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@AMNESTY INTERNATIONAL URGES GOVERNMENTS  
TO RATIFY AFRICAN RIGHTS CHARTER

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Human rights organization  
launches charter promotion

Amnesty International is calling on the governments of the 10 countries that have not yet ratified the African Charter on Human and Peoples' Rights to do so this year - the fifth anniversary of the charter coming into force.

The human rights organization said it is also urging other African states, all of whom have endorsed the charter, to boost public awareness of the rights it guarantees -- part of the organization's first lobbying and promotional campaign to mark the anniversary and the African Day of Human and People's Rights on October 21.

"African governments took an important step towards human rights protection in creating the charter," Amnesty International said, "but more important are the steps they take to live up to their obligations under the charter."

The organization said that African governments themselves underscored the importance of making people aware of their human rights by including it as a major obligation of governments under the charter when it was adopted in 1981. As well, the African Commission - the body that monitors the implementation of the charter - has asked for other organizations to help promote the charter.

"It's clear that governments are much less likely to violate human rights if people know what their rights are and what they can do about it if those rights are violated," Amnesty International said.

Amnesty International's campaign involves the publication of a guidebook on the charter for people who are not human rights specialists and the printing of the charter itself for human rights and other groups.

The organization's members, particularly in Africa, will also be publicizing some of the rights detailed in the charter and the steps people can take if those rights are violated. A major part of that awareness campaign will be ensuring that information about the charter is broadcast in several key African languages.

The African Charter covers a wide range of individual rights, such as the right to life, freedom of conscience, the right to speak freely and the right to join organizations such as trade unions and political parties -- rights that are similar to those in other international or regional human rights declarations.

But the African Charter on Human and Peoples' Rights also has some distinctive features considered to reflect the cultural and legal traditions of the region, including the rights of people fleeing persecution not just to seek asylum but also to obtain it.

Since the charter was adopted 10 years ago, 41 OAU members have ratified it, with only Côte d'Ivoire, Djibouti, Ethiopia, Kenya, Lesotho, Madagascar, Mauritius, Namibia, Seychelles, and Swaziland still to ratify. In June this year, the OAU Assembly of Heads of State itself called on those states to ratify the charter.

As part of its regular work, Amnesty International is also submitting information for the first time on human rights violations in Mauritania to the annual meeting of the African Commission. At its meeting in Gambia from 8-15 October, the 11-member commission will examine the reports of Egypt, Nigeria, Tanzania and Togo on their implementation of the charter.

As well as reviewing these country reports, the commission has broad powers to investigate human rights issues and bring human rights violations before the OAU Assembly of Heads of State.

The commission also has the responsibility to interpret the charter, promote human rights, and encourage national and local human rights institutions.

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