

The Wire

June 2006 Vol. 36. No. 05

AI Index: NWS 21/005/2006

[Page 1]

Rise in recruitment of child soldiers in DRC

In November 2005, 16-year-old "Patrick", a former child soldier, returned to his home village in rural North-Kivu province, eastern Democratic Republic of the Congo (DRC), to be reunited with his parents and sisters whom he had not seen for three years. Six weeks later, the joy of his homecoming was cut short when soldiers came looking for him.

"They demanded to see my army release papers and then tore them up and punched me," he told AI. "They accused my father of sheltering a deserter and beat him to the floor. Then they ransacked the house, tied me up and led me off. When we got to their camp I was so frightened of more beatings that I agreed to stay with them."

For three weeks Patrick was made to serve as a guard until, one night, he was able to make his escape. He is now being sheltered in a non-governmental organization (NGO) reception centre for former child soldiers in the city of Goma.

The soldiers who abducted him were followers of Laurent Nkunda, a former senior officer of the RCD-Goma armed group, accused of committing war crimes. In the past few months his forces have been responsible for a wave of forced recruitment. Scores of children, some at least as young as 12, have been abducted to serve as fighters in his rebellion against the government. Many of the children are, like Patrick, former child soldiers who had only recently returned to their homes after passing through a national demobilization programme. Conscripting children under the age of 15 into armed forces or groups is recognized as a war crime under international law.

Patrick was one of thousands of children who were forced to serve as fighters or as domestic or sex slaves by armed groups during the conflict that has ravaged the DRC since 1998. He was 12 when soldiers of an armed group surrounded his school and took him and several other children into the forest. He suffered three years of misery and danger from combat, beatings, malnutrition and bouts of illness before he was finally released. Of his school comrades he says: "Most are gone, dead".

With a 2002 national peace agreement, there was hope that the systematic use of children as fighters could finally come to an end. By late 2004 most armed groups had accepted a government plan to integrate their forces into a unified national army, from which under-18s are excluded. Converging on military collecting centres, the armed groups brought many (although by no means all) of the children with them. From there, the children were taken to NGO reception centres to be supported in their return to civilian life.

But the resurgence of recruitment of children by Laurent Nkunda threatens to undo the progress made so far. There are indications that Mayi-Mayi armed groups which oppose Laurent Nkunda have also started to recruit children again or are refusing to release the children already in their forces. The recruitments and ongoing insecurity in

North-Kivu are badly affecting NGO programmes for demobilized child soldiers, many of which have had to be suspended in recent weeks.

AI calls on Laurent Nkunda and all other armed group leaders to immediately halt the recruitment and use of children. The organization is appealing to the DRC government and international community to take concerted action to bring to justice Laurent Nkunda – who is the subject of an international arrest warrant issued by the DRC government in September 2005 – and other recruiters of children. Only then will child soldiers like Patrick be able to return home without fear.

Humanitarian crisis in Occupied Territories

The humanitarian situation in the Occupied Territories has deteriorated sharply since the European Union (EU) and USA stopped funding the newly elected Hamas-led Palestinian Authority (PA). UN agencies and aid organizations have warned that, while committed to providing emergency aid, they cannot replace the PA in delivering healthcare, education and other crucial services to 3.5 million Palestinians living under Israeli occupation in the West Bank and Gaza Strip.

The decision by key donors, notably the EU and USA, to stop funding the PA is having a severe impact. For more than a decade such funding enabled the PA to deliver health, education and other key services to the Palestinian population. However, it is Israel, as the occupying power, that is obliged under international law to ensure the welfare of the Palestinians living under its occupation. In recent months Israel has also been withholding US \$60 million a month of import taxes which it collects on behalf of the PA.

Emergency assistance essential to fulfilling fundamental human rights must never be used as a bargaining tool to further political goals. The international community must continue to press the PA to abide by international law and to act to prevent attacks by Palestinian armed groups against Israeli civilians. It must also press Israel to stop using excessive and disproportionate force against the Palestinian population.

During April 2006, Israeli forces fired around 3,000 artillery shells and aircraft missiles into the Gaza Strip in response to the firing by Palestinian armed groups of some 150 mortars into Israel. In the first four months of this year 90 Palestinians, including more than 20 children, were killed by Israeli forces; 17 Israelis, including one child, were killed by Palestinian armed groups.

Israel continues to appropriate large areas of fertile Palestinian land and to restrict the movement of Palestinians within the Occupied Territories, with disastrous consequences for the Palestinian economy. In May, Israel's newly elected Prime Minister, Ehud Olmert, reiterated his electoral pledge to strengthen and expand most of the Israeli settlements established throughout the West Bank, including East Jerusalem, in violation of international law.

The ongoing construction by Israel of a 600km fence/wall in the West Bank cuts off Palestinian farmers from their lands and hundreds of Israeli checkpoints and blockades severely curtail Palestinians' access to their workplaces, schools and hospitals.

AI delegates who visited the areas in April and May witnessed first-hand the extent of the damage of such measures on the Palestinian economy. Tons of agricultural

products have gone to waste as farmers are unable to reach their land or transport their produce to market. The result has been increased unemployment and poverty, rising malnutrition and other health problems. The cut in international aid to the PA has made the Palestinian population even more vulnerable.

[Page 2]

Rural communities in Guatemala violently evicted

“They set fire to their own houses” was how the official police report accounted for the destruction of homes during the forced eviction of the Chitocán community in northern Guatemala. Press reports and eye-witness testimony described how more than 500 police officers advanced on the community of 52 families, firing tear gas, and proceeded to burn and loot homes. The community had received no prior notice of the eviction order. According to the Red Cross, many children were badly affected by the tear gas.

The forced eviction in Chitocán in May 2004 was typical of the estimated 63 evictions that have been carried out since January of that year when Óscar Berger assumed the presidency, including six so far in 2006. The community who lived and worked in Chitocán are still owed hundreds of thousands of dollars by the farm owner, who had underpaid them for years.

According to the UN, more than half of all evictions have been violent. Four policemen and eight members of the community were killed during the eviction of the community of Finca Nueva Linda at the end of August 2004. After the eviction the authorities allegedly stood by while the owner bulldozed the area, resulting in the destruction of valuable forensic evidence. There are currently two pending arrest warrants – both for members of the evicted community.

There have been almost no investigations into the human rights violations committed during the evictions. An investigation by the Supervision Office of the Supreme Court of Justice in August 2004 amounted to little more than a catalogue of paperwork related to eviction orders, and never questioned the fairness of the orders or the violations that took place during the evictions themselves.

The government agency tasked with resolving agrarian conflicts, CONTIERRA, says there are 1,067 unresolved conflicts nationwide. However, rural and indigenous organizations claim the real number to be much higher. Meanwhile the Guatemalan government does not appear to be making any real effort to resolve the conflicts or address their causes. The issues fuelling the disputes include extreme poverty, serious inequalities of land distribution and poor enforcement of labour rights. Without the political will to resolve these problems, there will be many more Chitocáns and Finca Nueva Lindas in the future.

See *Guatemala: Land of injustice?* (AMR 34/003/2006)

Racist attacks rife in the Russian Federation

Nine-year-old Liana Sisoko was minutes from home when two youths attacked her by the lift in her St Petersburg apartment block in March. She was stabbed three times, including in the throat, and hospitalized with serious injuries. Her assailants daubed a

swastika and the words “skinheads...we did it” near the scene of the attack before fleeing. Liana’s mother is Russian; her father is Malian.

Racist attacks and killings of foreigners and ethnic minorities have become a regular occurrence in Russia. Victims include students, asylum-seekers and refugees from Africa and Asia, as well as people from the south Caucasus, the Middle East and Latin America.

Citizens of the Russian Federation are also vulnerable. Anyone who does not look “typically” ethnic Russian, in particular Chechens, members of the Jewish and Roma communities and children of mixed parentage, are at risk. Even ethnic Russians who are seen as sympathetic to foreigners or ethnic minority groups – such as those who listen to rap or reggae music – have been targeted for being “unpatriotic”. People researching and campaigning against racism have been threatened with violence; some have been killed.

Perpetrators of such crimes are usually referred to in Russia simply as “skinheads”. The term is used to describe well-organized groups professing a racist, neo-Nazi and violent ideology as well as informal groups of individuals who carry out attacks motivated by racial hatred. According to official figures, there are about 150 such “extremist” groups with over 5,000 members in Russia. Non-governmental organizations believe the number of individuals involved in such groups to be as high as 50,000.

The government’s response to this crisis has been too slow. The Russian authorities, while acknowledging the problem of race hate crime, have failed to act with due diligence to tackle it. In particular, the police and procuracy have failed to acknowledge the racist motive of many assaults and murders, despite provisions in the Russian Criminal Code that allow them to do so.

Khursheda Sultonova, a nine-year-old Tajik girl living in St Petersburg, was brutally murdered in a racist attack in February 2004. She was stabbed nine times in the chest, stomach and arms by a gang of youths chanting racist slogans, including “Russia for Russians”. Shortly after the murder, St Petersburg Procurator Sergei Zaitsev was quoted in the press as saying: “For the moment, this crime is not classified as one committed on the grounds of national hatred. This is an ordinary crime linked to unemployed youths, who were excited after drinking alcohol.”

On 22 March this year – just days before the attack on Liana Sisoko – the jury found the main defendant in Khursheda Sultonova’s case not guilty of murder. He and six others were convicted only on charges of “hooliganism”. Nowhere in the verdict was the racial motive of the crime recognized.

President Putin has condemned racist violence in the country, but his words have not been backed up by adequate action. Racist attacks continue to increase. The Russian Federation is required under international human rights law to combat all forms of discrimination. As such, it should develop and implement a national plan of action to combat racism, discrimination and xenophobia. It is not enough to pay lip-service to the issue.

See Russian Federation: Violent racism out of control (EUR 46/022/2006).

Police killings go unpunished

Impunity for deaths in custody and police shootings in Trinidad and Tobago

Galene Bonadie was shot dead, allegedly by a police officer, on 2 April 2004 when she tried to stop the police beating a man. Eyewitnesses say the officer, when challenged by Galene Bonadie, aimed his rifle and fired at close range without warning. The police claim that the weapon went off accidentally when a crowd tried to take the weapon from the officer.

An inquest into Galene Bonadie's death has been adjourned since the beginning of 2005. Witnesses have allegedly been followed, threatened and kicked by police officers.

Fitzgerald Edwards was arrested on 23 July 2005 reportedly for possession of cocaine. Witnesses claim that the arresting officers beat him. On the morning of 25 July he was reportedly found dead at Point Fortin police station. Police initially claimed that he died after suffering an epileptic seizure but an autopsy reportedly revealed that he died from multiple blows to the body and head and a punctured lung caused by a broken rib.

Although a police investigation into the death was reported in the press, the outcome of any such investigation is unknown.

The deaths of Galene Bonadie and Fitzgerald Edwards, and the subsequent failure to properly investigate them or bring anyone to justice, are just two examples of the disturbing trend in policing in Trinidad and Tobago.

Between 2003 and 2005, 35 people were reported to have died in police custody or after being shot by police in Trinidad and Tobago. While police reports of the shootings often describe armed confrontations and acts of self-defence, these claims are frequently disputed by eyewitnesses who claim they are unprovoked. Full, effective and independent investigations into such deaths are rare, and those that do take place are often hampered by lengthy delays and claims of witness harassment. To AI's knowledge, in recent years only two police officers have been convicted of unlawfully killing a civilian while on duty.

Violent crime, linked in part to the growth in the drugs trade and the proliferation of illegal weapons, is a high priority issue in Trinidad and Tobago. In 2005, in a population of 1.3 million, 389 people were murdered and at least 235 people were kidnapped. Under-resourced and often inadequately trained, the police face a number of complex challenges on public security.

In October 2005, 10,000 people marched through the streets of the capital city, Port of Spain, in protest at the government's apparent failure to bring the crime problem under control.

The clear pattern of impunity for violations by police officers can only further undermine public faith in the police force – making their job even more difficult. Community support will only be regained through a reform of the police service and an end to impunity for police abuses.

See *Trinidad and Tobago: End police immunity for unlawful killings and deaths in custody* (AMR 49/001/2006).

Worldwide appeals

UZBEKISTAN

Jailed for speaking out

Mutabar Tadzhibaeva, an Uzbekistani human rights defender, was sentenced to eight years' imprisonment in March. She faced 13 charges, including "membership of an illegal organization" and "using funds from Western governments to prepare or distribute materials containing a threat to public order and security". It is believed that she was detained primarily to silence her over the events of 12-13 May 2005 in the city of Andizhan, when security forces fired on a crowd of mostly unarmed protesters, killing hundreds of people, including children.

Mutabar Tadzhibaeva is the Chair of the human rights organization Fiery Hearts Club, and a founder of the national movement Civil Society. In recent years, she has come under increasing pressure from the authorities for her human rights activities. On 22 September 2005 she gave a radio interview in which she spoke out about the government's crackdown on human rights activities since the Andizhan events. On 7 October she was detained, just as she was preparing to travel to Ireland for an international conference on human rights defenders.

During the investigation and the trial, Mutabar Tadzhibaeva was reportedly denied access to some of the case files and was not given sufficient time to read all the materials that were available, or to consult with her lawyers. She was reportedly only allowed access to her defence lawyer in the presence of three or four guards, and throughout the trial she was forced to sit in a cage. Mutabar Tadzhibaeva made several petitions to the court, none of which were granted by the judge. Her request for her family to be present at her trial was allegedly refused by the judge on the grounds that they might intimidate the witnesses. Her lawyer was also forbidden to cross-examine the prosecution witnesses.

Please write, calling for the immediate and unconditional release of prisoner of conscience Mutabar Tadzhibaeva. Call on the authorities to allow human rights defenders to carry out their activities without any restrictions or fear of reprisals.

Send appeals to: Rashidzhon Hamidovich Kodirov, General Procurator of the Republic of Uzbekistan, ul. Guliamova 66, 700047 g. Tashkent, Uzbekistan

Fax. + 998 71 133 39 17/ 133 73 68. E-mail: prokuratura@lawyer.com

THAILAND

Killers of human rights defenders must be brought to justice

Several police officers arrested in connection with the "disappearance" and suspected murder of human rights lawyer Somchai Neelaphaijit were acquitted in January. Only one police officer was convicted, but on lesser charges. At the time, the prime minister stated that a separate investigation into the case by the Department of Special Investigations was proceeding and that results would be forthcoming within a month.

This has not happened and reports suggest that the enquiry is not being conducted with due attention.

Somchai Neelaphaijit “disappeared” in Bangkok in March 2004 (see the Wire May 2004). A prominent critic of the declaration of martial law in Thailand’s southern provinces, he had been acting on behalf of five individuals detained and tortured in connection with violence in the south.

Nearly 20 human rights defenders are believed to have been killed in the last five years for their peaceful defence of basic rights. The authorities have generated a climate of impunity by taking insufficient effective action to investigate and bring all suspected perpetrators to justice. Phra Supoj Suwagano, a Buddhist monk, was stabbed to death in June 2005 after he exposed illegal logging near his monastery in northern Thailand. Charoen Wataksorn (above right), a fisherman and longtime environmental campaigner, was shot dead in June 2004 after reporting illegal land transfers to the authorities. There have been complaints about the effectiveness of investigations into their and other killings.

Please write, expressing concern at the killings of Somchai Neelaphaijit, Phra Supoj Suwagano, Charoen Wataksorn, and other human rights defenders. Urge that these killings are effectively investigated and that those responsible are brought to justice.

Send appeals to: Chidchai Vanasatidya, Acting Prime Minister and Minister of Justice, Government House, Thanon Pissanulok, Dusit, Bangkok 10300, Thailand.

IRAN

Jailed for criticizing the authorities

‘I continue to hold out hope that, soon, Iran may be a country of the free and join the rest of the world in upholding human rights. Until then I shall remain in this darksome prison’

Letter from Arzhang Davoodi, July 2005

Arzhang Davoodi, an author, poet and director of the Parto-e Hekmat Cultural Education Centre in Tehran, is serving a 15-year sentence at Bandar Abbas prison, Iran. He has numerous health problems as a result of torture but has been denied access to medical treatment. AI believes him to be a prisoner of conscience.

Arzhang Davoodi was arrested in October 2003 after helping to make Forbidden Iran, a secretly filmed television documentary critical of the Iranian authorities. He was kept in solitary confinement at a detention facility run by the Revolutionary Guards, where he was severely tortured, resulting in injuries that included a broken shoulder blade, bleeding in his left eye, partial deafness, a broken jaw and broken teeth. He was later moved to two other prisons, before being transferred to Bandar Abbas prison in September 2005. He is allowed out of his cell into the prison yard for 15 minutes each week.

Arzhang Davoodi was detained without formal charge for at least a year, during which time he was asked to sign a pre-prepared confession several pages long on at least three occasions. In a letter written from prison in July 2005, he stated that he had been sentenced to 15 years’ imprisonment, 70 lashes and five years of house arrest.

He was charged with establishing and directing the Iranian Liberation Movement; writing a book calling for a secular Iran; organizing political activists in order to undermine the state; and involvement in the making of Forbidden Iran.

Please write to the Iranian authorities, calling for the immediate and unconditional release of Arzhang Davoodi and for an investigation into allegations that he was tortured.

Send appeals to: His Excellency Ayatollah Mahmoud Hashemi Shahroudi, Ministry of Justice, Park-e Shahr, Tehran, Islamic Republic of Iran

E-mail: via www.iranjudiciary.org/feedback_en.html

SINGAPORE

Executions imminent

Took Leng How, Iwuchukwu Amara Tochi and Okele Nelson Malachy have lost their appeals against mandatory death sentences.

Malaysian Took Leng How was sentenced to death in October 2004 for the murder of an eight-year-old girl. A panel of three Court of Appeal judges rejected his appeal by two votes to one in late January. The judge who voted against the sentence wrote that he believed that the girl may have died as a result of a fit.

Iwuchukwu Amara Tochi, a 19-year-old Nigerian, and Okele Nelson Malachy, believed to be from South Africa, were convicted of drug trafficking. Their appeal was rejected on 16 March.

Murder and drug trafficking (of over 15 grams of heroin) carry mandatory death sentences in Singapore. The UN Special Rapporteur on extrajudicial, summary or arbitrary executions has called for the death penalty to be eliminated for drug-related offences and has argued that the mandatory nature of death sentences is a violation of international legal standards.

Singapore, with a population of just over four million, is believed to have the highest per capita execution rate in the world. More than 420 people have been executed since 1991, the majority for drug trafficking. The government has consistently maintained that the death penalty is not a human rights issue.

There is usually little public debate in Singapore about the death penalty, partly as a result of tight government controls on the press and civil society organizations. The Special Rapporteur stated on 24 March: "Measures taken by the Government of Singapore suggest an attempt to suppress public debate about the death penalty in the country." However, recent national and international campaigns have given the issue a new prominence in Singapore.

Please write, urging the President to stop the executions of Took Leng How, Iwuchukwu Amara Tochi and Okele Nelson Malachy.

Send appeals to: President S R Nathan, Office of the President, Istana Annexe, Orchard Road, Singapore 0923.

Fax +65 6735 3135.

E-mail: s_r_nathan@istana.gov.sg

UPDATES

Morocco/Western Sahara

Ali-Salem Tamek and Brahim Dahane were released on 22 April 2006, following a royal pardon. According to official statements, 44 other Sahrawi detainees were pardoned at the same time. Many had been imprisoned following demonstrations in Western Sahara over recent months. The pardon followed a request from the Royal Consultative Council on Sahrawi Affairs, recently set up by King Mohamed VI.

As a consequence of the pardon, the trial proceedings of Brahim Dahane and 16 other released detainees, which were due to resume on 25 April, were cancelled.

AI received messages from Sahrawi human rights defenders saying that they believe that pressure at the international level, including that exerted by AI members, contributed to the releases.

See *Worldwide Appeal* May 2006.

Amnesty International Report 2006

During 2005 some of the world's most powerful governments were successfully challenged, their arguments rejected by courts of law, their repressive tactics resisted by human rights activists. After five years of backlash against human rights in the "war on terror", the tide appeared to be turning.

Nevertheless, the lives of millions of people worldwide were devastated by the denial of fundamental rights. Human security was threatened by war and attacks by armed groups as well as by hunger, disease and natural disasters. Freedoms were curtailed by repression, discrimination and social exclusion.

The Amnesty International Report 2006 documents human rights abuses in 150 countries around the world. It highlights the need for governments, the international community, armed groups and others in positions of power or influence to take responsibility. It also reflects the vitality of human rights activists globally, whether in local initiatives, international summits or mass demonstrations.

You can obtain a copy of the *Amnesty International Report 2006* (POL 10/001/2006) from your local AI office, or by e-mail from: orderpub@amnesty.org.

[Page 4]

Challenging violence in the family

'Surviving an abusive relationship is like surviving torture, the future narrows down to getting through the next few hours, the next day.' Domestic violence counsellor to AI

"Justina" did not survive her abusive relationship. A human rights organization in her home city of Lagos, Nigeria, reported that she died three weeks after she was attacked with acid. Although her husband was the prime suspect, it was several weeks before the police detained him for questioning. Police officers excused his actions, saying that he had poured acid over his wife after she tried to run away with his money. Alarming, reports of acid attacks in Nigeria appear to be increasing in recent years.

In Madrid, Spain, AI met Esperanza, the founder of a shelter for battered women. Esperanza has had to change her name to hide from her husband who has threatened to kill her. She has no confidence in the police or the authorities to protect her.

Violence against women in the family is an international pandemic. It is not confined to any particular political or economic system, but is prevalent in every society throughout the world. Within societies it cuts across boundaries of class and culture. The structures within society that perpetuate such violence are deep-rooted and resistant to change.

Widely represented as a haven of security and privacy, the family can become an extremely dangerous place for girls and women. When it does, they all too often feel that they have nowhere to turn for protection. Other members of the family – often children – who witness the violence also feel traumatized and powerless.

The cost to individuals and to society of tolerating violence against women does not stop at the physical agony of beatings and sexual assaults. It includes the psychological damage and disempowerment that women experience at the hands of partners or other family members.

Violence in the family can expose women to a whole range of further dangers. For instance, research in Uganda has shown that family violence leaves women more prone to HIV and other sexual infections because they are less able to negotiate safe sex with their partners. Women subjected to family violence also find it harder to work or study, which affects their ability to provide for themselves and their families.

Many women suffering such violence are tied to their abusers through a shared life, household and family. The social and emotional bonds linking the victim and the perpetrator make domestic violence different to most other human rights abuses – and a uniquely difficult one to challenge.

To learn more about AI's campaign to Stop Violence against Women visit www.amnesty.org/actforwomen

Good news on the death penalty

On 15 April, **Philippines** President Gloria Macapagal Arroyo commuted all death sentences in the country to life imprisonment. This is thought to be the world's largest ever commutation of death sentences, which will lead to the reprieve of at least 1,230 people.

No executions have been carried out during the President's term of office. A bill to repeal the death penalty is currently under consideration in the Philippines Congress, and hopes for complete abolition of the death penalty significantly rose when the President prioritized the bill.

By commuting these executions and prioritizing the legislation to end the death penalty in the Philippines, President Arroyo is joining governments around the world in recognizing the inhumanity of the death sentence.

Already in 2006 many countries have taken significant steps towards complete abolition. On 3 January, **France's** President, Jacques Chirac, declared his intention to the Constitutional Council to officially abolish the death penalty in all circumstances from the Constitution, rendering abolition irreversible.

In February, the Justice Ministry of **South Korea** reported that it wants to “reform the criminal justice system in a way that best protects human rights” and that it “will closely review abolishing the death penalty”. Support from the Justice Ministry, which has commissioned a study to determine how abolition would affect society and the crime rate, could be crucial to South Korean parliamentarians who in recent years have been trying to abolish the death penalty.

The **Vietnamese** Ministry of Police sent a proposal to reduce the number of crimes punishable by death to the Central Judicial Reform Commission in February. The offences to be dropped would be mainly economic ones such as fraud, embezzlement, bribery and counterfeiting. Dang Anh, a deputy director of the Ministry of Police’s judicial department, said that “the reduction will be in tune with the general tendency around the world which Viet Nam should follow”. In March, Viet Nam commuted the death sentences of two Australians convicted of drug trafficking.

On 8 March, the UK-based Judicial Committee of the Privy Council, the highest court of appeal for most of the English-speaking Caribbean countries, abolished the mandatory death sentence for murder in the **Bahamas**.

A draft bill to abolish the death penalty was tabled at the National Assembly of **Mali** in April by Kassoum Tapo MP, a former head of the Bar Association of Mali.

In April, **Papua New Guinea**’s new Minister for Justice, Mr Bire Kimisopa, said that a return to executions was not on his department’s agenda and that on the contrary, he will work towards abolishing the death penalty.

Over 40 countries have abolished the death penalty for all crimes since 1990, bringing the number of countries that have abolished the death penalty in law or in practice to 123.

AI is a member of the World Coalition against the Death Penalty, a coalition that unites national and international human rights organizations, bar associations, trade unions and local and regional authorities in an effort to rid the world of the death penalty.

To find out more and take action against the death penalty go to: www.amnesty.org/deathpenalty

AI at the European Social Forum

Three chained and blindfolded “Guantánamo prisoners” dressed in orange jumpsuits created a stir when they appeared at the European Social Forum (ESF) in May.

The “prisoners” – activists from AI Greece – led a march of more than 150 people through the venue in protest at US policies on renditions and unlawful detentions, including in Guantánamo.

This was just one of the eye-catching events and demonstrations staged by AI at this year’s ESF in Athens, Greece, 4-7 May. AI hosted a seminar on violence against women and took part in others, including one on human rights and the “war on terror”.

Throughout the four-day event, AI’s campaign stalls generated thousands of new actions. Nearly 2,500 photographs were collected for the Control Arms campaign’s “Million Faces” petition, and more than 3,000 postcards against renditions were signed. AI Greece recruited over 100 new members.

The ESF is Europe's biggest forum of grassroots organizations and activists from around the world.

Be the millionth face!

The Million Faces petition is almost complete and ready to be delivered. On 26 June, AI delegates will arrive in New York for the UN conference on small arms. There they will hand delegates the Million Faces petition calling for an international Arms Trade Treaty. With more than 900,000 faces already on the petition, the target is in sight. If you haven't added your face, go to www.controlarms.org. You might be the millionth face!

World Refugee Day – the reality behind the statistics

'In the last five years, the number of asylum -seekers arriving in all industrialized countries has fallen by half'

UNHCR

According to the UN High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR), there are fewer refugees worldwide today than at any time in almost a quarter of a century. Since 2000, the number of refugees has fallen steadily to just over 9 million in early 2005. Between January 2001 and December 2004 an unprecedented five million refugees returned to their countries of origin. But the reality is far bleaker and more complex than the numbers suggest. Large numbers of people returned to, for example, Afghanistan, Iraq and Burundi during this period in conditions that were not voluntary, safe or dignified.

The persistent focus on statistics by both the international community and individual governments has often led to the rights of refugees being disregarded. Ever-increasing numbers of asylum-seekers have been prevented from accessing protection, either physically or through complex legal procedures. Increasingly restrictive policies in the context of the "war on terror" have fuelled racism and xenophobia, with some politicians and segments of the media linking all refugees with criminality and terrorism.

And while the number of refugees may be dropping, there remain around 25 million internally displaced persons (IDPs) – people forced from their homes by conflict or natural disaster who have not crossed an international border. Inter-state conflict is less prevalent today than internal armed conflict, causing fewer refugee flows across borders, but more IDPs whose protection and assistance needs, systematically denied in countries such as the Democratic Republic of the Congo and Sudan, must be addressed.

It is time for governments and decision-makers worldwide to stop pandering to public fears about asylum-seekers and refugees and to honour their obligations to those in need of international protection. Whether the number of refugees rises or continues to fall, human rights must be the basis for all laws and practices concerning refugees, asylum-seekers and IDPs.

20 June is World Refugee Day. Get informed. Take action. Visit www.amnesty.org/refugees