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Algeria The Commission on Human Rights Must Act Now

A joint statement by Amnesty International, the International Federation of Human Rights,
Human Rights Watch and Reporters Sans Frontières

The annual meeting of the Commission on Human Rights is now more than half over, yet astoundingly there has been no movement whatsoever to address the human rights situation in Algeria, one of the gravest human rights crisis facing the international community today. It is imperative that member states of the Commission take an immediate initiative to table a resolution that establishes a mechanism to investigate the situation in Algeria. It is completely unacceptable that the Commission would allow Algeria's rejection of any human rights inquiry as the last word. This would not only reward Algeria's intransigence, but would signal other states that such declarations of impunity carry no price at all from the paramount international human rights body.

Many of the 53 member states have expressed the view that it would not be credible if this session of the Commission were to end without a strong expression of concern about the human rights situation in Algeria and a public Algerian government commitment to allow fact-finding missions by the U.N. Special Rapporteur on extrajudicial, summary or arbitrary executions and by the Special Rapporteur on torture. In fact, Algeria has slammed these doors shut rather than opened them in the slightest. Many governments have indicated that they would feel compelled to vote for a resolution on Algeria on these issues should one be tabled. But no government has been willing to put one forward. Our four organizations call on member governments of the Commission, and especially the E.U. meeting today in Brussels, to instruct their delegations to table, as a matter of greatest urgency, such a resolution.

Algerian Foreign Minister Ahmad Attaf, in his March 18 address to the Commission and in subsequent statements, actually reneged on Algeria's earlier agreement in principle, expressed to the E.U. troika delegation, officials of other governments, the U.N. High Commissioner for Human Rights and the Special Rapporteurs themselves, to finalize at the Commission dates and details for visits of the Special Rapporteurs. By all accounts, Foreign Minister Attaf issued the same refusal in his meetings with the High Commissioner for Human Rights Mary Robinson, Foreign Minister Klaus Kinkel of Germany, and other officials. U.S. Assistant Secretary of State Martin Indyk, meeting in Algiers on March 14 with Attaf and other high officials in an attempt to persuade the government to cooperate with the Commission's mechanisms and with international human rights organizations, also came away empty-handed.

The U.S. then began consultations with other governments regarding Algeria. U.S. Ambassador Bill Richardson, addressing the Commission on March 25, spoke of "the paramount need for a credible, independent verification of the facts,". The U.S. and its European allies have hoped that such remarks and the beginning of consultations would persuade Algeria to comply with the request to allow a visit by the Special Rapporteurs and international NGOs. In our view, this is not at all adequate to address Algeria's appalling human rights situation. Even this, however, the

Algerian government has adamantly rebuffed. As for the other regional groups, they have remained conspicuously silent, and appear content to leave any initiative to the Western group.

In Algeria, meanwhile, the massacres and other killings of civilians, the torture in security forces centres, the forced disappearances and other serious crimes continue without respite and without any serious or credible Algerian government investigation into the facts or indictment of those responsible. As we argued in our joint submission to the Commission, it is within the power of the Commission to address the continuing violence and human rights abuses in Algeria, with or without the cooperation of the Algerian government. The Commission should, as a first step, appoint a Special Rapporteur on the human rights situation in Algeria. Given the scale and duration of the crisis, this is crucial to ensure a measure of on-going international scrutiny of the situation, to express to the people of Algeria the concern of the international community, and to provide information and recommendations that will enable the government and the international community to address the crisis effectively.

There is still time for the Commission to act, but this process must begin immediately. Algeria today is flaunting its impunity before the Commission. In the face of this intransigent posture, member states of the European Union must no longer hide behind the facade of the E.U. unity - and the opposition mainly of France to any Commission initiative on Algeria - to justify silence in Geneva this week, even while high-level corporate and banking delegations travel to Algiers to discuss new opportunities for business profit. Nor can the E.U., the United States and Canada pretend any longer that the remaining shreds of "political dialogue" with the Algerian authorities will cover their inaction at the Commission. To avoid taking a decision to put forward a resolution on Algeria at the Commission on Human Rights is to reveal the complete subordination of human rights policy to every other possible consideration.

To all the governments that are presently members of the Commission, and to other governments attending as observers and participating in regional policy groupings, including today's E.U. meeting in Brussels, we therefore ask you to meet your responsibility to act on the human rights crisis in Algeria. Any other course risks the credibility of the Commission and the human rights mechanisms of the United Nations.

On Wednesday, April 15, in Geneva, Pierre Sané, Secretary General of Amnesty International, Patrick Baudouin, President of the International Federation of Human Rights, Robert Ménard, Executive Director of Reporters sans Frontières and Joanna Weschler, United Nations representative of Human Rights Watch, will hold a joint briefing for delegates and journalists in Room XXIII of the Palais des Nations.

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