Caught in the crossfire

Internal conflict destroys the lives of Nepal’s children

Sushil Karki, aged 8: shot dead during a gun battle between the Communist Party of Nepal (CPN) (Maoist) and security forces, while standing on the balcony of her home, December 2004; Santosh Bishwakarma, aged 15: reportedly shot dead by CPN (Maoist) forces, August 2004; Maina Sunuwar, aged 15: kidnapped, tortured and killed by army officers, February 2005.

These are just a few of the hundreds of children who have been killed since the beginning of the brutal conflict between CPN (Maoist) rebels and government forces, nine years ago. Caught between the two sides, children are being killed deliberately or in indiscriminate attacks, tortured, raped, illegally detained, abducted and recruited for military service. Many more are dying of poverty and disease, exacerbated by the conflict.

Children are not safe in their homes, or at school. Many schools have been forcibly closed by the CPN (Maoist) forces. It is estimated that since the beginning of the conflict, the CPN (Maoist) forces have abducted tens of thousands of schoolchildren, along with their teachers, for “political education” sessions. While most of the abducted children return home after a few days, a few do not and it is suspected that such children may have been recruited by the CPN (Maoist) forces.

Even after the CPN (Maoist) declared a unilateral cease-fire on 3 September, new abuses are being reported and hundreds of students and teachers continue to be abducted or to be subjected to indoctrination campaigns by the CPN (Maoist).

In February 2003 AI delegates met two 15-year-old boys who had been forcibly recruited by the CPN (Maoist) forces and severely beaten by their commander. The boys told AI delegates that they had been involved in committing extremely violent acts. The managers of the residential home where the boys were living informed AI that they were very disturbed and had to be kept away from the other children.

Even the very youngest are vulnerable. On 14 June 2005, it was reported that two women and a one-year-old child were abducted by CPN (Maoist) forces. Their mutilated bodies were found in a forest two days later. Chandra Malla told AI how in 2001, after her husband was killed by security forces, the police came to her home and arrested her 10-year-old son. He was pistol-whipped and, during six days in custody, beaten with a plastic pipe. In February 2005, an 11-year-old girl was reportedly raped by three members of a state-sponsored “village defence force” during an attack in which one person died and 600 homes were burned down.

Government figures have revealed that approximately half of Nepal’s children experience stunted growth due to malnutrition while 30,000 children under five die every year from diarrhoea. The conflict, and frequent blockades by CPN (Maoist) forces, are exacerbating the situation and leaving children accessible to vaccines, vitamins and vital drugs.

The government of Nepal has repeatedly stated its commitment to human rights, and the leaders of the CPN (Maoist) forces claim to abide by international humanitarian law. Yet the killings, the torture, the rape and the abduction of the country’s future – its children – continues.

Oil and injustice in Nigeria

Ten years after the execution of Ken Saro-Wiwa, the struggle for justice for the people in the Niger Delta continues

The execution of writer and human rights campaigner Ken Saro-Wiwa and eight other activists, (the “Ogoni nine”) on 10 November 1995, raised a storm of outrage across the world. Their deaths highlighted the suffering of the Ogoni people in the oil-rich delta of the Niger river. The Nigerian government was widely denounced and the oil company Shell condemned for its ambiguous and belated interventions.

But 10 years later, how much has changed for the people of the Niger Delta?

Ken Saro-Wiwa fought for an end to the environmental damage that was turning his homeland into what he described as a “wasteland”, endangering the people’s health and livelihoods. Today oil spills still blacken the land and pollute the waterways. Hundreds of gas flares burn day and night, filling the sky with soot and fumes. Operational practices such as these, so close to people’s homes, farms and waterways, would not be tolerated in the countries where the oil companies have their headquarters.

The inhabitants of the Niger Delta remain among the most deprived oil communities in the world – 70 per cent live on less than US$1 a day. In spite of its windfall gains, as global oil prices have more than doubled in the last two years, the Nigerian government has failed to provide services, infrastructure or jobs in the region.

The military government which executed Ken Saro-Wiwa and his companions was replaced in 1999 by a civilian government. Yet government security forces continue to kill people in the Niger Delta with impunity. Excessive force is used to protect the oil industry and restore law and order – and the human rights of communities are regularly violated.

The powerful oil companies operating in the region are perceived by communities and many activists on the ground as complicit in past human rights abuses. Some oil companies have admitted that their operations have contributed to fuelling conflict. In recent years, under pressure to demonstrate corporate responsibility, companies have developed voluntary codes of conduct, but these have not been able to reduce the negative impact of their operations in the region.

"It is like paradise and hell. They have everything. We have nothing... If we protest, they send soldiers. They sign agreements with us and then ignore us. We have graduates going hungry, without jobs. And they bring people from Lagos to work here," says Eghare W.O. Ojoghar, chief of the Ugborodo community in Delta State.

On 4 February 2005, soldiers fired on protesters at Chevron’s Escravos oil terminal on the coast of the western Niger Delta. One man was killed and at least 30 others were injured. The protest was over...
Brazil's juvenile prisons fail young people

Torture, ill-treatment and collective punishment are a part of daily life for the 6,000 detainees of São Paulo's Vila Marla juvenile detention centre, the State Foundation for the Well Being of Minors (FEREM).

In September 2005 the mother of M., an adolescent in the Vila Marla unit of FEREM, reported that her son had been so severely beaten by wardens that he was urinating blood. Another imprisoned juvenile, D., showed his mother beating marks and signs of torture. He told her that the FEREM director had personally ordered that his food be withheld. He was kept for four days in solitary confinement, after being dragged out of class by a guard who shot five times into the ceiling to intimidate him.

The FEREM states its objective is to rehabilitate young offenders through education to enable them to reintegrate into society. Yet detainees live little, if any, educational support. Detention conditions are frequently inhuman and, with violence between detainees at an all-time-high, guards conditioned to act as overseers rather than educators.

Guard convicts of torture

Hopes of improvement were raised following convictions in 17 torture cases, involving 227 FEREM guards, between 2001 and 2004. These were largely the result of work by public prosecutors monitoring the system. In response to reports of wardens beating detainees, the FEREM president announced a package of reforms, but it met strong resistance. The number of riots and escapes, many of which were allegedly instigated by wardens, increased and as the FEREM descended into further chaos, the president resigned.

Under the new FEREM president, reports of ill-treatment continue. In September 2005, the president issued a decree giving directors the power to limit access to the prison by children's rights advocates and members of civil society. Access to detainees by lawyers, relatives and human rights organizations is paramount for safeguarding their physical and mental integrity.

Juvenile detainees tortured

AI has reported that the FEREM authorities are using the Vila Marla unit as a punishment unit where detainees are said to be tortured and locked up all day. Members of the adult prison guards, "shock unit", have reportedly been brought in to implement punishments. This is contrary to stipulations of the Statute of Children and Adolescents (ECA), adopted in Brazil in 1989, which, among other provisions, recognizes the legal rights of incarcerated minors. Cases of detainees with broken limbs, marks of strangulation and urinating blood have been reported.

Electoral sensitivity has made São Paulo's juvenile detention system an issue which politicians avoid. Public perception of juvenile prisoners is overwhelmingly negative. Regular calls are made for the age of criminal responsibility to be lowered from 18 to 16 and for a tougher detention regime, longer sentences and even transfers into the adult penal system after the children reach adulthood.

But the authorities must recognize the rights of young prisoners and comply with international and Brazilian law.

AI urges São Paulo's state government, Geraldo Alckimin, to order the investigation of incidents of torture and ill-treatment at the FEREM Vila Marla, prosecute those found responsible under the law against torture and ensure that all FEREM units comply with the minimum standards set out in the ECA.

Setback for juvenile justice system in Pakistan

The rights of children in Pakistan suffered a major setback in December 2004 when a Lahore High Court judgment revoked the Juvenile Justice System Ordinance (JJSO), reportedly finding it "unreasonable, unconstitutional and impracticable".

While the JJSO, introduced in July 2000, was not a perfect piece of legislation it made a significant move towards upholding Pakistan's international obligations to child rights. It included such provisions as definition of a child as under 18 years of age, the establishment of juvenile courts, the regulation of police arrests of child suspects, prohibition of the death penalty for children, prohibition of the use of handcuffs and fetters, and the appointment of special panels of lawyers to represent child offenders.

However, even before the ruling, the implementation of the JJSO had been slow and partial. Courts continued to impose harsh sentences and heavy fines on juveniles. Conditions of detention, particularly for girls, remained inadequate. Pakistan is one of the last countries in the world still to impose the death penalty on juveniles — in blatant violation of the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child (CRC) which Pakistan ratified in 1990.

Zaiauddin, a disabled 13-year-old boy, and 16-year-old Abdul Qadir were sentenced to death in Balochistan province in 2003. The court failed to refer them to a juvenile court. While waiting for their appeal to be heard, the two were held in Much Prison, in a cell measuring 1.8m x 2.4m, with six adult men who had been sentenced to death. There were fears that they might be subjected to sexual abuse by other detainees in the overcrowded prison. AI members who had appealed to the Governor of Balochistan on the boys' behalf were informed in mid-August 2005 that they were now held in a separate room for juveniles.

Some areas of Pakistan such as the Federally Administered Tribal Areas (FATA) retain legal systems which function separately from the regular laws of the country. The JJSO has not been fully implemented in these areas and none of the necessary infrastructure has been put in place. There is no provision limiting criminal responsibility of children or protection against harsh sentences. Collective punishments can be imposed on children for crimes committed by their relatives.

Sometimes whole families are imprisoned for years. Thirteen children aged between two and 13 were reportedly serving prison sentences in Central Prison, Dera Ismail Khan, in 2004, for being related to a wanted criminal suspect.

Following a meeting with AI Secretary-General Irene Khan in 2001, President Pervez Musharraf agreed to commute all death sentences on juveniles imposed before the JJSO came into force. The exact number of juveniles under sentence of death at the time was estimated to be between 125 and 350. Although some have benefited from these commutations, many still remain under sentence of death, unable to prove their age at the time of the offence.

AI urges the government to reinstate the JJSO in accordance with its obligation to bring CRC provisions into national law. The government must ensure that the necessary provisions be made to implement it fully throughout the country.

China: human rights protesters released from labour camp but still at risk

Mao Hengfeng, who had been assigned by the Chinese authorities to 18 months' "Re-education through Labour" (RTL) was released on 12 September.

Since her release she has continued to protest about abuses of her rights, despite RTL officials reportedly threatening "severe consequences" if she did so. She has suffered abuses, along with her husband, Wu Xuejun, who has been subjected to beatings and may face criminal charges. Both are at risk of further human rights violations.

People receiving RTL terms have no access to a lawyer and no court hearing. "Sentencing" is usually decided by the police alone. They can be detained in an RTL facility for up to four years and are at high risk of being beaten or tortured, particularly after being transferred to a labour camp.

AI is continuing to campaign to protect Mao Hengfeng and her husband's rights and demand investigations into allegations that they were tortured and ill-treated.

Worldwide Appeal March 2005

AI raises alarm over child detainees in Burundi

The justice and penitentiary systems in Burundi leave children vulnerable to human rights violations

R. aged 14, was arrested on 12 January 2004, accused of robbery. In the six months that he was held in custody he was beaten with a metal rod and stick by a police officer. He was sentenced in May 2004 to two and a half years. When AI delegates saw him he still bore the scars on his arm and hands.

T. aged 17, was arrested on 21 October 2002 for alleged robbery. While in custody he was beaten and tied up. He still suffers from his injuries. He has spent over two years in prison without sentence. His trial is in process.

R. and T. are two of 48 child detainees AI delegates met during visits to four of Burundi's 11 prisons in January. AI is deeply concerned about the treatment of children in the country's justice and penitentiary systems.

Harsh overcrowded conditions

In most prisons, children endure harsh and overcrowded conditions: some child detainees have reported acts of sexual abuse within the prison, many are frequently deprived of basic educational support and recreational activities appropriate to their age and special needs are, in general, not provided.

Twenty of those interviewed by AI had been held in custody beyond the legal period of detention. Several suffered cruel, inhuman and degrading treatment during this period. At least a quarter of the child detainees interviewed had been detained for more than a year without trial, often in conditions amounting to cruel, inhuman and degrading treatment. Of those who had been tried, few were assisted by a lawyer.

In a number of cases, children visited by AI were being detained in violation of domestic and international detention procedures. Burundi has ratified the main international and regional human rights instruments. On 29 June 2004 it ratified the African Charter on the Rights and Welfare of the Child. Moreover, the Burundian national legislation includes children-related specifications. But neither international nor national laws are respected.

"Parents are failing to take their children's special status seriously. Magistrates and penitentiary authorities are not receiving the necessary training and lack knowledge of the laws that apply to children. This sometimes leads to sentences which contravene national penal procedures.

Sentenced for longer than the legal limit

L. aged 16, was arrested on 10 June 2003. He was sentenced to 20 years' imprisonment although the national legislation specifies that a prison sentence for a child cannot exceed 10 years.

While Burundi's law on children is generally eligible for conditional release after serving one quarter of his or her sentence, however, few children have benefited from this legal measure.

Despite an official commitment, government officials to recognize some of the serious failings endemic to the penitentiary system, no concrete measures are being undertaken to address them.
LIBYA
Detained without trial

Political campaigner and prisoner of conscience Fathi el-Jahmi (above left) has been held without trial since his arrest in March 2004, after his participation and interviews with international media criticizing the Libyan authorities. It is feared that he is not receiving adequate treatment for various chronic medical conditions which could be life-threatening.

While being held in Kandalaha, Afghanistan, Abdullah al-Noaimi was reportedly tortured, sexually mutilated and denied access to medical care by US personnel. In June 2002 he was flown to the Guantánamo Bay detention camp in Cuba. He was suffering from a urinary tract infection, had been urinating blood and had diarrhoea. During the transfer he was allegedly denied water and access to toilet facilities.

RUSSIAN FEDERATION

Two brothers ‘disappear’ in Chechnya

Al fears that the “disappearance” of Yakub Adamovich Magomadov may be connected to his efforts to find his younger brother Akhimbek Adamovich Magomadov.

Akhimbek Magomadov was detained by Russian federal forces on 2 October 2000 and has not been seen since. The family searched for him throughout the Russian Federation, eventually lodging a complaint with the European Court of Human Rights in 2001. Yakub Magomadov told AI delegates in March 2004 about his brother’s “disappearance” and the intimidation his family faced after the complaint to the European Court of Human Rights.

For example, in autumn 2003, Yakub Magomadov had visited a prison in Russia’s Rostov region after hearing that his brother might be detained there. When he left the prison he was reportedly pushed into a car by men in uniform who took his passport, beat him and warned him that he would “disappear” if he continued to look for his brother. His family last saw him in April 2004, when he left Chechnya to travel to Moscow.

On 16 May, a member of the Chechen president’s security guard reportedly told the family that Yakub Magomadov was being held at the Russian federal forces headquarters in Khankala, Chechnya, and gave them a note written by Yakub Magomadov and a copy of his passport photograph. However, the Russian authorities denied that they detained Yakub Magomadov. They allege that Yakub Magomadov is in hiding, as he is accused of having committed a criminal offence.

In September 2005 AI learned that Yakub Magomadov had reportedly been seen alive in August 2005 in detention in Khankala, where he may be being held secretly.

AI believes that Abdurrazig al-Mansouri may be a prisoner of conscience solely for the non-violent exercise of his right to freedom of expression.

CAMBODIA
Parliamentary imprisoned

Cheam Channy, an elected member of parliament for the opposition Sam Rainy Party (SRP) in Cambodia, was arrested in February immediately following the removal of his parliamentary immunity. He was charged with “organized crime” and “fraud”.

These accusations were linked to allegations made in July 2004 regarding activities of SRP Committee No. 14 of which he was the Chair, and the alleged establishment of a militant armed force or “shadow army”. However, Committee No. 14 was set up solely to monitor the performance of government ministries covering national defence, veterans’ affairs, armed force or “shadow army”. However, Committee No. 14 he was the Chair, and the alleged establishment of a militant armed force or “shadow army”. However, Committee No. 14 was set up solely to monitor the performance of government ministries covering national defence, veterans’ affairs, demobilization and public security, modelled after opposition party “shadow ministries” around the world.

Despite the fact that Cheam Channy is a civilian charged with non-military offences, he was detained in a military prison and brought before a Military Court, in contravention of both domestic and international law. At his trial on 9 August no evidence was produced to substantiate the charges against him were presented, and basic international fair trial standards were flouted. He was sentenced to seven years’ imprisonment.

AI believes that Cheam Channy is a prisoner of conscience, sentenced to a long prison term as a result of an attempt to stifle legitimate political opposition in Cambodia, and curtail freedom of expression and association. His case is another example of serious flaws in the Cambodian judicial system, including political interference with the judiciary and failure to meet international fair trial standards.

USA
Tortured in US custody

Abdullah al-Noaimi, a 23-year-old Bahraini, was arrested on the Afghanistan-Pakistan border in November 2001 and transferred into US custody. He had travelled to Afghanistan to find his missing cousin and was returning to Bahrain via Pakistan.

While being held in Kandahar, Afghanistan, Abdullah al-Noaimi was reportedly tortured, sexually mutilated and denied access to medical care by US personnel. In June 2002 he was flown to the Guantánamo Bay detention camp in Cuba. He was suffering from a urinary tract infection, had been urinating blood and had diarrhoea. During the transfer he was allegedly denied water and access to toilet facilities.

Upon arrival in Guantánamo his ordeal continued. Instead of being treated for his ailments, he was reportedly given hallucinogenic and mood-altering drugs and asked to sign confessions that he was a member of Al-Qa’ida. He told his lawyer that a guard had taunted him and threatened him with rape.

In 2004 an FBI officer concluded that Abdullah al-Noaimi “was not a threat”, after concluding he was the last known survivor of the smallest group of Al-Qa’ida’s camps, Camp IV. Despite this, his classification as an enemy combatant stood.

In a desperate attempt to protest against his continued detention and years of harsh treatment, Abdullah al-Noaimi went on a hunger strike in July 2005, along with around 200 other detainees. After 11 days, he fell unconscious and was administered fluids intravenously to keep him alive.

AI believes that Abdullah al-Noaimi’s lawyers believe he has also participated in a second hunger strike which began in August and AI is concerned for his physical and mental well-being.

> Please write, calling on the authorities to investigate allegations that Abdullah al-Noaimi was tortured in US custody, and to set up an independent commission of inquiry into all allegations of the use of detainees by the US’s “war on terror” detention policies and practices. Call for the detention facility at Guantanamo Bay to be closed and the detainees either released or charged and tried in accordance with international standards.

Send appeals to: President George W. Bush, The White House, 1600 Pennsylvania Avenue NW, Washington DC 20500 USA. Fax: +1 202 456 2461. Email: president@whitehouse.gov

Cites updated dates

AMNESTY INTERNATIONAL

Palestinian students released in Iraq

Palestinian students Jayab Mahmoud Hassan Humid and Ahmad Badran Fars were released in August after being held in the US-run prison at Camp Bucca, southern Iraq, for more than two years without charging or trial. They were arrested on 11 March 2003 and taken to Abu Ghraib prison shortly before being released and returned to their homes in the West Bank. Other Palestinian students arrested with them were released after several months’ detention.

Following his release Jayab Mahmood Hassan Humidt told AI that he was denied access to a lawyer, despite several requests. He also claimed he had suffered humiliation and torture at Camp Bucca including being forced to stand for hours in the heat of the sun. The men thanked AI for its support.

See Worldwide Appeal April 2005.

Prisoner of conscience released in Viet Nam

Prisoner of conscience Brother Nguyen Thien Phung (Ha) was released in September after spending 15 years in prison. He was released under a large prisoner amnesty to mark Viet Nam’s National Day celebrations on 2 September. He is reported to be in reasonable health. This comes soon after the release of fellow inmate, Brother Pham Thien Bot (Trinh) under an earlier amnesty in March.

Brother Nguyen Thien Phung (Ha) and Brother Pham Thien Bot (Trinh) were both members of the Congregation of the Mother Coredemptivum (CMC). They were arrested in May 1987 and sentenced to 20 years’ imprisonment for peacefully exercising their right to freedom of religion, expression and association by their activities as members of the CMC. The CMC in the USA has thanked AI for its efforts for their release.


Libya frees prisoners of conscience

Five prisoners of conscience who had been held since 1998 were released in September. Ramadan Shaglouf, Tarig al-Dermin and Twfik al-Jahmi, Al Beou and Musa al-Zwi had been convicted of belonging to the Islamic Alliance Movement, a political group, and given sentences ranging up to life imprisonment. However, AI is concerned that their freedom may be conditional on their agreeing to continue their political activity in the country - a political activity - which would be an infringement of their right to freedom of expression. AI also calls on the government to investigate allegations of torture made by at least one of the five released.

Mexico frees environmental activist

Prisoner of conscience and environmental activist Héctor Sánchez was released, on 15 September after spending more than 10 months in prison. AI had learned that his arrest and prosecution were in retaliation for his peaceful struggle to prevent excessive logging of the region’s forests.

Following his release, he told the media that he will continue his environmental activism and the fight for the protection of human rights for organizations for their support. He said that during all the time he was in prison he never felt alone as the manifestations of support never ceased.

See Worldwide Appeal May 2005.
Solidarity in the Occupied Territories

Palestinians and Israeli activists come together in weekly peaceful protest in the West Bank

To the Palestinian village of Bil'in in the construction by the Israeli army of the fence/wall through the West Bank has disastrous consequences. It will cut the villagers off from two thirds of their land, the main source of their livelihood. For the past year the villagers have been holding peaceful demonstrations each week to protest against the fence/wall. They have been joined by human rights organizations and international activists. The weekly Palestinian-Israeli demonstrations and other activities in Bil'in have come to symbolize non-violent protest and solidarity between the two communities.

The Israeli army has responded with unwarranted force. Soldiers fire tear gas, stun grenades and rubber-coated metal bullets, and often beat and arrest demonstrators. Israeli police are increasingly being prevented from reaching the village. The Israeli army has been imposing curfews, declaring the place a "closed military area" and turning back Palestinian activity on the roads leading to the village. As a result fewer outsiders are present to witness the human rights abuses which the villagers suffer daily.

With the olive harvest underway, Israeli police and soldiers have joined the Palestinian villagers in Bil'in to pick olives in the fields which are being cut off from the village by the fence/wall. The route of the fence has been designed to appropriate large areas of Palestinian land and expand Israeli settlements, built in the Occupied Territories in violation of international law.

Although the Israeli authorities claim that the fence/wall is being built to "separate" Israel from the West Bank, more than 80 per cent of it is being erected on Palestinian land inside the occupied West Bank.

The International Court of Justice (ICJ) has called on Israel to cease constructing the fence/wall in the West Bank and dismantle the sections already built there. Israel continues to disregard the ICJ's recommendation.

Freedom of expression under attack in Tunisia

At the opening of the first phase of the World Summit on the Information Society (WSIS) in 2003 in Geneva, UN General Kofi Annan described information and communication technologies as "instruments with which to advance the cause of freedom and democracy". It is ironic that the Tunisian authorities prepare to host the second phase of the WSIS in November, it is clamping down on precisely the rights to freedom of expression and information that such technologies offer.

Over just a few weeks in August to September, the Association of Tunisian Judges (AMT) had its offices closed, the Union of Tunisian Journalists (STJ) was banned from holding elections and an injunction was served on the League of Human Rights (LTDH), preventing it from preparing and holding its sixth national congress. The LTDH's offices were also surrounded by police and all but members of its executive committee denied access.

Deprying the AMT of its office came as part of a series of measures taken by the authorities that appeared intended to intimidate judges and restrict their legitimate activities and freedom of expression. Following recent calls for more independence of the judiciary, the office of the AMT had its telephone, fax and Internet access frequently disconnected by the authorities. Many judges have said that they have been arbitrarily transferred to remote places in the country, away from their families, apparently as part of efforts to intimidate and silence them.

Since the creation of the STJ in May 2004, its president has been summoned for questioning several times to the security department of the Ministry of Interior. The LTDH and other human rights organizations are also routinely targeted by the authorities.

The government of Tunisia should end immediately its harassment and persecution of human rights defenders, judges and journalists and ensure that all Tunisians are able to exercise their rights to freedom of expression and association.

Children in Kosovan camp risk death from lead poisoning

About 5,300 people of Roma, Ashkali and Egyptian origin are living in lead-contaminated camps in North Mitrovica, Kosovo. Most of them, including 138 children under the age of six, have dangerous levels of lead in their blood. Some of the children have suffered symptoms of lead poisoning, including convulsions and coma, suggesting very high levels of exposure.

According to the World Health Organization, children living in the camps "are at a risk of encephalopathy [brain disorder] and possible death". In adults, exposure to high levels of lead may result in increased blood pressure and decreased function of the kidneys and central nervous system.

Most of the camps' inhabitants have lived there since fleeing their homes in southern Mitrovica following the conflict in Kosovo in 1999. The camps, which were set up by the UN Mission in Kosovo (UNMIK) in 1999, are located on land which was used for a lead-smelting plant, operated by the Trepa Mines Company. The UN forced its closure in 2000 following a report of high lead levels, but on 22 August 2005, the mine reportedly reopened. European Union and UN authorities welcomed this as a step forward for the economic development of Kosovo.

UN declares emergency

On 24 June 2005, following a visit to the site, the Representative of the UN Secretary-General for the Human Rights of Internally Displaced Persons declared "this situation is an emergency. A failure to act now would amount to a violation of the right of the affected camps' residents to their health and physical and mental well-being."

As a result of pressure from AI and other non-governmental organizations (NGOs), a site has now been identified by the relevant authorities for the relocation of the residents. At a first site to be identified, five families have to be housed and other toxins, a second site was found, but funding remains problematic.

An AI Netherlands staff member who recently visited the site found that the international community had failed to fully inform the residents of the present situation and consult them on the move. AI will continue to put pressure on the authorities to ensure that the local community is fully consulted and to give guarantees that they will be moved to a safe place as soon as possible.

Human rights: 'one of the pillars of the United Nations'

The UN unambiguously acknowledged human rights as one of its three pillars, alongside development and peace and security, at the 2005 World Summit in September.

One of the most important decisions of the Summit was to create a Human Rights Council. States also decided to double the budget of the Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights over the next five years.

Other positive outcomes of the Summit include the unqualified acceptance by all states of their collective international responsibility to protect people from torture, war crimes, ethnic cleansing and crimes against humanity; strong commitments to end discrimination against women and impunity for violence against women; and the decision to further mainstream human rights throughout the UN system.

These positive outcomes reflect the commitment of a growing number of states from all regions to improve the capacity of the UN to promote and protect human rights. The momentum of the Summit must not be lost. AI now calls on the General Assembly to establish the new Human Rights Council without delay. World leaders took the first steps, but failed to establish the Council, but left nearly all details to be negotiated by the General Assembly under the direction of its President.

The new Council must have credibility in the eyes of the world and especially of those in need. It must preserve all the strengths of the Commission on Human Rights, but it must also be able to provide more immediate rights with greater authority, more credibility and more effectiveness than the Commission has done. Those governments that have been silent supporters of an improved UN human rights machinery must now be heard. AI speaks out forcefully for a strong Human Rights Council in the General Assembly.

For more information see: UN Governments must act promptly and effectively on important human rights commitments in 2005 World Summit Document (A/60/2005).

AI hosts torture conference

On 19-21 November, AI and human rights NGO Reprieve are hosting a conference on the use of torture and other cruel, inhuman or degrading treatment in the "war on terror".

The conference, "The Global Struggle Against Torture: Guantánamo Bay, Baghdad and Beyond", will bring together torturers, their family members, lawyers and experts.

The aim is to support the work and promote alliances of those engaged in the struggle against torture and other violations of human rights in the "war on terror".

For more information go to: TortureWeb@amnesty.org

Attacks on Roma, Ashkali, and Egyptian in Kosovo

For more information see: Roma, Ashkali and Egyptian in Kosovo

Lighting the message of AI

Al Netherlands attempts to break the world record for the largest flaming image, with a giant version of the AI logo. Al members and student activists used 10,100 candles to create the image, which measured 9 x 13 metres, in Vredenburg Square in the city of Utrecht, on 7 September.