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**Human rights crises are never inevitable: they can, and must, be prevented**  
**Amnesty International report outlines human rights violations in 144 countries**

Many of the human rights crises we continue to witness throughout the world could be prevented if the international community had human rights at the top of its agenda, Amnesty International said today as it released its annual report.

“None of the human rights tragedies of recent years were unpredictable or unavoidable. The warning signs for the massive crises that struck Burundi, Chechnya, East Timor and Kosovo in 1999 were all there for the world to see and for governments to take action on,” the organization continued.

“Governments purport that armed intervention in human rights crises is motivated by the quest for justice. But if this is the case, how can they allow situations to deteriorate into such unspeakable injustice?” Amnesty International asked, calling on the international community to devote more resources to the prevention of such crises.

“Prevention work requires governments to condemn violations of human rights by their allies as well as their foes. It also means ensuring that economic sanctions do not lead to the violation of socio-economic rights, as in Iraq, where the rights of children deprived of food and basic medical supplies seems to carry no weight on the international agenda,” the organization added.

“It is only through a serious collective commitment to the day to day protection of the human rights of all, wherever they live and whoever they are, that future human rights crises can be prevented.”

However, the picture that emerges from Amnesty International’s annual report for 1999 is one of a world where human rights violations are not confined to areas of crisis but are committed on a daily basis by government officials, armed opposition and paramilitary groups in at least 144 countries.

The report documents extrajudicial executions in 38 countries; judicial executions in 31 countries; prisoners of conscience in at least 61 countries; cases of torture and ill-treatment in 132 countries and “disappearances” in 37 countries. However, Amnesty International believes that the true figures for all these statistics are much higher.

“ While countries as diverse as the USA and China, Saudi Arabia and Colombia, Turkey and Russia continue to disregard and violate human rights, individual governments and the international community turn a blind eye to the plight of the victims,” Amnesty International said.

Throughout the world, thousands of people who have been tortured, unjustly detained, and deprived of their fundamental rights, are seeking justice and redress. They are joined in this quest by the relatives of the “disappeared” and of the victims of extrajudicial executions.

In the majority of cases, their pleas go unheeded. Despite some progress in the struggle to bring perpetrators to justice -- most notably with the efforts in 1999 to bring Augusto Pinochet to trial in Europe -- impunity remains widespread for past and current human rights violations.

## **REGIONAL HIGHLIGHTS**

**AFRICA** -- *Armed conflict continued to ravage Africa in 1999. The world saw some of the worst atrocities as rebel forces in **Sierra Leone** entered Freetown: civilians were killed, people had their arms or legs amputated and abductions were systematic. Despite the peace agreement signed in July 1999, between the government and the armed opposition, these abuses continued. The peace agreement also granted a total amnesty for gross human rights abuses, including war crimes and crimes against humanity. Both government forces and the armed opposition unlawfully killed thousands of civilians in **Burundi, Congo and DRC**. In **Burundi**, the situation reached crisis point as "disappearances" increased and thousands of people continued to be detained without charge or trial, many in harsh conditions.*

*The armed conflicts in the region took their toll as thousands of children under the age of 18 fought in **Sierra Leone, Burundi, Guinea-Bissau, Somalia, Angola and Sudan**, often after having been forcibly recruited. Thousands of people fled to neighbouring countries to escape the fighting in **Sierra Leone, DRC, Congo and Sudan**, while in **Ethiopia and Burundi** thousands were forcibly displaced. In **Togo** human rights defenders were arrested on suspicion of passing information to Amnesty International after the organization published a report detailing extrajudicial executions in that country.*

**AMERICAS** -- Although efforts have been made at national and international level to tackle the legacy of past human rights violations, impunity for past and current abuses remains rampant throughout the continent.

The rate of investigation and punishment of practices such as police brutality (reported in **Brazil, Ecuador, El Salvador, Haiti, Jamaica, Nicaragua, the USA and Venezuela**), torture and ill-treatment of prisoners and detainees (**Belize, Bolivia, Brazil, Ecuador, El Salvador, Nicaragua, Paraguay and Peru**), and the harassment of human rights defenders (**Bolivia, Chile, Colombia, Mexico**) is often far below the acceptable. In **Colombia**, while the population suffers atrocious abuses at the hands of the armed forces, paramilitary groups working with their support or acquiescence, and armed opposition groups, those responsible continue to walk free.

In flagrant violation of international human rights standards the **USA** continued to execute people convicted of crimes they committed under the age of 18 and to deny the right to seek consular assistance to foreign nationals charged with capital offences. A total of 98 people were executed in the USA in 1999.

**ASIA** -- Armed and inter-ethnic conflict claimed the lives of thousands of civilians in the **Asia Pacific** region and facilitated other human rights abuses such as torture, "disappearances" and arbitrary detention.

Despite a well-organized campaign of intimidation by pro-Indonesian militia groups supported by the Indonesian army, **East Timor** voted overwhelmingly for independence from Indonesia in August. Hundreds of people were killed and tens of thousands of people were forced to flee violent attacks.

1999 saw the most serious and wide-ranging crackdown on peaceful dissent and religious freedom in **China** for a decade. Thousands of people were arbitrarily detained by police and some were sentenced to long prison terms after unfair trials or sent to forced labour camps. Systemic torture and ill-treatment continued. Around 18,000 executions were recorded in China in the 1990s, a figure probably far below the real number.

In **Pakistan**, the government continued to demonstrate a bias against women by failing to investigate serious human rights abuses, including the "honour killings" of several hundred girls and women and the trafficking of women.

**EUROPE** -- As war spawned human rights atrocities in Chechnya and the international community struggled to establish lasting peace in Kosovo, in the rest of Europe torture and ill-treatment by police -- often racially motivated -- continued to be the most widely reported human rights abuse.

The Russian military offensive in **Chechnya** and the intensified campaign of intimidation against Chechens in Moscow and elsewhere displayed a blatant disregard for international human rights law and humanitarian law. In **Kosovo**, the scale of abuses against the ethnic Albanian population peaked during the NATO air-strikes in June. Human rights abuses against Serbs, Roma and other ethnic minorities continued even after the installation of a large peace-keeping force and a UN-led administration.

Refugees and asylum seekers suffered human rights violations. Cruel and dangerous methods of restraint, including the deliberate blocking of breathing passages, were the subject of investigation in **Switzerland** and **Belgium** following deaths by asphyxiation during forcible deportation. Roma also fell prey to prejudice, with particular problems identified in **Bulgaria, Greece, Hungary, Romania, Slovakia** and **Kosovo**.

The ratification of the **Second Optional Protocol to the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights** -- a treaty providing for the abolition of the death penalty -- by **Azerbaijan, Bulgaria, Cyprus, Georgia, Slovakia, Turkmenistan** and the **UK** was a positive development.

**MIDDLE EAST** -- During 1999 widespread and serious human rights violations including large scale executions, routine use of torture and unfair trials took place throughout much of the Middle East and north Africa.

Torture, inhuman or degrading treatment continued in Saudi Arabia. Amnesty international recorded 103 executions during the year although the real figure may well have been higher. Criminal judicial procedures fell far short of international standards and political and religious freedom continued to be curtailed in Saudi Arabia. A number of people were arrested during the year on political and religious grounds, some were held without charge or trial and without access to their families or lawyers for prolonged periods. The International community stood silent towards these violations and the secrecy surrounding the human rights situation in Saudi Arabia.

In Israel most members of the security forces enjoyed impunity for human rights violations. Torture continued to be officially permitted and systematically used until September when the High Court of Justice ruled that such methods of interrogation were unlawful. However, reports of Palestinians being beaten and otherwise ill treated at checkpoints continued to be received. At least 39 Palestinian houses in the west bank were demolished, the policy of houses demolitions discriminated against Palestinians and appeared to be aimed at stopping Palestinian development in parts of the west bank under the Israeli control. Torture, arbitrary detention, death in custody and extrajudicial

executions were reported in different countries in the Middle East. Scores of political prisoners, including possible prisoners of conscience were arrested, despite the fact that others being held for long periods without charge or trial, were released.

Torture and ill-treatment in **Egypt** remained systematic, and resulted in the death of some detainees. The imposition of the death penalty and executions remained widespread in several countries, including **Iraq, Iran, Libya and Yemen**. In **Iran** hundreds were arrested following student demonstrations in July against increased restrictions on freedom of expression, detention of journalists and closure of newspapers.

In **Tunisia**, human rights defenders and their relatives were increasingly targeted and freedom of expression further restricted. Impunity was a major concern in several countries. In **Algeria**, where in addition to security forces, impunity was also increasingly granted to armed groups. In **Algeria, Lebanon and Morocco**, government promises to shed light on thousands of "disappearances" brought no concrete results.

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To obtain a copy of the report, or to arrange an interview in English, Arabic, French or Spanish, please contact the Amnesty International press office in London, on +44 020 7413 5566/5564/5562/ 5810/5831/5729.