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Middle East and North Africa can end legacy of human rights abuse and corruption

Respect for human rights and a strong commitment to transparency and eradicating corruption are fundamental to building sustainable, accountable and inclusive governments in the Middle East and North Africa. The time to act is now, said Amnesty International and Transparency International in a joint statement issued today.

Amnesty International and Transparency International together urge leaders – particularly in Tunisia and Egypt – to deliver on their promises of swift and substantive reform, and to reaffirm their commitment to human rights and the need to fight corruption. The two organisations also reiterated their calls for an end to violence against civilians in Libya.

People from all sectors of society in the region have taken to the streets to demand an end to repression and corruption. Many protests were led by young people, angered by the corruption and greed of political elites, calling for change. They faced violence by state security forces simply for making such demands.

In response, many governments in the region are realising they must take action to demonstrate respect for human rights and bring an end to corruption. These actions should include:

- Repealing laws that limit freedom of expression, association and assembly, which have been used to stifle dissent and limit political participation
- Establishing processes for consultation and access to information that allow human rights activists and all other civil society actors to participate fully and without fear in the building of systems and institutions of government
- Ensuring women’s equality by allowing their full participation in all these processes, and repealing discriminatory laws and policies where they exist
- Building a truly independent justice system
- Reining in the security forces and making them accountable

Huguette Labelle, Chair of Transparency International, said: “As new laws are written, and old laws are revised or discarded, the region’s leaders must live up to the highest standards demanded by their people: zero tolerance for corruption and respect for individual rights and freedoms.”

Salil Shetty, Secretary General of Amnesty International, said that restoring and guaranteeing human rights must be an immediate priority for new governments. He warned that basic principles of human rights should never be sacrificed for short-term economic and political fixes. “This is an historic opportunity to break with years of oppression by taking urgent, concrete measures to uphold national and international human rights obligations,” said Shetty.

The International Covenants on Civil and Political Rights and Economic, Social and Cultural Rights are key human rights treaties. The International Covenant on Civil

and Political Rights guarantees freedom of expression, association and assembly, freedom from torture and arbitrary detention, and fair trials. In the region, only Oman, Saudi Arabia, Qatar and the United Arab Emirates are not parties to this treaty. The International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights requires governments to use national resources to ensure the rights to food, water, housing and health, amongst others; meeting this legal obligation is fundamentally incompatible with corruption. The UN Convention against Corruption provides a clear framework of laws and actions required to prevent and punish abuse of power for private gain. It addresses the cross-border nature of corruption, includes provisions on the return of ill-gotten assets, and it mandates the participation of citizens and civil society organizations in accountability processes. In the region, only Oman, Syria and Saudi Arabia have not ratified it.

Amnesty International and Transparency International urged the international community, including all companies doing business in the Middle East and North Africa, to support local reform efforts, and to actively promote human rights and an end to the looting of national resources and income. Human rights and the fight against corruption go hand-in-hand. Already some former leading Egyptian and Tunisian officials are facing prosecution or investigation for corruption. Amnesty International and Transparency International urge that those found to have committed human rights violations should also be held to account.

All governments should ensure that they freeze the assets of Colonel al-Gaddafi, his family and associates in line with UN Security Council Resolution 1970 of 26 February 2011.

As the protesters throughout the region have said clearly, we, Amnesty International and Transparency International are also saying, “enough.” No one should live with the insecurity perpetrated by unaccountable governments that rule with the threat of violence, and political elites who plunder their countries’ resources and deprive their people of their human rights.

Decisive action by the region’s leaders is vital, if the gains of the recent weeks are to be translated into lasting reform.