

AMNESTY INTERNATIONAL PRESS RELEASE

AI Index: AMR 29/008/2003 (Public)
News Service No: 273
3 December 2003

Embargoed until 3 December 2003 0600 GMT

El Salvador: Legalising discrimination

Today in an open letter to the President of El Salvador, Francisco Guillermo Flores Perez, and other top officials, Amnesty International called for a review of the legality and constitutionality of the "Anti-Maras" Act that penalises teenage gangs.

"This law legalises discrimination in Salvadorean society", said Amnesty International, referring to several controversial features of the Act.

The Anti Maras Act focuses on the appearance and social background of people, directly refers to tattoos and identity symbols typically used by these groups, and makes frequent mention of minors, who are tried as adults by the Courts.

"It is ironic that legislation designed to curb high levels of crime contravenes international human rights standards to which the country is a signatory, and the national Constitution itself", said Amnesty International.

At the same time, the law has triggered a series of attacks by members of the government on members of the judiciary who refuse to apply it, because they feel that it is unconstitutional and violates international treaties which El Salvador has signed.

"These attacks damage the professional standing of members of the judiciary and could place them in danger of physical harm", said Amnesty International.

In its letter Amnesty International also urges the Salvadorean authorities to study and treat the underlying causes of high crime levels – including the problem of youth crime. It says that only once they have studied these should they go on to draw up and implement regulations and policies to achieve real long-term solutions in accordance with the standards of the rule of law.

"Any government programme that seriously seeks to solve the problem of violence should focus on the economic, social and educational problems; lack of opportunities and the availability of arms to youth groups, Amnesty International underlined.

"Until these crucial subjects are dealt with, initiatives such as the Mano Dura (Get Tough) Plan and entirely repressive legislation such as the Anti Maras Act, will only serve to squander resources and boost the prison population of already over-saturated jails", Amnesty International concluded.

Public Document

For more information please call Amnesty International's press office in London, UK, on +44 20 7413 5566
Amnesty International, 1 Easton St., London WC1X 0DW. web: <http://www.amnesty.org>

For latest human rights news view <http://news.amnesty.org>