

Human Rights are everybody's business

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'We see businesses as having human rights responsibilities, both within their own operations and in the influence they may have on governments and others.'

Irene Khan, Secretary General, Amnesty International

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Amnesty International is a worldwide campaigning movement that works to promote internationally recognized human rights.

Amnesty International's vision is of a world in which every person enjoys all of the human rights enshrined in the Universal Declaration of Human Rights and other international human rights standards. Our mission is to undertake research and action focused on preventing and ending grave abuses of the rights to physical and mental integrity, freedom of conscience and expression, and freedom from discrimination, within the context of our work to promote all human rights.

Amnesty International has more than a million members and supporters in over 140 countries and territories. Amnesty International is impartial and independent of any government, political persuasion or religious creed. Our work is financed largely by subscriptions and donations from our worldwide membership.

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[photo caption]

Cover photo: Women from the Ijaw community protest at a pumping station in the Niger Delta, Nigeria, to press for more jobs and amenities for their community from a US oil company, 17 July 2002. © AP

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Companies and human rights

The Universal Declaration of Human Rights calls upon every individual and every organ of society – which includes companies and business operations in general – to protect and promote human rights. Companies have a duty to protect the interests, health and safety, and human rights of employees and their dependents, of business partners, associates and sub-contractors, and of the communities in which they operate.

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Amnesty International calls on companies to make respect for human rights an integral component of their business dealings with other companies, partners, associates, subsidiaries, suppliers and government officials.

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Amnesty International holds governments primarily responsible for human rights but also calls companies to account for the impact of their activities on human rights. New international guidelines and standards encourage companies to adopt policies and practices that conform to international human rights standards.

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Amnesty International calls on companies to uphold the rights of employees to freedom of expression, peaceful assembly and association, including the right to form independent trade unions, to hold peaceful protests and to strike — without fear of imprisonment, detention or torture.

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Companies' influence on governments goes beyond the economic and commercial sphere. Some have taken a lead in establishing company codes of conduct and committing themselves to international human rights standards.

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Amnesty International calls on companies to ensure that their security arrangements do not lead to human rights violations and are consistent with international standards for law enforcement. They should scrutinize the human rights record of the forces that provide their security and ensure that they have training in human rights.

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[photo caption]

Workers march in protest in the northeastern Chinese city of Liaoyang, Liaoning province, demanding the release of a jailed labour leader, 19 March 2002. Workers' representatives were arrested and charged with "illegal assembly and demonstration" for organizing protests involving up to 30,000 workers. Labour disputes and protests have risen dramatically in China in recent years. Workers have demonstrated against mass lay-offs, corrupt management, low or missing wages and illegal working conditions. Attempts to establish independent trade unions since the late 1980s have been short-lived and brutally repressed.

© AFP/Frederic J Brown

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Colombia — systematic violation of human rights

Amnesty International has urged national and international companies in Colombia to ensure that the human rights of people legitimately protesting against their operations are not abused. Foreign investors should publicly condemn human rights violations and urge the Colombian authorities to tackle the systematic violation of human rights that characterizes the counter-insurgency strategy of the security forces. Companies are under a moral obligation to ensure that, however unwittingly, they do not condone or facilitate human rights violations.

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Do human rights standards apply to companies?

States are expected to implement the international human rights treaties that they ratify through their domestic laws, and companies are governed by those laws. Other non-treaty international standards do not have the force of law but set out minimum standards of good practice to which all companies should adhere.

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Amnesty International calls on companies to ensure that their operations do not have a negative impact on the human rights of the communities in which they operate.

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All companies have a direct responsibility to respect human rights in their own operations. Their employees and other people with whom they work are entitled to rights such as freedom from discrimination, the right to life and security, freedom from slavery, freedom of association, including the right to form trade unions, and fair working conditions.

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Saudi Arabia — discrimination against women migrant workers

In Saudi Arabia, women migrant workers, particularly from poorer countries in the Middle East, Africa and Asia, are especially vulnerable to abuse at the hands of their employers, on whom they are completely dependent. Many are not paid – some are beaten or raped. Amnesty International campaigns against systematic discrimination and the failure of the criminal justice system in Saudi Arabia to protect women from human rights abuses.

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[photo caption]

An illegal diamond miner emerges from a makeshift mine-shaft at a state diamond concession, Democratic Republic of the Congo, October 2001. © AI

[end caption]

International human rights standards set out the human rights that companies should respect and take into account in their operations all over the world. These standards include:

- The Universal Declaration of Human Rights. This universally recognized set of principles is the cornerstone of the United Nations (UN) human rights system. It identifies human rights – civil, cultural, economic, political and social – that are vital to everyone’s well-being and development. It establishes that they are an international responsibility and are universal and indivisible.
- The eight Fundamental Conventions of the International Labour Organisation – the UN agency which promotes workers’ rights. These legally binding international treaties form an integral part of a framework to protect workers and provide a decent working environment for both employees and employers.

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Amnesty International calls on companies to ensure that their activities are consistent with international human rights standards. This means that companies must protect the human rights of their employees, their dependants and the communities in which they operate.

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- The Declaration on Fundamental Principles and Rights at Work of the International Labour Organisation applies to governments, trades unions and companies. It codifies international standards recognizing trade union rights and prohibits forced labour, child labour and discrimination.

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Democratic Republic of the Congo — killings in the diamond fields

In the government-controlled region of Mbuji-Mayi in the Democratic Republic of the Congo (DRC), dozens of suspected illegal diamond miners are shot dead every year by state security guards. Most of the miners are unarmed and the guards fire on them without warning. The company running the diamond concessions and the local authorities close their eyes to these extrajudicial executions. Local human rights defenders and journalists who denounce what is

happening are harassed and detained. Amnesty International is calling on governments, the diamond industry and consumers to bring pressure to bear on the DRC authorities to end these abuses.

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- The UN Basic Principles on the Use of Force and Firearms by Law Enforcement Officials define the strictly limited circumstances under which security personnel may use force and firearms, and limit the use of force to the minimum necessary.
- Amnesty International's Human Rights Principles for Companies, based on international standards, were developed to assist companies in developing their role in situations where human rights are at risk.

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Amnesty International calls on companies to ensure that their policies and practices prevent discrimination based on ethnic origin, sex, colour, language, national or social origin, economic status, birth or other status, or on religious, political or other conscientiously held beliefs.

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Amnesty International calls on companies to ensure that their operations are free from slavery and other similar practices, such as forced labour and hazardous and exploitative forms of child labour, including bonded labour and commercial sexual exploitation. In countries where such practices are prevalent, companies should ensure that they do not benefit from them and should publicly oppose them.

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[photo caption]

Boy working at a brick kiln, Kasur, Pakistan. Bonded labourers in Pakistan work seven days a week, sometimes in chains. Some are held in private prisons controlled by landlords, local police or officials. The police and local courts fail to stop this unlawful practice. © BLLF

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[photo caption]

“Not one murder more, not one woman less”, says an Amnesty International poster on the killings of migrant workers in the city of Ciudad Juárez, Mexico. Since 1993 more than 200 women have been murdered or are missing, feared dead. In most cases, no one has been brought to justice. Most of the women were from poor and marginalized communities, attracted by jobs in maquilas — factories set up by US and other foreign companies to exploit cheap labour and favourable tariffs in the regions near the US border. Neither the authorities nor the companies have provided adequate protection for vulnerable migrant workers. © AI

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Globalization — the need for a regulatory framework

After a decade of growth in foreign direct investment and liberalization of the international trade in goods and services, the absence of a regulatory framework has been a target of international protests. Pockets of prosperity amid widespread and growing poverty heighten the sense of economic deprivation and of social exclusion and injustice.

Under voluntary standards such as the UN Global Compact, some companies have made commitments to respect human rights within their sphere of influence. The Global

Reporting Initiative assists companies to report the social, environmental and labour impact of their activities in a standardized form.

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Amnesty International calls on companies to report periodically on their human rights performance according to internationally accepted criteria.

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However, voluntary standards are no substitute for binding international agreements. Amnesty International urges the adoption by the full UN Commission on Human Rights of the Human Rights Principles and Responsibilities for Transnational Corporations and Other Business Enterprises, developed at the UN Sub-Commission for Protection and Promotion of Human Rights.

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Amnesty International calls on companies to adopt an explicit company policy on human rights that includes public support for the Universal Declaration of Human Rights. The policy should be implemented at all levels of the company and should apply to subsidiaries, associates, partners and sub-contractors.

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Amnesty International believes that companies should produce their own codes of conduct that would enable them to evaluate the impact of their operations and policies in a human rights framework. Codes of conduct would remind companies of international human rights standards agreed by their governments, as well as the expectations on companies. They should be translated into operating policies and made applicable to subsidiaries, partners and associate companies.

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Amnesty International calls on companies to take steps, above all, to avoid complicity in human rights abuses

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What you can do

Join Amnesty International and become part of a worldwide movement campaigning for an end to human rights violations. Help us to make a difference.

- Make a donation to support Amnesty International's work.
- Tell your friends, family, neighbours and co-workers about your commitment to human rights.

For further details, please write to the address in the box below, if there is one.

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AI Index: POL 34/008/2002