Martín Barrios stated that he had never asked for a pardon because he is innocent. He said that he would not be deterred from carrying out his work.

He has previously been threatened and intimidated as a result of his human rights activities. In December 2003 he was seriously assaulted outside his home but no one has yet been brought to justice for the attack. Friends and relatives have been told that an individual linked to the textile plant industry has reportedly been paid to kill him if he continues his work.

The Inter-American Commission of Human Rights has instructed the Mexican authorities to take measures to guarantee the safety of Martín Barrios, his family and other members of the Human and Labour Rights Commission.

Please write, calling for the authorities to take action to guarantee the safety of Martín Barrios Hernández, his family and members of the Human and Labour Rights Commission of Tehuacán Valley, in accordance with their wishes.

Send appeals to: State Governor of Puebla, Lic. Mario Marín Torres, Gobernador del Estado de Puebla, 14 Oriente, No. 1006, Colonia El Alto, Puebla, Mexico.
Fax: + 52 222 213 8805. Email: gobernador@puebla.gob.mx

Saudi Arabia

Fear of execution

Three Sri Lankan nationals are reported to be at risk of imminent execution. Their cases have been referred to Saudi Arabia's Head of State, King Abdullah Bin 'Abdul

‘Aziz Al-Saud, to decide whether to grant clemency or to ratify their sentences. If the King ratifies the sentences the three men could be executed at any time.

D.D. Ranjith de Silva, E.J. Victor Corea and Sanath Pushpakumara were reportedly arrested in March 2004 in the capital, Riyadh, and sentenced to death in connection with a series of armed robberies. Their sentences were reportedly confirmed in March 2005. They are currently held in al-Ha’ir prison in Riyadh.

AI does not have detailed information about their trials or whether the three men were legally represented. However, the organization is concerned that defendants in Saudi Arabia often do not have adequate legal representation, even in trials for offences carrying the death penalty. Also, in some cases known to AI, defendants apparently were not kept informed of the progress of legal proceedings against them.

Please write, urging King Abdullah Bin ‘Abdul ‘Aziz Al-Saud to commute the death sentences.

Send appeals to: His Majesty King Abdullah Bin ‘Abdul ‘Aziz Al-Saud, The Custodian of the Two Holy Shrines, Office of His Majesty the King, Royal Court, Riyadh, Saudi Arabia.

Updates

Bahamas

On 8 March the Judicial Committee of the Privy Council ruled that the mandatory death penalty for murder in the Bahamas was unconstitutional. The ruling means that the country’s 28 death row inmates will now get individual sentencing hearings (although another court decision limiting the amount of time an individual can spend under sentence of death effectively means none of the 28 will be executed).

USA

On 27 February, a Pennsylvania judge, ruling in the case of George Banks, found that he is mentally ill and should not be executed. According to newspaper reports, Judge Michael Conahan said, “Banks cannot make rational choices because of his major mental illness, cannot rationally comprehend his death sentence, has a hopeless prognosis and will not improve to any acceptable degree.” State prosecutors have said they will appeal the ruling.

In a second case, the South Carolina Supreme Court recently ruled that Mar-Reece Aldean Hughes is not mentally competent to waive his right to pursue appeals (to “volunteer” to be executed) and ordered further legal proceedings to take place.

See *the Wire* March 2006 and *USA: The execution of mentally ill offenders* (AMR 51/003/2006).

Maldives

Prisoners of conscience Ahmad Ibrahim Didi and Naushad Waheed were released on 22 February after four years in prison. Ahmad Ibrahim Didi was given a life sentence in 2002 for his involvement in producing Sandhaanu, an email magazine. The magazine contained work critical of the government and had a wide readership. Artist and cartoonist Naushad Waheed was arrested that same year after contacting AI and participating in debates critical of the government.

See *Worldwide Appeals* January 2003.

China

Human rights defender Mao Hengfeng was released from custody on 8 February. She had been detained along with her daughter, in Beijing on 24 January. Police officers took them to Shanghai, where they released her daughter. Mao Hengfeng was held for 16 days in a hotel room. She was verbally abused at the beginning of her period of detention, but was not tortured.

See *Worldwide Appeal* updates March 2005.

Cuba

A total of 72 prisoners of conscience remain imprisoned in Cuba. Most of them were detained in March/April 2003 and July 2005.

Those arrested in 2003 received prison sentences ranging from 26 months to 28 years. The 2005 arrests – when 50 people were detained – targeted those involved in peaceful demonstrations and commemoration events. Fourteen remain in detention without trial. AI considers four of them to be prisoners of conscience: René Gómez Manzano, Oscar Mario González Pérez, Emilio Leiva Pérez and Julio César López Rodríguez.

Between 2004 and 2005, the government released a total of 22 prisoners, mainly for medical reasons. However, those who remain in prison are suffering from ill health and some of those released have suffered harassment, threats and restrictions on travel.

See *Worldwide Appeal* April 2004 and updates July and September 2004.

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Police target lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender people in the USA

“Nothing is more unfair than singling out a group and making them criminal when they are not.” R. Boevingloh, a 60-year-old gay man, February 2004

R. Boevingloh was walking in a park in St Louis, Missouri, in June 2001 when he made the mistake of greeting an undercover policeman who walked past him. He was arrested, charged with lewd conduct and placed on two years’ probation. “I did nothing wrong,” he told AI, “I did not ‘cruise’ anyone, did not expose myself, did not hurt anyone and was targeted simply for being a gay male in a city park.”

In a new report AI reveals a range of human rights violations perpetrated by law enforcement officials against lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender (LGBT) people in the USA. While some of these abuses are so violent that they amount to torture, by far the more pervasive are those abuses committed day in and day out, making life intolerable for many members of the LGBT community.

All too often US law enforcement officials share the prejudices prevalent in society, such as homophobia, racism or sexism. When vague laws give police officers the power to decide what is “offensive”, the enforcement of these laws can become a means of punishing LGBT people for perceived transgression of social norms. LGBT people are frequently targeted for selective enforcement of minor public order or morals offences such as “loitering with intent to solicit”, “public lewdness” or “disorderly conduct”. The California Supreme Court, for instance, noted that the state’s prohibition of “lewd conduct” had been selectively enforced against gay men.

Transgender women are particularly at risk of such prejudicial treatment as many police officers assume that they are sex workers. AI has received numerous reports of transgender women being stopped and questioned by police when going about everyday tasks such as shopping. LGBT rights activists in Chicago told AI that police officers see transgender women as easy targets when they need to meet their allotted arrest quota.

It is hardly surprising that when LGBT people are victims of crime, they often prefer not to report the crime than face a dismissive, hostile or abusive response from the police. AI has found a pattern of police failing to respond appropriately to crimes against LGBT individuals. Police lack of understanding, or in more extreme cases hostility, has in some cases resulted in officers arresting the victims of the crime rather than the perpetrators.

In July 2000 a lesbian in St Paul, Minnesota, reported to a police officer that she had been attacked and abused in a supermarket. The officer refused to take action and even threatened to arrest her and her partner. When she told him that her attacker had called them “dykes”, the police officer replied that if they chose that lifestyle they must “expect some people to have a problem with it”.

Discriminatory policing can affect individuals in virtually every sphere of their daily lives. The effect of police targeting of LGBT people can be profound. Transgender woman Rachel Thompson told AI how a violent attack by a police officer changed her life: “That is when I decided to become an activist – abuse can be very inspiring... I will never forget to fear the police. I will always mistrust the system...”

For more information see *Stonewalled – Still demanding respect: Police abuse and misconduct against lesbian, gay, bisexual and trans-gender people in the USA* (AMR 51/001/2006).

Trailblazing activism across the Philippines

Fittingly for an activist organization, LAGABLAB means “blaze” in Tagalog, one of the Philippines’ major languages.

Established in 1999, LAGABLAB, the Lesbian and Gay Legislative Advocacy Network, is a broad network of lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender (LGBT) organizations and allies working primarily through legislative lobbying towards achieving a society free from all forms of discrimination, particularly those based on gender and sexual orientation.

Angie Umbac, a member of LAGABLAB, says, “Although Philippine laws do not explicitly prohibit homosexuality in the country, the LGBT community does not enjoy legal equality with heterosexuals and it continues to experience high levels of discrimination, harassment and violence. Effective lobbying for LGBT rights is needed for the voice of the LGBT community to be heard in the legislative process.” The Executive Director of AI Philippines, Jessica Soto, explains, “Discrimination against the LGBT community in the Philippines can be characterized as institutionalized as many institutions, like religious organizations and government agencies, which are supposed to provide sanctuary and protection, are unwilling or incapable of protecting LGBT people, and sometimes are even the purveyors and perpetrators of the discrimination.”

LAGABLAB has been instrumental in the campaign to enact the Anti-Discrimination Bill which would protect LGBT people from discrimination, particularly in employment, education, housing and access to public services. Since 2001, LAGABLAB and AI Philippines, along with other organizations, have run the Stop Discrimination Now! campaign to end discrimination against the LGBT community in the Philippines and to support the passage of the Anti-Discrimination Bill in Congress.

In September 2003, a significant portion of the Anti-Discrimination Bill was incorporated into a municipal ordinance in Quezon City (Metro Manila), one of the country’s most populated cities. The ordinance is currently being tested for the first time in a court case filed in November 2005 by a gay man, who claims his employment contract was not renewed because he and his partner exchanged symbolic wedding vows.

The Anti-Discrimination Bill was passed by a unanimous vote in the Human Rights Committee of the lower house of Congress in May 2005. However, the legislation process has slowed recently while Congress’ attention is focused on a proposal to introduce a parliamentary system of government.

This has not deterred LAGABLAB’s fire to spread its message. “The lobby work of LAGABLAB has been taken from the halls of Congress and into the streets, television or radio studios, and even the classrooms,” said Angie Umbac. “It contributes to the gradual but progressive change of societal perception of the LGBT community in the Philippines and validates that LGBT rights are human rights.”