

## AI NEWSLETTER

### October '95 Focus

Human rights defenders are the women and men on the front lines of the struggle to realise the ideal proclaimed in the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, that all people should be free from “fear and want”. Wherever there is persecution and oppression, when human rights are denied or human dignity threatened, when harassed minorities or oppressed peoples are at risk, defenders strive to protect the weak and hold the powerful to account.

Those who stand up for human rights often pay a high price for their courage. Human rights defenders are assassinated for protesting against state violence. They are jailed for demanding prisoners' rights. They “disappear” because they investigate abductions and political killings. They are harassed and have their work curtailed through ostensibly legal channels: when their writing is banned or censored, when official restrictions prevent them from getting resources to support their work and deny them the right to organize, or prevent them from representing victims. Defenders get death threats, their telephones are tapped, their houses are watched, their families are intimidated. The greatest threat comes from governments that have the most to hide; when a government cannot tolerate any form of dissent, those who speak out on human rights may be signing their own death warrant or detention order.

Yet the struggle for human rights involves people in every region and virtually every country in the world. It espouses universal principles, embodied in international human rights instruments. The human rights community is a combination of human rights NGOs and other individuals or associations, including trade unions, popular and religious organizations.

Human rights defenders can be lawyers, journalists, peasant leaders, trade unionists, students, relatives of victims and many others who denounce and investigate violations; support and protect the victims; fight to end impunity; promote human rights education; and mobilize their communities in campaigns to stop the violations. The work of AI and other international human rights organizations would grind to a halt without the support, cooperation and information they provide.

Even governments that appear to have sophisticated mechanisms for human rights protection have not eliminated human rights violations. Defenders in these societies often work with the dispossessed, minorities, and other vulnerable sectors. And by investigating and denouncing violations, defenders keep the state accountable for its actions and help to curb the authoritarian tendencies that can emerge in any government, no matter how open or democratic it appears to be.

In countries suffering the consequences of violent conflict or dictatorship, defenders have a decisive role. When trade unions and political parties have been banned, when parliaments have been dissolved and the free press closed, when dissidents have been murdered, jailed or forced into exile, human rights defenders are often the only force standing between the mass of ordinary people and the unbridled power of the state. No one else would take up the cases of peasants evicted from their land. No one else would try to find out what had happened to the men and women who have “disappeared”. Local activists are sometimes the only source of data about what is really happening in a particular country; they alert international NGOs and the media and denounce human rights violations to the relevant bodies of the United Nations (UN).

The role of human rights defenders is likewise key in countries undergoing major reform or transition. They are among the first to take advantage of small democratic openings, and they help create the space in which the right to peaceful dissent and freedom of expression can be exercised and protected. Because they are mobilized for causes that transcend party political borders, defenders contribute to creating the civil consensus that frequently follows a period of extreme repression. Defenders try to ensure that those responsible for past human rights violations are held to account, but they also constitute a guarantee that justice is not turned into vengeance against the old oppressors. In addition, they try to ensure that new-found freedoms flourish, by continuing to investigate and denounce any new violations of human rights.

### The UN Draft Declaration on Human Rights Defenders

Human rights defenders have often been left to stand alone, surviving through sheer grit and courage. Governments have singularly failed to protect them. For more than 10 years state representatives at the UN Commission on Human Rights have been unable to reach agreement on the text of a basic declaration aimed at recognizing and strengthening the right to defend human rights.

The debate over the Declaration has been characterized by the constant tension between those who are trying to protect defenders, and reinforce the rights necessary for human rights work, and governments that would like to impose a set of limitations and obligations that would make the work practically meaningless.

Most of the rights that make the defence of human rights possible are already guaranteed to all people: the right to freedom of expression, for example, or to freedom of association and peaceful assembly. But given that governments can be inventive in finding ways to restrict the exercise of human rights, and given that existing international instruments contain sufficient restrictions already, the purpose of this Declaration should be to fortify defenders' rights in the face of real and sometimes violent suppression by governments and their agents. Governments, on the other hand, do not need any additional protection from those who are peacefully exercising their fundamental rights and freedoms.

The Working Group responsible for the draft operates by consensus, and progress has been blocked by a few states that have taken advantage of the consensus rule to push for amendments aimed at emphasizing the duties and responsibilities of human rights defenders, rather than their rights and freedoms. The introduction of restrictive proposals, especially from Cuba, China, Syria and Mexico, has accelerated during the last two sessions.

Other states, including the USA, United Kingdom and Greece, have made valuable proposals on many issues but have objected to clauses that would allow third parties to take court actions to protect the human rights of others. This could leave those most in need, like the "disappeared", without protection.

A small group of governments would like to subordinate the activities of defenders to national law, which often falls short of the rights and protections offered by international human rights standards. There have also been attempts to limit outside financial and material support. And although the primary role of human rights defenders is to act on behalf of others, Cuba, supported by China, has proposed a wording that could restrict defenders to defending only their own rights. This could mean, for instance, that a human rights activist might have the right to make a public declaration if he or she has been tortured, but would not have the right to protest against the torture of any other person.

The protection of those who defend and promote human rights is a matter of high priority for AI. Together with other international NGOs we must protect defenders and legitimise human rights activism in countries where it remains virtually impossible today. As a first step, AI is urging the world's governments to agree a strong text for this Declaration and to adopt it as a matter of urgency.

#### Colombia

Those who defend human rights in Colombia learn to expect threats and harassment, and the ever-present danger of being killed or to "disappear". "We all know that defending human rights puts us personally at risk", said human rights lawyer Rafael Barrios, "but we have to take up that challenge". The majority of attacks against human rights workers are attributed to paramilitary groups who take their orders from Colombia's armed forces. The physical attacks and threats are accompanied by an orchestrated smear campaign to discredit and undermine human rights work. There are many brave people in a variety of organizations in Colombia who risk their lives working for human rights.

Alirio de Jesús Pedraza Becerra was one of them; a lawyer and human rights worker who was abducted from a shopping centre in Bogotá on the evening of 4 July 1990. Witnesses say that police agents stood by and did nothing while eight heavily armed men in plain clothes seized Dr Pedraza,

who was resisting and shouting for help. Dr Pedraza worked with the Political Prisoner Solidarity Committee; when he “disappeared” he was representing the relatives of scores of peasants killed when troops opened fire on a protest march, and trade unionists detained and tortured by the army.

In October 1992 two members of the judicial police were arrested on suspicion of involvement in his “disappearance”, but were released without charge in July 1993. One of the police agents had reportedly confessed to the kidnapping and said that Dr Pedraza had been so heavily drugged during interrogation that he suffered a mental breakdown and was left on a street in Barranquilla. Sporadic rumours that he has been seen in the area have forced his family through agonizing cycles of hope and despair, but five years after he “disappeared”, they still don’t know if he is dead or alive.

United States of America

President Bill Clinton told the US public on 15 September 1994 that military intervention was needed in Haiti to protect the human rights of its people. The prime objective of the multinational invasion forces, he declared, would be “stopping brutal atrocities”. US Army Captain Lawrence Rockwood’s mistake was to take his Commander-in-Chief at his word. Rockwood was court-martialled in May, ending a 15-year military career, because he defied orders and entered one of Haiti’s most notorious prisons to try and stop human rights violations he suspected were being committed there.

When he arrived in Port-au-Prince on 23 September, Rockwood already knew about the brutal conditions in Haitian prisons, and feared that political detainees would be in danger from prison authorities loyal to the ousted military leader. After US troops entered the local jail in Les Cayes and discovered some 30 emaciated men detained in a single, stinking cell, Rockwood sought permission to investigate conditions in the prison in Port-au-Prince. It was denied, but he persisted and after nearly a week of refusals, “decided to take further action in order to avoid the continued inexcusable loss of human life”.

Rockwood left his barracks, paid a local Haitian to drive him to the prison, forced his way through the door and informed the Haitian officer in charge, Major San Justice, that he would be conducting an inspection. Rockwood was allowed only brief access to the prison before a US military attaché arrived to remove him. He was detained in the custody of his unit, and returned to the US the following day.

At his court-martial in May, which AI attended, Rockwood was thrown out of the US Army after being convicted on charges including “conduct unbecoming an officer”. He remains convinced, however, that his actions were justified, even required, because failure to act would have made him complicit in ongoing human rights abuses. And he still plans to appeal against his discharge, he says, because “you can’t leave the military in the hands of cynical people who believe that might makes right.”

People’s Republic of CHINA

Although Ding Zilin is adamant that she is not a political activist, police keep surveillance outside her apartment and tap her telephone. Her crime is to be the mother of a victim of the 1989 Tiananmen Square massacre, a mother who insists she has the right to grieve publicly for her son. Ding is also a university professor, but because she has spoken out about the massacre and helps the families of other victims, she is not given teaching assignments and her pay has been cut.

Gathering the names of the victims and finding their families is gruelling work, most are too frightened to speak to her. Foreign reporters who interview her have been interrogated, friends have been warned not to visit her, and she herself has been detained. But her work continues, she says, because “I don’t want those victims to die an anonymous death in unknown circumstances.”

Ding recently signed two important petitions, both drafted in May 1995. One calls on the National People’s Congress to investigate the incidents of 4 June 1989 fairly and independently, and to make the results public. The other appeals to the Chinese authorities for tolerance and greater freedom of expression.

“I wish that there will never be another killing in this much ravaged country, that there will no longer be innocent civilians dying on streets.” This is why she wants “to reveal to the world every story, steeped in tears and blood, that I unearth along the way.”

Ding’s experiences are part of the vast pattern of harassment, intimidation and attempted isolation of those who are openly critical of the authorities in China. They are often subjected to house arrest and short-term detention, or are sentenced to longer periods of “re-education through labour.”

#### CUBA

Human rights monitoring and reporting are severely restricted in Cuba, where the government exerts an extraordinary degree of control over collective voluntary action. Over the last 10 years, several independent human rights groups have tried to register with the Ministry of Justice, but none has been formally recognized. While some of their activities are tolerated, members of these organizations are never sure how far they can go before the authorities react. They face regular harassment and have often been imprisoned just for trying to send reports of alleged human rights violations out of the country.

Sebastián Arcos Bergnes is Vice-President of the Cuban Committee for Human Rights, (CCPDH), an unofficial group formed inside a Cuban prison in 1976. He was arrested in Havana in January 1992, and brought to trial 10 months later on a charge of “enemy propaganda”. Accused of sending abroad “false reports used in campaigns of defamation against Cuba”, he was convicted and received a 56-month prison sentence. He was released unconditionally on 31 May 1995, together with five other political prisoners.

Sebastián Arcos had been imprisoned during the 1980s and became involved with the CCPDH upon release. From then on, he faced frequent harassment, including “acts of repudiation” in which government supporters, organized with the collaboration of the security forces, gathered outside his home and chanted pro-government slogans and shouted abuse at him.

Legal restrictions have made it virtually impossible for human rights groups in Cuba to monitor human rights violations provide human rights education, or disseminate information. Although six political prisoners were released in May, this has not yet been followed by any concrete shift in policy. Until there is a fundamental change in attitude, and reform of the laws relating to freedom of expression, association and assembly, human rights defenders in Cuba will not be able to work without fear of being harassed or jailed.

#### RWANDA

Human rights defenders in Rwanda continue to be at risk of being murdered, beaten, tortured, detained or made to “disappear”. Many have been threatened and harassed, and some of those who survived the 1994 massacres have since been forced to leave the country in fear for their lives.

In early 1995 Pierre-Claver Rwangabo, a provincial governor, denounced prison conditions and arbitrary arrests in his province. A few weeks later his car was ambushed by unidentified men, and he was gunned down, along with his son and chauffeur. No results of any inquiry into his death have been released. Rwangabo was known to be a long-standing political moderate critical of excesses by all parties to the conflict.

*Le Messenger* newspaper had denounced human rights violations in Rwanda for many years. In early 1995 the editor, Edouard Mutsinzi, published an article criticizing current atrocities by government forces. Shortly afterwards he was attacked in a bar by a gang of men wearing military insignia, who beat him nearly to death with machetes and knives. Although Edouard Mutsinzi was left for dead, his wife was able to get him to a hospital and he and his family fled Rwanda as soon as he could be moved. He is still under medical care and has not regained the ability to speak; there are fears that he may have permanent brain damage.

The legitimacy of the defence of human rights in Rwanda is being undermined by the authorities and in particular by the armed forces, who are increasingly strident in their criticism of human rights

defenders both official and independent. The government, while seldom openly critical of human rights organizations, has done little to reprimand the armed forces for attacks and threats against defenders, and none of these incidents has been adequately investigated.

#### SYRIA

In late 1991 the human rights situation in Syria appeared to be improving. More than 2,000 untried political prisoners had been released, suggesting that martial law restrictions in force since 1963 might be relaxing. A small group of people decided that the time had come to talk openly about politics and human rights.

In association with the Committee for the Defence of Democratic Freedoms and Human Rights in Syria (CDF), Lawyer Aktham Nu'aysa and 16 others produced a leaflet protesting about human rights violations in Syria. The leaflet was issued and distributed on International Human Rights Day – 10 December – and all 17 were quickly arrested and held incommunicado. They were charged with offences including publishing false information and receiving money from abroad, and were tried before the Supreme State Security Court in early 1992. Aktham Nu'aysa was apparently unable to walk into the courtroom because he had been so badly tortured. After a manifestly unfair trial, based largely on the evidence of “confessions” extracted under torture, 14 of the defendants were imprisoned for between three and 10 years. Aktham Nu'aysa received a nine-year sentence.

There is no legal way to promote and protect human rights in Syria, so human rights monitoring and campaigning have been forced underground. The CDF, for instance, is able to pass some information to its network of overseas supporters, who publicize the human rights situation in Syria. But it is only the actions of those defenders willing to risk long-term imprisonment, or worse, that keeps the struggle for human rights alive.

#### **The UNDraft Declaration should guarantee the right to defend human rights. As an absolute minimum this should include:**

t the right to defend the rights of other people; t the right to form human rights organizations; t the right to advocate human rights ideas freely and openly; t the right to choose to defend any or all human rights;

t the right to obtain and utilize the necessary resources; t the right to communicate with national and international NGOs, and to have unrestricted access to relevant intergovernmental organizations;

t the right to participate in peaceful actions promoting the observance of human rights; t the right to use the law, and be protected by it, in the defence of human rights.

#### **October' 95 News**

Former Yugoslavia: Thousands of people have “disappeared” or gone “missing” during four years of war in the former Yugoslavia. At AI's biennial conference, held in the Slovenian capital, Ljubljana, in August, delegates from more than 70 countries signed a statement calling on the world's governments to support action to resolve the issue of “disappearances” and “missing persons”\* in the former Yugoslavia.

The lack of will to find the “disappeared” and “missing” in the former Yugoslavia is evident. All sides have ignored relatives' requests for information. In some cases relatives seeking information have themselves been persecuted. The international community has done little to put pressure on the authorities to identify the whereabouts of the “disappeared” and “missing”.

Estimates of how many people have “disappeared” or are “missing” vary, but it may be more than 20,000. A significant proportion of them are civilians who were simply of the wrong nationality, or in the wrong place at the wrong time. As new events take over the focus of the world's governments and the international media, they are in danger of being forgotten.

In May 1992 the Yugoslav National Army (JNA) pulled out of eastern Bosnia, leaving large amounts of weapons in the hands of the local Serb forces. A wave of arrests, detentions and killings followed. Vahda Ibi'eviaë, aged 19, and her 13-year-old brother, Salih, were abducted by armed men in the town of Vlasenica, a few months later, in July. They were taken to a nearby detention camp for 10 days and then by bus, with other Muslim women and children, towards the government-held town of Kladanj. On the way the bus was stopped by armed men. They singled out 13 young women and girls, aged between 14 and 20, and took them away at gunpoint saying: "We'll make some fine little Serb babies with these girls". Vahda Ibi'eviaë was one of them.

Bronka Magdiæ is a refugee from Vukovar, a town in eastern Croatia that fell to the JNA in 1991 after bitter fighting. She lives with her teenage son and daughter in a cramped room on the 11th floor of a hotel in Zagreb. She has not seen her husband Mile Magdiæ, who had worked as a waiter in a café until being called up to take part in the defence of the town, since 14 October 1991. She herself was detained by Serb soldiers. It was from one of them, at the end of November, that she heard the first news of her husband. The soldier had seen him in a group of patients who were taken from the hospital in Vukovar to a nearby farm. She was then told by the International Committee of the Red Cross that her husband had been released in an exchange, but this turned out to be a mistake. All her other attempts to find out what happened to him have been to no avail. She has herself been detained and questioned by Serb soldiers.

Not all those who have "disappeared" in Croatia were non-Serbs. Bogdan Grgiæ, a Serbian lorry driver born in the village of Sadilovac, near Slunj, was taken from his home in Zagreb by Croatian police driving an unmarked car. He was questioned about a Serb attack on Slunj and then released. He appears to have been detained solely because of where he lived. Three weeks later he was abducted from his home by two armed men who said they were police officers but showed no identification. Bogdan Grgiæ subsequently "disappeared". His wife, Sofija, was told at the police station that he had not been taken there.

AI believes that the investigation and clarification of the fate of the "disappeared" and "missing persons" is a vital prerequisite for a process of reconciliation. Whatever the future for the former Yugoslavia, a lasting peace can only be based on justice and respect for human rights.

\*The terms "disappearance" and "missing person" are used respectively according to whether responsibility lies with a government or another party to the conflict. However, the consequences for victims and their families are the same.

#### Spain

Five Spanish law enforcement officers from Ibiza have been found guilty of causing physical and mental injuries to two tourists from Denmark. Nearly four years after the assault, the court sentenced the officers to up to 30 days' imprisonment and finally compensated the tourists. AI had campaigned vigorously to ensure a full inquiry into the incident.

Mohamed Hegazy and Raed Shibli were arrested in September 1991 and taken to a police station after allegedly resisting arrest and injuring the officers. In July 1993 they were acquitted of injuring the officers but found guilty of resisting arrest. In the station they were assaulted and beaten with truncheons while handcuffed and Mohamed Hegazy, in particular, suffered injuries to his arms, buttocks back and legs. One officer admitted in court to beating Mohamed Hegazy with a truncheon for approximately 15 minutes to "calm him down".

Two days later they made a judicial complaint, but the judge stopped the inquiry after six weeks even though neither complainant had been interviewed and despite extensive medical and photographic evidence.

The case received widespread publicity in Spain and as a result the Attorney General personally intervened and requested the reopening of the inquiry. In March 1995 the five officers were finally brought to trial.

AI condemned the failure of the court to conduct a prompt and thorough inquiry into the complaint, the unacceptable delays in the judicial process and the fact that nominal sentences were passed for admitted serious offences.

Guinea: Several hundred prisoners are thought to be detained in Guinea in conditions which fall far short of international standards and which amount to cruel, inhuman and degrading treatment. Detainees sleep naked on the bare floor which, in the majority of cases, is covered in urine and faeces. They are regularly deprived of food and do not have access to medical treatment; visits depend on being able to bribe guards.

AI has received alarming statistics revealing hundreds of deaths in detention in Guinea over the last six years – some as a result of torture. In August 1993 Liman Kourouma died after being tortured while he was held in Conakry Prison, in the capital. An autopsy was carried out at the request of his relatives and the state pathologist recorded the cause of death as a heart attack. However, the examination also revealed evidence of circular marks around his wrists and of first degree burns around the ankles. In Nzérékoré prison, in Haute Guinée, prisoners are kept in leg-irons. One of the detainees, Traoré, was reportedly tortured while in detention and kept in leg-irons. He was arrested with his wife, allegedly for having bought stolen meat.

During the night of 31 December 1994, 16 detainees died in suspicious circumstances, in Conakry Prison. They were among a group of detainees arrested as part of a crack-down on lawlessness.

The State Prosecutor of the Republic has announced that a judicial inquiry has been opened, though he did not state its terms of reference. He also said that a police medical team has taken evidence. However, the progress of the inquiry is not known and its results have not been made public. Some local reports suggest that overcrowding and poor ventilation in the cell may have caused the deaths, but other sources claim to have heard shots in the prison on the night in question. Thirteen of the victims were buried immediately.

The severity of prison conditions appears to be the result of serious negligence by the Guinean authorities. AI is urging them to investigate all deaths in detention and all allegations of torture. The authorities should also ensure that all prisoners are given adequate food and medical treatment. Sanitary conditions and levels of hygiene should also be maintained, and physical exercise provided for.

News in Brief:

†On 3 August 1995 the Mauritian Parliament voted to abolish the death penalty in law. A majority of 52 out of the total 66 Members of Parliament voted for abolition, many sighting AI's work in their speeches. This vote briefly tipped the global scale in favour of abolition, with a majority 98 countries having eliminated capital punishment in law or in practice. However, 9 days later the Gambian government reinstated the death penalty, which had been abolished in April 1993. AI is urging the Armed Forces Provisional Ruling Council, who came to power in a military coup in July 1994, to reconsider their decision.

†The Egyptian armed political group *Gihad* (holy war) called for the death of Dr Nasr Abu Zeid on 21 June 1995. The death threat followed a ruling by a Cairo court of appeal which overturned a previous ruling throwing out the case. The court said that Dr Nasr Abu Zeid must leave his wife because as a "good Muslim" she could not be married to an apostate. This is based on the strict application of Islamic (*Shari'a*) law. AI urges *Gihad* to withdraw its threat immediately and unconditionally.

†AI has called on the Government of Nepal to release 11 Christians sentenced on 21 August to two years' imprisonment for proselytizing. The detainees include a Nepali national, an Indian national and nine Nepali-speaking Bhutanese refugees. The organization believes them to be prisoners of conscience and is calling for their immediate and unconditional release.

## Tunisia

Prisoner of conscience **TOURKIA HAMADI**, a 29-year-old mother of two small children, was arrested and imprisoned on 10 July 1995 after her six-month prison sentence was confirmed on appeal by the court in Gabes, in the south of the country. She had been tried on 5 May and sentenced on charges of belonging to the illegal Islamist party *al-Nahda*, and of assisting her husband to flee Tunisia.

Her husband, a sympathizer of *al-Nahda*, went into hiding in 1991 when mass arrests of *al-Nahda* supporters took place. He fled Tunisia in 1992 to seek political asylum abroad. Since 1992, and especially from October 1994, Tourkia Hamadi was often arrested and questioned about her husband's whereabouts and activities. Relatives, especially wives, of imprisoned or exiled *al-Nahda* sympathizers have been increasingly harassed. Scores of women have been imprisoned on charges of giving financial help to prisoners' families; others have been imprisoned for receiving small sums of money from friends or relatives. Most were also accused of belonging to an unauthorized association (*al-Nahda*) and participating in unauthorized meetings.

Between May and July 1995 at least seven women were imprisoned on such charges. They include prisoner of conscience Aicha Dhaouadi, a secondary schoolteacher from Bizerte and mother of a four-year-old girl, whose husband fled Tunisia in 1992. She was arrested on 19 May 1995 and is currently serving a nine-month prison sentence for supporting an illegal political party and collecting donations.

+*Please write* urging the immediate and unconditional release of Tourkia Hamadi and Aicha Dhaouadi to: M. Sadok Chaâbane/ Ministre de la Justice/ Ministère de la Justice/ Boulevard Bab Benat/ Tunis/ Tunisie.

## Turkey:

**ATILAY AYÇIN**, president of Hava-Is, the Turkish air industry workers union, is currently serving a 20-month sentence at Saray Prison, near Tekirdag, in northeast Turkey. He was arrested in May 1995 and prosecuted under Article 8 of the Anti-Terror Law, for spreading "separatist propaganda" in a speech on "Fundamental Rights and Freedoms". The event, held in September 1991, had been organized by the Turkish Human Rights Association in Istanbul.

Atilay Ayçin has a history of prosecution for dissent. In 1973, while at Air Training School, he spent four months in a military prison for demanding improvements in the rights of non-commissioned officers. In 1981 he was detained on suspicion of being a member of an illegal organization but later acquitted and released.

Since 1991 the Turkish Government has repeatedly promised the international community and the Turkish public that it will reform Article 8, which punishes non-violent expression of separatist opinion with heavy terms of imprisonment. But the proposed reforms are opposed by the President and high-ranking members of the military as well as by some parliamentary deputies of the True Path Party, the senior partner in the ruling coalition.

+*Please write* appealing for the immediate and unconditional release of Atilay Ayçin, and asking that urgent steps be taken to reform Article 8 of the Anti-Terror Law to ensure that Turkish citizens are not imprisoned for peaceful protest and dissent, to: President Süleyman Demirel/ Cumhurbaşkanı/ 06100 Ankara/ Turkey.

## Laos

**THONGSOUK SAYSANGKHI, LATSAMI KHAMPHOU AND FENG SAKCHITTAPHONG** were arrested in October 1990 for their criticism of the Lao Government and for advocating a multi-party democracy. Held without charge until November 1992, they were each sentenced to 14 years' imprisonment after an unfair trial. They were not allowed a defence lawyer. Charges against them included "making preparations to stage a rebellion and conducting propaganda against the Lao People's Democratic Republic". AI considers them to be prisoners of conscience.



Thongsouk Saysangkhi is a former Deputy Minister of Science and Technology who resigned in August 1990 after criticizing the government for “restricting popular liberties and democracy”. Latsami Khamphoui, a former Deputy Minister for Agriculture and Forestry, wrote a letter in January 1990 to the government criticizing the political and economic system. Feng Sakchittaphong is a former official in the Ministry of Justice who, together with Thongsouk and Latsami, wrote an article advocating multi-party democracy. The three also held meetings at which a multi-party political system was advocated.

At last report they were detained in Camp 7, located in a remote area of Houa Phan province. General conditions are reportedly poor, and medical facilities virtually non-existent. All three are in their late fifties and suffer from ill-health. At last report, Thongsouk Saysangkhi was suffering from diabetes, had a cataract and urinary tract problems. Feng Sakchittaphong also was suffering from urinary tract problems and is reportedly an epileptic. Latsami Khamphoui was suffering from chronic hepatitis.

+*Please write* calling for the immediate and unconditional release of Thongsouk Saysangkhi, Latsami Khamphoui and Feng Sakchittaphong, to: Nouthak Phoumsavan/ President,/ Office of the President/ Vientiane/ Lao People’s Democratic Republic (Laos).

**Update: Thich Quang Do**, a prisoner of conscience, featured on this page in the August issue of *Amnesty News*, was sentenced to five years’ imprisonment on 15 August 1995. AI is asking for his immediate and unconditional release.

Nigeria:

The reported sentencing to death of 14 defendants following secret treason trials in Nigeria has provoked an unprecedented level of concern from governments, heads of state and former heads of state from all over the world. AI is concerned that the death sentences could be confirmed and carried out soon, and has called on the Head of State, General Sani Abacha, to commute the sentences. AI also fears that some or all of the defendants may be prisoners of conscience.

The 14 prisoners believed to have been sentenced to death include former deputy head of state, retired Major-General Shehu Musa Yar’Adua. Former head of state, retired General Olusegun Obasanjo, is among 11 prisoners reported to have been given sentences of life imprisonment. At least 15 others are said to have been sentenced to between two and 25 years’ imprisonment.

The Nigerian authorities announced in July 1995 that 40 defendants had been convicted by a Special Military Tribunal for involvement in an alleged coup attempt. Warrants were issued for the arrest of three others convicted *in absentia*. The trials were grossly unfair. The tribunal is an arm of the government rather than a court of law.

Arrests and convictions continued. In July Dr Beko Ransome-Kuti, President of the Campaign for Democracy, was among four human rights activists arrested, apparently because of their criticism of the trials. Reports suggested he might have been tried and sentenced to life imprisonment.

AI considers them to be prisoners of conscience imprisoned for the non-violent expression of their political views and is calling for their immediate and unconditional release.

Honduras:

For the first time in the history of Honduras, military officials have been charged with “disappearances”. Ten army and police officers were charged on 25 July 1995 by the country’s Special Human Rights Prosecutor in connection with the temporary “disappearance” of six people during the 1980s. However, nine of the 10 have not been arrested, and only one of them is in detention on unconnected charges. Those of them who are still on active duty have not been suspended from their posts.

The issue of the “disappeared” resurfaced during the November 1993 presidential elections after many years of silence and prompted the Honduran Human Rights Commissioner to undertake a study of past “disappearances”. The subsequent report was the first official acknowledgement that

government forces were involved in the “systematic, clandestine and organized” practice of “disappearance” against political opponents throughout the 1980s.

For many years AI has been calling on the Government of Honduras to investigate the whereabouts of at least 184 people who “disappeared” during this period and to bring those responsible to justice.

Despite attempts by the administration of President Carlos Roberto Reina to reduce the power of the police and armed forces, AI is concerned that intimidation of human rights defenders and relatives of the “disappeared” could jeopardize these attempts to stamp out impunity. The organization is urging the Honduran Government to stand firm in its resolve to bring the perpetrators of “disappearance” to justice and to protect those who are witnesses of human rights violations.