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Surviving under siege

Restrictions imposed by Israel on the movement of Palestinians in the Occupied Territories have had a devastating effect on the lives of some three and a half million Palestinians.

“The right to food in the occupied territories has been seriously violated with a number of households suffering from chronic malnutrition.” UN Special Rapporteur on the right to food, Jean Ziegler, 15 July 2003

Unemployment in the Occupied Territories has soared to close to 50 per cent and two thirds of the population are now living below the poverty line, with an increasing number suffering from malnutrition and other health problems.

Closures, blockades, military checkpoints, curfews and a barrage of other restrictions prevent Palestinians from leaving their homes or immediate surrounding areas – effectively confining them to a form of house arrest. When possible at all, even a short journey to a nearby village or town can take hours as Palestinians have to make long detours to avoid checkpoints, blockades and closed military areas. Such journeys are tiring, costly, time-consuming and often dangerous, with travellers at risk of being detained, ill-treated or shot.

In the West Bank, Palestinian vehicles are prohibited from using main roads which are used freely by Israeli settlers. Many secondary roads have also been blocked because they intersect with roads used by Israeli settlers or pass near settlements that have been established in the Occupied Territories in violation of international law.

The fence/wall which Israel is building in the western part of the West Bank cuts off scores of Palestinian villages and towns from the rest of the West Bank and often from their farming land. Some 400km long and up to 100m wide, the barrier is made of a concrete wall, deep trenches, electric fences and patrol roads for tanks. Israeli officials claim that it is intended to prevent Palestinians from entering Israel to carry out suicide bombings or other attacks. However, it is mostly being constructed on Palestinian land deep inside the West Bank in order to isolate the Palestinians from Israeli settlements. The land which is being seized or made inaccessible as a result is among the most fertile in the West Bank with the best water resources. Agriculture constitutes a main source of income for the Palestinians in these areas.

Qalqilya, a town of some 42,000 people, has been completely closed in on all sides, with a single checkpoint in and out. The checkpoint opening times vary and at times it has remained closed for days. Inhabitants of nearby villages who relied on the town for health, education, commerce and other services are now cut off from it. If they can enter at all, it is only by detours which make the journey up to 10 times longer.

In Qafin, a village west of Jenin, in late 2002 Israeli bulldozers tore down most of the olive trees before their owners could harvest the crop to make way for the fence/wall, which surrounds the village on three sides. Sixty per cent of the village’s agricultural land and thousands of olive trees are on the other side. In the past three years the Israeli army has destroyed more than 3,000 Palestinian homes, as well as hundreds of

workshops, factories and public buildings in the West Bank and Gaza Strip. They have bulldozed vast areas of cultivated land, uprooting olive groves and orchards and flattening greenhouses and fields of growing crops. The destruction has damaged the Palestinian economy, but the stringent restrictions on the movement of Palestinians have been the main cause of the severe economic depression and dramatic increase in unemployment and poverty.

Israel has a right and a duty to protect its people from attacks by Palestinian armed groups, including by restricting access to its territory. However, the disproportionate restrictions on movement imposed cannot be justified on security grounds. They discriminate against Palestinians and are often used as a form of collective punishment in reprisal for attacks committed by Palestinian armed groups.

The Israeli government must end the construction or expansion of Israeli settlements and related infrastructure in the Occupied Territories and take measures to evacuate Israeli settlers from the West Bank and Gaza Strip. It must refrain from constructing barriers, fences or other structures inside the West Bank and Gaza Strip which create permanent restrictions on the right to free movement of Palestinians in the Occupied Territories or involve the arbitrary destruction or seizure of their property.

AI also calls on Palestinian armed groups to end their policy of killing Israeli civilians and on the Palestinian Authority to prevent and investigate such attacks and bring those responsible to justice. AI reiterates its call on the Israeli authorities to end the practice of extrajudicial executions and other killings of civilians.

AI continues to call for an international human rights monitoring presence in Israel and the Occupied Territories.

For further information, see *Israel and the Occupied Territories: Surviving under siege – the impact of movement restrictions on the right to work* (MDE 15/064/2003).

[Picture caption] A Palestinian boy rides his bicycle in the shadow of the wall cutting off Palestinian communities from one another © International Solidarity Movement

Justice turned upside down in Afghanistan

“It is impossible for a woman to complain about forced marriage... If she complains the family will kill her.” A woman talking to AI delegates in Afghanistan, May 2003

In many parts of Afghanistan, girls and women are prosecuted for adultery, “running away from home” and for engaging in consensual sex before marriage, all of which are known as *Zina* crimes. The majority of girls and women in detention are accused or convicted of such crimes.

Sometimes families press the courts to prosecute women for *Zina* crimes. In one case a 16-year-old Afghan girl who had “run away” from her 85-year-old husband whom she had been forced to marry at the age of nine was sentenced to two and a half years’ imprisonment for *Zina*. The man who helped her escape from her husband was reportedly released after five months.

In Herat, western Afghanistan, investigations against girls and women are initiated by the police. The police, it is reported, “act like spies”, following women and, in some cases, randomly carrying out forcible virginity tests. In other regions there are no girls or women in detention for such crimes. The cases apparently go unreported to the police; instead, the family deals with the case by killing the girl or woman involved.

Although forcible and under-age marriages are crimes under Afghan law, neither

society at large nor the judicial system treat them as a criminal offence. For example, the grandmother of an eight-year-old girl approached a court, seeking proceedings against a 48-year-old man to whom her granddaughter had been forcibly married. Under Afghan law, the legal age for marriage is 16. The court refused to act.

This is justice turned upside down. Any criminal justice system must protect the rights of all. In Afghanistan, however, women seeking justice are victimized, and the protection of women is not being adequately addressed in plans for the reconstruction of the criminal justice system.

AI is calling for the protection of the rights of women and for their individual dignity to be put at the heart of the reconstruction of the criminal justice system. The international community must make good on its verbal commitment to women's rights, and support the administration in meeting this challenge, however sensitive and difficult. If individual women have the courage to come forward, as they do despite all the barriers, then the government and the international community must build a system which women can trust will protect them.

For further information, see *Afghanistan: "No one listens to us and no one treats us as human beings" – Justice denied to women in Afghanistan* (ASA 11/023/2003) to be published in mid-October.

[Picture caption] Afghan women celebrate a wedding. Forced and under-age marriages are widespread in Afghanistan, even though they are illegal. © AI

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Thousands evicted from their homes in Angola

Emília André Zunza and her four children, the youngest only one year old, spent two weeks living in the open in Benfica, a suburb of the Angolan capital, Luanda, after police removed the zinc sheets which formed their home. Dozens of houses were demolished in Benfica in March and April. The police who stole the zinc offered to sell it back to her, but she could not afford to pay and eventually moved to live with relatives.

Mass evictions in Luanda's suburbs, known as *musseques*, have affected over 5,000 families since July 2001. The evictions were carried out violently and arbitrarily. Most of the families affected were not given adequate alternative accommodation or any other compensation.

Under international human rights law forced evictions are a gross violation of human rights.

The government evicted people from Boavista, in central Luanda, after landslides from a nearby cliff killed several people. Residents failed to persuade the authorities not to evict them until adequate alternative housing was ready. They tried to prevent the evictions by erecting barricades. On 1 July 2001 hundreds of police moved into the area. Some residents threw stones. Police said they fired into the air but they killed two men, and injured several people, including 17-year-old Cândida Quissanga who had been washing dishes outside her house. By September over 4,000 families had been moved to an area over 40 km away and housed in tents.

The *musseques* expanded during Angola's 27-year civil war, which ended in April 2002. Those who needed houses, including many who fled to Luanda because of the war, built them wherever there was a space and with whatever materials they could

find or afford. Most people are without security of tenure because the system for obtaining permission to occupy land is seriously defective. Few musseques have adequate facilities such as water, electricity, sanitation and refuse collection.

Homeless people who had crop gardens in Soba Kapassa, in south Luanda, sought authorization for their plans to build houses. Initially, the authorities commended their project. Later, the residents agreed to give up part of the land for a new hospital to be built. Forty-two houses were demolished. However, instead of a hospital, high-rental houses were built and the authorities announced that further demolitions would take place to build the hospital. In December 2002, without warning, police surrounded the area and government officials demolished 1,125 houses. To date, no hospital has been built.

The Soba Kapassa residents received no compensation at all. About half the Boavista families received houses by mid-2003 while others remain in tents. Some 60 Benfica families received new houses. In addition to losing homes and possessions, some victims of forced eviction lost employment or schooling. Some were killed or injured by stray police bullets and others were beaten.

The psychological effects of these evictions are enduring. The residents' commissions of all three areas continue to seek redress. With the assistance of non-governmental organizations, some victims have sued for compensation but these cases have not yet come to court.

AI is calling on the Angolan government to stop forced evictions and to ensure that housing policies and laws conform to international human rights treaties.

For further information, see *Angola: Forced evictions in Luanda – a call for a human rights-based housing policy* (AFR 12/007/2003) to be published in November.

[Picture caption] Soba Kapassa residents build makeshift shelters after they were forcibly evicted and their homes demolished by the government, 2002 © CUBSK

Weather-beaten tents used to re-house Boavista residents for nearly two years, after the government destroyed their homes, 2003 © Maõs Livres

Where are the 'disappeared' children of El Salvador?

"I can't describe how I felt. I never imagined anything like it, such happiness and emotion. The truth is that it is not easy when someone suddenly tells you, 'This is your family' after having thought of yourself as an orphan for twelve years. All I know is I felt very happy and very emotional. There were my parents and brothers and sisters, they were alive, they were happy. What a Godsend!" Andrea, separated from her family during the armed conflict, was reunited with her family in 1994.

Thousands of girls and boys were victims of the armed conflict in El Salvador between 1980 and 1991. Hundreds were assassinated in massacres committed by the armed forces; others were taken by soldiers after their parents were murdered or after becoming separated from them during army attacks on their villages. Some were put in orphanages, others were given up for adoption either within El Salvador or abroad. Their families have been searching for them ever since.

Carmen and her brother Hernán (right) were captured with their parents in Santa Ana during the armed conflict. They were separated from their parents and taken to children's homes. In 1981 they were given up for adoption in Italy. They eventually met their biological family, accompanied by their adoptive parents, in July 2002.

The government of El Salvador has not assumed its responsibility for investigating the “disappearance” of these children. As part of the peace process at the end of the conflict, a Truth Commission was set up to investigate the violations committed since 1980. Although the Commission did not investigate the cases of “disappeared” children, it did encourage the parents to initiate legal proceedings.

In the face of government indifference, the families of the victims have taken on this difficult task. They formed an association, *Asociación Pro-Búsqueda de Niñas y Niños Desaparecidos (Pro-Búsqueda)*, to try and discover what happened to their children. *Pro-Búsqueda* has documented many cases and has determined the whereabouts of many girls and boys, even in other countries, and has sponsored family reunions. It tried to persuade the government to set up a National Search Committee to trace the children but this initiative was opposed, in particular, by the armed forces who were primarily responsible for the “disappearances” of children during the war.

The Salvadoran authorities have failed to investigate and punish the vast majority of human rights violations committed during the conflict, including the “disappearances” of children. Not only do they refuse to try and trace those children who disappeared but they do not even support the efforts of those who are trying to find them. The pleas of the families must

be answered and the whereabouts of those children who “disappeared” during the conflict determined, particularly since it has been shown that many of them are still alive.

[Picture caption] *“Meeting my family has been so good, because they are a part of my life, they complete my history, and they are very important for my future. There was something lacking in my life. Now I have found the part of my identity that was missing, the part that completes my person, and enables me to understand my future more clearly, and where I am going.”* Carmen Lombardo, on being reunited with her biological family, July 2002 © Private

Serbia and Montenegro : Alleged torture during ‘Operation Sabre’

“I have never seen a man beaten up so badly in my entire life. There is not a single spot on his body without haematomas [bruises].” Lawyer to a victim of police torture

Torture appears to have been widely used during “Operation Sabre”, a crackdown on organized crime launched in the wake of the assassination of Serbian Prime Minister Zoran Đindić on 12 March.

During the operation, which ended on 22 April, more than 10,000 people were arrested, according to the Interior Ministry. Of these, 3,200 were charged with criminal offences. Although many of those released were too scared to talk openly about their ordeal behind bars, apparently because they feared rearrest and further ill-treatment, a number of detailed torture allegations did emerge. Torture methods reported included asphyxiation by taping a bag over the head, beatings, electric shocks and mock executions.

Sandra Petrovic told AI that her husband, Goran Petrovic, and brother, Igor Gajic, were arrested in Kruševac on 14 March and held incommunicado until 13 May. She said that her husband had told her that on 29 March he had been taken to a forest near Cuprija where police officers taped a bag over his head and beat him severely, injuring his spine. She said that her brother told her he had been tortured with electric

shocks after being doused with water, and had also been taken to the forest and beaten.

Marija Jotic told AI that her husband, Zoran Jotic, was arrested at the same time, and that after 15 days in detention had been taken to Niš and allegedly beaten after a bag had been taped over his head. She said that he had also been subjected to mock executions.

Milan Sarajlic, Deputy Public Prosecutor of Serbia, was arrested on 19 March and held incommunicado until 11 April. He was taken to the infamous “29 November” Belgrade police station where, according to AI’s information, many other detainees were tortured before and during “Operation Sabre”. His family’s lawyer said that over an extended period Milan Sarajlic had allegedly been tortured with electric shocks to his temples while a bag was taped over his head. He was allegedly subjected to psychological torture, including threats to kill his daughter and three mock executions. He subsequently needed psychiatric treatment.

Immediately after Prime Minister Zoran Đindić’s assassination, the government declared a state of emergency and introduced emergency legislation, which remained in force until 22 April. AI expressed deep concern that past police use of torture, combined with the lengthy incommunicado detention allowed by the emergency legislation, put at grave risk the thousands of people arrested during “Operation Sabre”.

AI called on the international community to undertake a wide-ranging investigation to ascertain the scale of the violations. It also called on the Serbian authorities to undertake prompt, thorough, independent and impartial investigations into all allegations of torture and ill-treatment, and for those responsible to be held to account.

For further information, see *Serbia and Montenegro: Alleged torture during “Operation Sabre”* (EUR 70/019/2003).

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Worldwide appeals

Viet Nam

Dramatic rise in death sentences

Le Thi Kim Phuong, a cashier at a shipping and trading company, was sentenced to death on 17 January after being found guilty of running a fraudulent investment scheme involving US\$1.6 million. Her sentence was upheld by Ho Chi Minh City People’s Court on 6 June. On 12 August, two women, Hoang Tu Lien and Tran Thi My Ha, were sentenced to death for trafficking US\$90,000 of counterfeit money.

AI is alarmed by the recent dramatic rise in the reported use of the death penalty in Viet Nam, particularly for economic and drugs-related offences. By September this year a total of 72 death sentences and 19 executions had been recorded, double the number for the whole of 2002.

In April 2003 the UN Commission on Human Rights passed a resolution calling on countries “to abolish the death penalty completely and, in the meantime, to establish a moratorium on executions” and “to ensure... that the death penalty is not imposed for non-violent acts such as financial crimes.”

Concern about the use of the death penalty in Viet Nam is compounded by the routine use of trials that do not conform to international standards. Defendants do not have the

right to appoint counsel of their own choice. A lawyer will be assigned to them, but often not until the very last moment before their case is heard. The defence is not allowed to call or question witnesses, and private consultation with counsel may be limited. In many cases all the defence counsel can do is plead for clemency on a defendant's behalf.

Please write, expressing concern at the apparent increase in the use of the death penalty in Viet Nam, in particular for drug and economic offences, and calling for all remaining death sentences to be commuted.

Send appeals to: Prime Minister Phan Van Khai, Office of the Prime Minister, Hoang Hoa Tham, Ha Noi, Viet Nam. Fax: + 844 823 4137.

[Picture caption] Soldiers take aim in groups of five to execute three prisoners, Viet Nam © Private

Brazil

Police killings continue

Four unarmed young men were shot dead in the community of Borel in Rio de Janeiro during an operation carried out by military police on the afternoon of 16 April. They were Carlos Magno de Oliveira Nascimento, a student who was in Rio to visit relatives; Everson Gonçalves Silote, a taxi driver; Thiago da Costa Correia da Silva, a mechanic, and Carlos Alberto da Silva Pereira, a painter and builder. Although the precise circumstances that led to the death of the four men are not clear, all the technical evidence and testimony so far indicate that they were summarily executed.

The mother of Carlos Magno de Oliveira Nascimento visited AI in August for the launch of AI's report to mark the 10th anniversaries of the Candelária and Vigário Geral massacres in which eight street children and 21 shanty town residents, all unarmed, were killed by military police.

AI is extremely concerned at the very high levels of police killings in Rio de Janeiro in 2003 and that recent public statements made by politicians in defence of killing criminals appear to have been taken as a "green light" to kill by members of the city's police forces.

For further information, see *Brazil: Rio de Janeiro 2003 – Candelária and Vigário Geral 10 years on* (AMR 19/015/2003).

Please write to the governor of Rio de Janeiro, asking to be informed of the outcome of any investigations into the killings of Carlos Magno de Oliveira Nascimento, Everson Gonçalves Silote, Thiago da Costa Correia da Silva and Carlos Alberto da Silva Pereira, who all died during a police operation in Borel on 16 April 2003. Express your concern at the high level of killings by police in Rio de Janeiro in 2003, and call for investigations into all police killings in the city.

Send appeals to: Exma. Governadora de Estado do Rio de Janeiro, Sra. Rosangela Barros Assed, Palácio Guanabara, Laranjeiras, 22238-900 - Rio de Janeiro - RJ, Brazil. Fax: + 55 21 2553 6162/6247. E-mail governadora@gabgovernadora.rj.gov.br

[Picture caption] Carlos Magno de Oliveira Nascimento © Private

Tunisia

Journalist imprisoned again Journalist Abdallah Zouari, a former political prisoner and prisoner of conscience, was sentenced on 29 August 2003 to nine months'

imprisonment because he had failed to comply with administrative measures which restrict his freedom of movement.

As a journalist with the now defunct Islamist publication *al-Fajr* (Dawn), Abdallah Zouari was sentenced in 1992 after a grossly unfair military trial to 11 years' imprisonment and an additional five years of so-called administrative control. Former prisoners who have been sentenced to administrative control have to sign in regularly at police stations and have to seek permission from the police if they want to leave their area of residence. AI has documented a pattern of similar arbitrary measures used by the Tunisian authorities against former political prisoners that are both discriminatory and curtail their rights to freedom of expression or movement.

After Abdallah Zouari was released in June 2002, he was ordered by the Ministry of the Interior to live in a remote village near the town of Zarzis, some 210 miles south of his home in Tunis where his family live. When he challenged this decision he was sentenced to eight months' imprisonment for failing to comply with the administrative control measures, after a trial that did not respect his rights to defence. He was released after two months, following a national and international campaign on his behalf. On 17 August 2003 he was arrested again for the same reason. The arrest took place in the company of Tunisian human rights defenders in the town of Ben Guerdane, some 50km from his assigned place of residence, but in the same governorate. Abdallah Zouari has been on hunger strike since his arrest in protest at his detention.

Please write, calling for the immediate and unconditional release of prisoner of conscience Abdallah Zouari and for all discriminatory measures against him to be lifted.

Send appeals to: M. Bechir Tekkari, Ministère de la Justice et des Droits de l'Homme, 31 Av. Bab Benat, 1006 Tunis - La Kasbah, Tunisia.

Fax: + 216 71 568 106. E-mail: mju@ministeres.tn [Picture caption] Abdallah Zouari © Private

Updates

Prisoner sends message to AI

"I am still alive and determined to live as long as I am surrounded by good people like you. God bless you all."

This is a message from Zaki Sayid Zaki 'Abd al-Malak to all those who have appealed on his behalf. He is one of several alleged gay men detained and tried in Egypt after agreeing to meet a contact through the Internet who turned out to be a police officer. He is currently serving three years in prison for "habitual debauchery". While homosexuality is not a criminal offence in Egypt, the charge of "habitual debauchery" is used to criminalize consensual homosexual relations in private. See Worldwide Appeal April 2003.

Please continue to send appeals calling for his release to: His Excellency, President Mohammad Hosni Mubarak, 'Abedine Palace, Cairo, Egypt. Fax: +202 390 1998. E-mail: webmaster@presidency.gov.eg

Releases in Saudi Arabia

Seven men were released from prison in Saudi Arabia after they were granted clemency by the King. Among the seven were William Sampson and Alexander

Mitchell, who were both sentenced to death, and Raf Schyvens, who was sentenced to prison, after convictions in connection with a series of bombings in Riyadh in November 2000. Their “confessions”, shown on television before their trial, are reported to have been the main evidence against them. It is not known why they were suddenly released.

UN approves Human Rights Norms for Businesses

In August the UN Sub-Commission on Human Rights approved the Norms on the Responsibilities of Transnational Corporations and Other Business Enterprises with Regard to Human Rights . The Norms set out in a comprehensive way the key human rights responsibilities of companies and provide a useful checklist for those companies keen to improve their human rights record. AI took part in elaborating and supporting the Norms .

UN World Habitat Day

The UN Human Settlements Program (UN-HABITAT) was founded by the UN General Assembly in 1985. Since then World Habitat Day has been celebrated annually. This year, on 6 October, global observance will be held in Rio de Janeiro, Brazil, with the theme “Water and Sanitation for Cities”. In Africa alone up to 50 per cent of the continent’s urban population do not have adequate water supplies. An estimated 180 million lack adequate sanitation. See www.unhabitat.org

World Day against the Death Penalty

A worldwide day of action against the death penalty is planned for 10 October. The World Coalition against the Death Penalty, of which AI is a member, is calling on people to organize events and discussions around the issue of the death penalty. For more information on what you can do, contact Together against the Death Penalty, tel. +33 1 47 07 61 60 or e-mail: worldday@abolition-ecpm.org

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Algeria: Steps towards change or empty promises?

Mohamed Belkheir, a 42-year-old restaurant manager from the eastern province of Bouira, was arrested on 16 March 2003 by plainclothes security force agents. He was taken in an unmarked car to the Military Security centre of Ben Aknoun in Algiers and tortured for 10 days. He was reportedly beaten, given electric shocks to his fingernails and genitals, and told that his wife would be raped in front of him.

On 25 March Mohamed Belkheir was apparently forced, while being beaten, to sign a statement without being allowed to read it. The next day he appeared before an examining magistrate and was charged with belonging to a “terrorist” group. He remains in detention awaiting trial.

Such cases continue to be reported with disturbing frequency in Algeria, despite government pledges in recent years that it was “turning the page” on a decade of horrendous human rights abuses. Since the cancellation in 1992 of the country’s first multi-party elections, which the Islamic Salvation Front looked set to win, tens of thousands of people have been unlawfully killed by armed groups, the security forces and state-armed militia. Thousands more have “disappeared” after arrest, and hundreds of thousands have suffered other grave abuses of their rights.

Translating the government’s promises of reform into reality is desperately needed. Every month up to 100 people are still being unlawfully killed, with civilians

suffering most from indiscriminate bombings and targeted armed attacks. Girls and women are being abducted and raped by armed groups, and torture in state custody remains widespread.

The authorities have introduced reforms with the stated aim of addressing human rights concerns. Some looked positive, such as changes made to the Criminal Procedure Code in 2001, but these have not been translated into practice. Other seemingly positive moves have been undermined by subsequent government action.

For example, a National Commission of Inquiry into events in Kabylia in 2001 pointed clearly to the authorities' responsibility for the unlawful killing of dozens of unarmed demonstrators. However, the authorities then rejected the findings and failed to prosecute most of those responsible for the killings.

Other measures have simply been negative, such as the January 2000 amnesty of around a thousand armed group members. These measures have prevented the truth emerging about past human rights violations, ensured impunity for the perpetrators, and deprived tens of thousands of victims of their right to redress.

With the legacy of a decade of violence and the ongoing abuses yet to be adequately addressed, many victims and their families feel abandoned and the climate of impunity persists.

Cynicism about the government's intentions has fed unrest among Algeria's predominantly young population, sparking increasing protests. The heavy-handed official response to these protests, combined with growing poverty and other social problems, has fuelled discontent further, creating a potentially explosive situation. Urgent action is needed now by the authorities to show that their promises of reform were not empty words.

For further information, see *Algeria: Steps towards change or empty promises?* (MDE 28/005/2003).

[Picture caption] Youths walk along a wall in Kabylia, Algeria. The graffiti means "No to hogra, repression and injustice... For a better Algeria and greater democracy." Hogra is an Algerian Arabic word denoting contempt and humiliation suffered as a result of the authorities' abuse of power. © Hocine/AFP/Getty Images

No impunity for Charles Taylor

Liberian President Charles Taylor relinquished power and travelled to Nigeria on 11 August, where it is feared he may be granted immunity from prosecution for his suspected role in atrocities during Sierra Leone's 10-year internal armed conflict.

According to an indictment by the Special Court for Sierra Leone, Charles Taylor is responsible for crimes including widespread and systematic killings of civilians, amputations, rape and other forms of sexual violence, the use of child soldiers, abduction and forced labour. He is alleged to have provided active support to the armed opposition Revolutionary United Front (RUF) in order to destabilize Sierra Leone and obtain access to the country's diamond reserves.

To date, the Special Court has indicted 13 individuals under its mandate to prosecute those suspected of being most responsible for the widespread and systematic killings, rapes, mutilations, abductions and use of child combatants which occurred during the conflict. Nine are currently in custody, two have died and two, including Charles Taylor, remain at large.

International law requires that those who are suspected of having committed war crimes, crimes against humanity and other breaches of international law be investigated and, if there is sufficient evidence, prosecuted.

It appears unlikely that Charles Taylor will face either arrest or prosecution while he is in Nigeria. Nigerian President Olusegun Obasanjo has vigorously defended his country's decision to offer Charles Taylor a safe haven, describing it as a "humanitarian action" aimed at securing a peaceful transition of power in Liberia and an end to the country's internal armed conflict. He welcomed Charles Taylor when he arrived in the capital, Abuja, reportedly saying that "we will endeavour to be good hosts while he is in Nigeria".

AI believes that durable peace and reconciliation cannot be built on a foundation of impunity. This was clearly demonstrated in Sierra Leone, where the sweeping amnesty provided by the 1999 peace agreement failed to secure a just and lasting peace, as became apparent within less than a year. Rather than perpetuating what has been a major contributing factor to years of conflict in West Africa – impunity for serious violations of international law – the Nigerian government should set an example to other states by arresting Charles Taylor and publicly affirming its support for the Special Court and its important contribution to justice, reconciliation and sustained peace in Sierra Leone.

The sign of true love?

To many people, a diamond is a symbol of love. To many others it represents conflict, poverty and misery. For years, funds raised from the illicit trade in diamonds from conflict zones have been used to buy weapons to fuel civil wars and human rights abuses in Africa. In January, the Kimberley Process, an international certification system, was introduced to stop the trade in conflict diamonds – a huge leap forward. However, the process currently lacks teeth to ensure that all participating countries and the diamond trade are complying with the scheme. ActionAid, AI and Global Witness believe that, without impartial checks on the implementation of the Kimberley Process, conflict diamonds may still find their way into the legitimate diamond trade.

Take Action

Sign up to our Diamond Pledge and demonstrate support for impartial, regular monitoring of all countries participating in the Kimberley Process. The pledges will be presented next month at the meeting of Kimberley Process participants in South Africa.

Sign up: www.amnesty.org/globalization

The pledge is an initiative of the Cooperative Bank, Action Aid, AI and Global Witness.

[Picture caption to **ICM picture**] AI prepares for the launch of its worldwide campaign "Stop Violence against Women" by raising the issue at its International Council Meeting in Mexico in August. A giant banner with delegates' handprints is displayed, together with a poster demanding justice for the hundreds of women murdered in the Mexican cities of Ciudad Juárez and Chihuahua.

Recent reports

TURKMENISTAN: Clampdown on dissent (EUR 61/015/2003)

YEMEN: The rule of law sidelined in the name of security (MDE 31/006/2003)

GUATEMALA: Legitimacy on the line – Human rights and the 2003 Guatemalan elections (AMR 34/051/2003)