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@ORGANIZATION OF AMERICAN STATES MUST TACKLE
"DISAPPEARANCES" AND POLITICAL KILLINGS
SAYS AMNESTY INTERNATIONAL

WASHINGTON, D.C. -- Amnesty International today took its concerns to the Organization of American States (OAS) regarding the OAS' failure to take strong action to end the political killings and "disappearances" that continue to plague the continent.

"Despite the political change of recent years and moves towards democracy, many government or government backed forces in the Americas have continued to deliberately target people for elimination or cause them to vanish without trace," said Pierre Sané, Secretary General of Amnesty International.

"During this time of change, the OAS has not shown the leadership needed to ensure that the mass violations of the past are not swept under the carpet through amnesties, and that strong measures are taken to prevent political killings and "disappearances" from taking place now," said Mr. Sané.

Mr. Sané raised these concerns in a meeting today with Assistant Secretary General of the OAS, Ambassador Christopher R. Thomas in Washington. Amnesty International will launch a major campaign tomorrow (20 October) against "disappearances and political killings world wide.

In Brazil, for example, some 4,600 street children were murdered or "disappeared" between 1988 and 1992 by uniformed policemen or "death squads" composed of civilian vigilantes and gun-for-hire police officers. Eighteen-year-old Roberto Carlos da Costa "disappeared" in Vila Nova York in 1992, having previously been detained and tortured by military police on suspicion of petty theft.

In Colombia, 3,800 people have been killed and 400 "disappeared" by the security forces and by "death squads" operating with army backing since 1990. Investigations are open but the guilty are rarely brought to justice.

"A climate of impunity pervades this continent," said Mr. Sané. "Governments must show the political will to bring the guilty to justice. Too often the killers and kidnapers are allowed to go free."

El Salvador, for example, passed a sweeping amnesty law in March 1993 which puts people implicated in killings and "disappearances" beyond the law. In countries such as Peru and Haiti, the armed forces commit human rights crimes with almost total impunity.

Amnesty International said that it was also concerned about the deterioration in the human rights situation in Haiti which led to the withdrawal of UN and OAS human rights monitors.

Amnesty International is calling on the OAS to strengthen its protection and promotion of human rights, and to ensure that its draft Convention on Enforced Disappearances will include effective measures to end these violations and to punish those responsible.

"The Convention should declare enforced "disappearances" to be a crime against humanity and allow rapid action to be taken totackle these violations when they occur," said Mr. Sané. "It must enable the OAS to take steps to resolve thousands of past cases by

prohibiting sweeping amnesty laws for perpetrators and compel governments to provide protection for witnesses and claimants in such cases and provide compensation for the victims.”

Amnesty International is also calling on the General Assembly and the Permanent Council of the OAS to increase its support of the valuable work of the Inter-American Commission for Human Rights. The Commission urgently needs more resources.

And the organization is urging the OAS to recognize the immense contribution to the field of human rights made by many non-governmental human rights organizations to provide them with opportunities for formal consultation and to ensure protection for human rights defenders.

Amnesty International is opposing moves by some countries in the region towards reinstating the death penalty. Some countries, such as Peru, are reportedly willing to denounce the American Convention on Human Rights in order to reintroduce the death penalty. The USA, meanwhile, continues to execute juveniles.

“The American Convention on Human Rights must be defended -- the Americas could and should be a death-penalty free continent,” said Mr. Sané.

Amnesty International is calling on all governments in the Americas who have not yet done so to ratify the American Convention on Human Rights and its protocol to Abolish the Death Penalty, and to recognize the jurisdiction of the Inter-American Court of Human Rights. It is also calling on such governments to ratify the Inter-American Convention to Prevent and Prohibit Torture.
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