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APEC Summit: Economics and human rights converge

OTTAWA – APEC will only foster genuine, sustainable development if government leaders gathering in Vancouver next week for the fifth APEC summit improve adherence to the rule of law, transparency and accountability, Amnesty International said today.

Amnesty International's Secretary General Pierre Sané will lead a delegation to the summit to highlight the relationship between human rights and development, and to warn that economic crisis in the region could lead to human rights violations as governments crackdown on opponents in their struggle to maintain growth rates.

"Recent economic shocks and environmental crisis in the region are a reminder that development is about more than just markets," Mr Sané said. "Genuine, sustainable development depends on the rule of law, government accountability and transparency -- the same factors that guarantee human rights."

"Businesses need to be sure that their investments are protected by a strong legal framework which is not open to abuse by corrupt officials. Investors need freedom of information and openness on the part of governments rather than secrecy and unaccountability."

"But across the APEC region, governments are jailing, torturing and sometimes killing those people who are standing up and denouncing corruption or illegal activities, or working to defend the rule of law and human rights. Their work deserves support from the corporations and governments gathered in Vancouver -- not silence."

In a report released for the summit, Amnesty International details examples of development being pursued at the expense of, rather than in pursuit of human rights. According to Mr Sané, the emerging problems in many regional economies are likely to exacerbate these pressures.

Recently, the Malaysian government has reportedly banned academics from making statements about the country's haze problem, and Prime Minister Mahathir has threatened to use the repressive Internal Security Act against currency speculators. In China, journalists have been jailed under restrictive state secrets legislation for reporting on financial policies and structural changes to the civil service.

"APEC should recognise that human rights are at the heart of development," Mr Sané said. "The Universal Declaration of Human Rights embodies issues at the cutting edge of globalization, from protection for intellectual property rights to freedom of expression, movement and ideas."

Amnesty International is calling on APEC leaders to ensure the forum's principles and action agendas affirm the place of human rights in development and promote international human rights standards, including core International Labour Organization conventions. The organization is also urging APEC to step up cooperation and consultation with non-governmental organizations (NGOs), reflecting the central role of civil society in building an Asia-Pacific community.

Amnesty International is inviting business leaders gathered at APEC to work with NGOs on how to promote and support human rights in their operations, to develop codes of conduct incorporating human rights principles and to promote human rights concerns in their contact with governments and other businesses.

Among the cases highlighted in Amnesty International's report are:

- Irene Fernandez who runs Tenaganita, a women's non-governmental organization in Malaysia, published in August 1995 a report alleging medical negligence and abuse in detention camps for illegal migrant workers who had been attracted by the country's labour shortages. The government used restrictive defamation legislation to bring her to court, where she faces a jail term of up to three years.
- South Korea's rapid industrialization has been supported by repressive measures against legitimate independent trade union activity. Teachers and public servants are not allowed to form independent trade unions and face arrest for peaceful protests against these measures.
- In Indonesia, trade unionists have been killed and tortured and their meetings violently broken up by the police. Muchtar Pakpahan, leader of the Indonesian Prosperous Workers' Union (SBSI) union has been charged with subversion which carries a possible death sentence.
- In Mexico, environmental activist Leticia Moctezuma Vargas opposes a government-sponsored golf course proposed to be built on land sacred to the Tepoztlan community. As a result of her peaceful protest she has received death threats, while other members of her community, including old women and children, have been brutally beaten by the police.

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Members of the delegation will be available for interviews and queries. For further information, or to receive a copy of Amnesty International's APEC media pack, please call:

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