
AMNESTY INTERNATIONAL NEWS SERVICE 53/94

TO: PRESS OFFICERS
FROM: IS PRESS OFFICE
DATE: 17 MARCH 1994

AI INDEX: NWS 11/53/94
DISTR: SC/PO

NO OF WORDS: 2091

NEWS SERVICE ITEMS: EXTERNAL - EL SALVADOR, CARIBBEAN, COLOMBIA

PLEASE NOTE: The enclosed item on El Salvador will be sent out to international media today - leading up to elections on Sunday 20 March.

PLEASE NOTE: APOLOGIES - The news item, "More than 200 unarmed civilians killed in capital, Bujumbura", AI Index: AFR 16/WU 04/94, sent in News Service 45/94 was full of typing errors. It also contained incorrect information in the first paragraph, saying that the majority of those killed were of the Tutsi ethnic group - in fact, the majority were Hutu. We are very sorry for this and will be double-checking all items from now on to avoid this happening again.

PLEASE NOTE: The enclosed item on human rights defenders in Colombia is to go with a circular being sent out in the weekly mailing of 23 March. It is entitled: The Human Rights Movement Under Siege, AI Index: AMR 23/09/94. This item is not embargoed and may be used for on-going media coverage of the Colombia campaign, particularly for features. A further two documents on children and indigenous peoples, with news service items to go with them will be sent during the next few weeks.

ALSO: The press conference in Bogotá was apparently a huge success - getting great coverage within Colombia and in the international media. Jan in the press office is compiling an evaluation of media coverage and we URGENTLY want your feedback.

NEWS INITIATIVES - INTERNAL

INTERNATIONAL NEWS RELEASES

****Burundi - 16 May**** - SEE NEWS SERVICE 36/94

Burundi Week will be launched at a press conference in Belgium, organized by the Flemish and French-speaking sections there - the IS researcher plus some other IS staff will also be present. Materials include: One video - a cross between an ENR and a campaign video + photo exhibition (contact Anne Jenkins at the IS re: video and photo ex) and an audio cassette which will be targeted to African radio stations, news release and document (contact Paula re: these materials).

Hong Kong - 21 April - SEE NEWS SERVICE 36/94

TARGETED AND LIMITED NEWS RELEASES

****Jordan - 22 March** - SEE NEWS SERVICE 37/94 AND 49/94**

Report and news service item (NS 49/94) on Jordan (document being submitted to Human Rights Committee) are embargoed for 22 March and will be issued in New York by the UN New York office and the IS researcher on Israel/OT. The report, "Jordan: Human rights reforms, achievements & obstacles", AI Index: MDE 16/02/94, went out in the weekly mailing of 16 March.

Turkey - 30 March - SEE NEWS SERVICES 46/94 AND 26/94

****Switzerland CAT - 19 April****

Switzerland is coming before the Committee against Torture on 20 April. An AI report and news service item will be issued to targeted media embargoed for 19 April. The report: Switzerland: Allegations of ill-treatment in police custody, AI Index: EUR 43/02/94, will go out in the Weekly Mailing of 6 April.

****Israel & OT CAT - 25 April****

Israel is coming before the Committee against Torture on 25 April. A news service item will be written, embargoed for 25 April, to go with a 15-page report to be submitted to the CAT. The report should go out in a weekly mailing early in April.

FORTHCOMING NEWS INITIATIVES

****Saudi Arabia - 10 May** - More details to follow**

Annual Report - 7 July - SEE NEWS SERVICE 51/94

AI INDEX: AMR 29/WU 01/94
17 MARCH 1994

EL SALVADOR: POLITICAL KILLINGS AND DEATH THREATS MAR ELECTIONS

A series of political killings and death threats have marred hopes that the 20 March general elections in El Salvador will mark a watershed in the process of human rights reform in that country, according to Amnesty International.

Two years after Peace Accords ended 12 years of armed conflict between the government and the former armed opposition group Farabundo Marti National Liberation Front (FMLN), Ruben Eduardo Vanegas was murdered. A local election campaign coordinator for the FMLN, Vanegas was at his Santa Ana home when unidentified gunmen dressed in military-style clothing burst in. The men shot dead his parents Lorenzo, aged 106, and Santos Feliciano Cabrera, aged 83, before torturing and fatally shooting Vanegas.

The killing of Vanegas is one of 10 killings of opposition activists reported to Amnesty International since the beginning of the year -- the latest in a series of apparently political killings in the months leading up to the elections.

Although the victims have included several members of the ruling Nationalist Republican Alliance (ARENA) party, most have been low-to-mid level members of the FMLN, which became a political party in 1993. Many of the killings are characteristic of the so-called "death squads", clandestine forces intimately linked to state structures, that Amnesty International believes have continued to operate with impunity despite the ending of the armed conflict in 1992.

Since the electoral campaign began, many prominent FMLN leaders, including the party's vice-presidential candidate, have received death threats in the name of "death squads" notorious for hundreds of killings during past years of conflict. Other FMLN leaders have been the object of attacks and intimidation. On 24 February, unidentified attackers fired on the car of Nidia Diaz, FMLN candidate for deputy in the Department of San Vicente. She was unhurt but her bodyguard suffered injuries.

Like the vast majority of recent political killings, attacks and threats, these cases have gone uninvestigated by the current government. Amnesty International is alarmed that little progress has been made in investigating and ending these human rights violations, despite a large number of human rights commitments made by the government as part of the 1992 Peace Accords. Moreover, the 1993 amnesty law, which blocked prosecution of those responsible for thousands of killings and "disappearances" during the war, may have contributed to the pre-election violence by sending a signal that such human rights violations can be perpetrated with impunity.

As the continuing spiral of violence demonstrates, full compliance with the commitments made in the Peace Accords and a firm resolve to end such impunity are essential if human rights are to be respected under a newly elected administration.

Amnesty International notes the creation of the government's Investigative Joint Group (Grupo Conjunto) to look into certain recent cases attributed to "illegal armed groups". However, it considers that only a thorough and independent investigation into the activities and structures of the "death squads" -- both during the armed conflict and since -- will fully satisfy the recommendation of the Truth Commission to put an end to this phenomenon that still poses a threat to society. The Truth Commission was appointed by the United Nations to examine selected cases of human rights violations during the conflict. Such an inquiry should also include a review of intelligence services and a study of evidence contained in recently declassified documents of the United States Government that implicate top Salvadorian civilian and military officials in "death squad" activity.

Also urgent is the need to put into effect judicial reforms and measures for the effective investigation of abuses as recommended by the Truth Commission and by the United Nations Observer Mission in El Salvador (ONUSAL), which was created to monitor implementation of the Peace Accords.

Amnesty International calls on the incumbent government to provide guarantees for the safety of all those participating in the elections and urges the incoming authorities to intensify efforts to implement the agreed human rights reforms. The newly elected government should also send a clear message that human rights abuses have no place in El Salvador's future by ensuring that all those who have committed human rights violations, including those in the run-up to the elections, are brought to justice.

ENDS/

AI INDEX: AMR 05/WU 01/94
17 MARCH 1994

CARIBBEAN: AMNESTY INTERNATIONAL URGES COMMUTATION OF DEATH SENTENCES IN THE BAHAMAS, BARBADOS AND JAMAICA IN COMPLIANCE WITH JUDICIAL DECISION

Amnesty International has written to authorities in The Bahamas, Barbados and Jamaica urging them to implement the November 1993 decision that prisoners who have spent five years or more under sentence of death should have their sentences commuted.

The ruling by the Judicial Committee of the Privy Council (JCPC) in London, the final court of appeal for English-speaking Caribbean countries, concluded that: "in any case in which execution is to take place more than five years after sentence there will be strong grounds for believing the delay is such as to constitute 'inhuman or degrading punishment or other treatment'".

Amnesty International pointed out that Trinidad and Tobago had commuted relevant sentences in early December and that Grenada had taken a "most encouraging approach" by commuting the sentences of two persons on death row even though they had only been sentenced in 1991.

The organization noted that the decision had been issued four months ago already and called on the authorities to avoid lengthy procedures, as indicated by the JCPC in its ruling, and implement the decision as soon as possible. It also called for the commutation of all death sentences.

Amnesty International had previously written to authorities in Dominica on the case of one prisoner who should also benefit from the JCPC ruling but no reply has been received.

Amnesty International opposes the death penalty without reservation and works to prevent executions from being carried out.

ENDS/

AI INDEX: AMR 23/WU 03/94
17 MARCH 1994

COLOMBIA: HUMAN RIGHTS DEFENDERS RISK THEIR LIVES

Human rights activists are under increasing attack in Colombia, where merely being a member of a human rights organization can be enough to put your life at risk.

While the government of Colombia notionally supports human rights, in reality, those who work to protect human rights on the ground face threats, harassment and in some cases "disappearance" or extrajudicial execution at the hands of the armed forces or their paramilitary allies.

The attacks are apparently one facet of a concerted smear campaign, designed to discredit the growing human rights movement in Colombia - and end opposition to the cycle of human rights violations committed by the armed forces and paramilitaries.

"We are afraid that the situation is getting worse," said Amnesty International, "and that a propaganda war is being waged by some sectors of the armed forces against human rights activists that puts their lives even more at risk."

In one incident alone last year, the lives of about 150 human rights workers, trade unionists and popular leaders were put in danger when military intelligence reportedly released a list of so-called collaborators and guerrilla supporters to a television station. In fact, the list contained the names of many human rights defenders - blacklisted by the military on little or no evidence.

Had the station broadcast the list, the lives of the human rights defenders and others would have been put seriously at risk, and the reputation of their organizations seriously damaged. In the past, similar semi-official lists published in the media, branding individuals as "subversives" have served as "death lists", and been followed by the murder of the individuals named. Fortunately, in this case, the Andean Commission of Jurists took the case to court and got a ban on publication of the material.

Sadly, in many cases, there is no last-minute reprieve for individual human rights defenders. In 1992 alone, three workers for CREDHOS, an independent human rights organization, were shot dead, and others were threatened. In January this year, two naval officers confessed that the murders of all three were among the serious human rights violations committed by a top secret naval intelligence unit to which they belonged. According to their statements, contract killers were brought in to carry out the killings - assassins who received a monthly salary from the Colombian navy.

Lawyers, too have been killed or threatened - when Dr Rafael Barrios Mendivil took up the case of 20 Paez Indians massacred by police agents and civilian gunmen in December 1991, he was the third lawyer to start on the case. The previous two had been shot. He, too, received threats, and eventually left Colombia. "The way we try to deal with it," he said, "is to keep constantly in mind all those who have already died and given their blood for a better future. It's a commitment from which one can't retreat. We have to go forwards."

Amnesty International is calling on the government of Colombia to live up to its own public commitment to human rights and to stop putting the lives of those who fight for human rights at risk.

Said Amnesty International: "The Colombian government says it is tackling human rights violations. In reality, they are allowing the persecution of those who are really working for human rights.

"Until we see that those who use the power of the state to kill in cold blood are brought to justice, there can be little hope for an end to the violence."

ENDS/