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Fiftieth anniversary of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights

Paris – 10 December 1998 – As governments around the world today celebrate the fiftieth anniversary of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, Amnesty International called on leaders around the world to make all human rights a reality for all.

Far from celebrating the role of governments, the organization said it would be celebrating the work of human rights defenders around the world who continue to be persecuted for trying to bring about the better world promised by governments in 1948.

“Today should be a day of shame for many governments,” said Pierre Sané, Secretary General of Amnesty International. “A sense of shame that 50 years on from the spirit of idealism and commitment to a better world which framed the adoption of the UDHR, poverty affects hundreds of millions while the torture, “disappearances”, unfair trials and unlawful killings continue.”

“While many leaders will mark today’s historic occasion by reiterating their commitment to protecting human rights, Amnesty International will hold up a mirror to highlight just how far reality is from the world envisaged in the UDHR.”

“Behind the rhetoric is the reality. Amnesty International’s 1998 Annual Report documents the facts. At least 1.3 billion people live on less than \$1 a day, 117 governments torture their citizens; at least 55 governments unlawfully kill their citizens; at least 87 governments jail prisoners of conscience; at least 31 governments make their citizens “disappear”; and at least 40 governments execute their citizens.”

Mr Sané’s comments were made during the first ever world summit of human rights defenders, organized to mark the anniversary and taking place in the Palais de Chaillot in Paris, the location of the UDHR’s adoption by the United Nations in 1948.

More than 300 grass-roots activists from over 100 countries have gathered in Paris to highlight their struggle and call on governments to help human rights defenders under attack. They are joined by well-known defenders such as Nobel laureates Rigoberta Menchú and José Ramos Horta, His Holiness the Dalai Lama; Chinese dissident Wei Jingsheng; US civil rights campaigner Angela Davis; and Algerian Newspaper Editor Salima Ghazali.

Later today, in a live satellite link-up with New York where the UN General Assembly is also celebrating the anniversary, the President of the summit will deliver a “Paris Declaration” on human rights defenders, which will be followed by a response from UN Secretary General Kofi Annan.

“I think all those who contributed to the conception of the UDHR in 1948 would be horrified to listen to the personal testimonies from these brave individuals gathered here who have been persecuted by their governments merely for peacefully trying to defend the rights set out in that historic document,” Mr Sané said.

“I hope that many of those government representatives in New York will be chastened by the voices of ordinary people around the world who have shown extraordinary courage by taking it upon themselves to defend the rights of others.”

Although Amnesty International’s annual report presents a bleak look at the state of human rights 50 years on, Mr Sané said that in some areas there had been improvement, but in many others governments failed to implement the majority of standards they themselves had set up since the UDHR’s adoption.

In particular he focussed on the issue of impunity with the recent arrest of General Pinochet and the adoption in Rome this year of the statute for a permanent international criminal court. Although flawed, it presents the best chance we have of giving teeth to the UDHR and ensuring that future perpetrators of crimes against humanity are discouraged from committing human rights violations or are brought to justice when they do, Mr Sané argued.

“Setting up an international criminal court is one of the greatest steps forward in human rights protection taken by the international community,” Mr Sané said. “A fitting way to mark the UDHR’s anniversary would be for all governments to immediately ratify the statute without conditions so that the court can begin to bring about an end to the impunity that has marked the last fifty years.”

Amnesty International also welcomed the reforms undertaken by UN Secretary General Kofi Annan to integrate human rights concerns into all the key areas of the UN’s work, and called on governments to fully support these moves.

“The UDHR has been called ‘the world’s best kept secret’ and ‘little more than a paper promise’ Mr Sané said. For the last 37 years, Amnesty International, together with tens of thousands of human rights defenders and non-governmental organizations, has been working to share that secret.”

“When governments adopted the UDHR they promised to disseminate it throughout society. Today, on the fiftieth anniversary, we promise to redouble our efforts to make sure that for the next 50 years, the UDHR is no longer a secret, and challenge governments to finally live up to the promise they made fifty years ago.”

Today’s commemoration in Paris will conclude with musicians from around the world playing the biggest human rights concert since the Human Rights Now Tour ten years ago. Radiohead, Alanis Morissette, Asian Dub Foundation, Peter Gabriel, Tracy Chapman, Youssou N’Dour, Kassav’, Axelle Red, Shania Twain, Orlando Poleo, Jimmy Page and Robert Plant will perform in front of a packed Bercy Stadium. ...ENDS/

For further information, or to arrange an interview, please call: Amnesty International Press Office: +44 171 413 5566/5810/580 -- ISDN line available for interviews.