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**ALGERIANS: FAILED BY THEIR GOVERNMENT
AND BY THE INTERNATIONAL COMMUNITY**

**STATEMENT BY PIERRE SANÉ, SECRETARY GENERAL
AMNESTY INTERNATIONAL**

**NEW YORK, 18 NOVEMBER 1997
(Check against delivery)**

Today Amnesty International is taking its lobbying campaign on Algeria to New York because we want to challenge United Nations member states to stop averting their gaze from the Algerian tragedy and start taking real action to bring some relief to the Algerian people.

Let me start by giving you some basic facts:

- some 80,000 people have been killed since the outbreak of the conflict in 1992
- this year alone Algerians have been slain in their thousands with unspeakable brutality -- decapitated, mutilated and burned alive in their homes
- many of the massacres have been within shouting distance of army barracks, yet cries for help have gone unanswered, the killers allowed to walk away unscathed
- torture, "disappearances" and extrajudicial executions have become part of the daily reality of Algerian life
- and what action has the international community taken? None

This last point is as disturbing as the grizzly catalogue of abuses.

- Few member states of the UN have spoken out on the situation in Algeria, and those which have done so have made mostly bland and generalized statements of concern
- The UN Commission on Human Rights has failed to address the plight of the victims in Algeria
- The Organization of African Unity has failed to respond to the human rights situation in Algeria
- The European Union has hidden passively behind a self-created wall of ignorance, claiming they don't have full information on the abuses in Algeria yet taking no action to instigate or support investigations
- No expert mechanism of the UN has visited Algeria in the six years of horror

In the mean time, children and women have continued to die, and that is why Amnesty International added its voice to calls for action made by other non-governmental organizations.

Last month, we joined with the International Federation of Human Rights, Human Rights Watch and Reporters sans frontières to call for a Special Session of the Commission on Human Rights and the establishment of an international investigation to get the facts, determine who is responsible for abuses, and make recommendations.

We have been lobbying governments around the world, sent letters to foreign ministries and issued an open letter to all governments two weeks ago.

We're here today to call again on governments to take action, including those who have to date responded with what I can only describe as insupportable excuses.

- they have argued that the Algerian authorities will never allow a human rights investigation into the country
- they have hidden behind each other by claiming that there is no political will for a Special Session of the Commission on Human Rights
- They argue that such a Special Session is not needed because the Third Committee of the UN is currently meeting here in New York, but this committee has so far taken no initiative on the Algerian crisis

All this against the backdrop of recent statements by the UN Secretary General, the UN High Commissioner for Human Rights, UNICEF and UNHCR condemning the massacres of civilians and other human rights abuses in Algeria. These words are welcome, but start to sound hollow when they are followed only by the hedging of governments and not by action.

We can think of no other country where human rights violations are so extreme, where civilians have been targeted to such an extent, and yet where there has not even been international scrutiny let alone action by the international community.

In other countries with similar levels of torture, "disappearances" or political killings at least experts have visited or monitors have been sent or political resolutions have been passed.

Governments cannot claim to be ignorant of the violations, especially the massacres of the past year.

Most of these massacres have taken place in areas around the capital Algiers, in the most militarized region of the country. As I said earlier, some of the villages where the massacres were committed -- sometimes for hours on end -- were close to army barracks and security forces posts. Yet the army and security forces did not intervene, neither to stop the massacres nor to arrest the killers - who were able to leave undisturbed on each occasion.

Let me give you some recent examples:

- on the night of 11 July in Bou-Ismaïl, west of Algiers, a family of 12 were massacred
- on the night of 28 August in Rais, south of Algiers, up to 300 people, many of them women and children, even small babies, were killed and more than 100 injured
- on the night of 5 September in Sidi Youssef, on the outskirts of Algiers, more than 60 people were massacred
- and on the night of 22 September in Bentalha, south of Algiers, more than 200 men women and children were massacred
- and in the past few weeks, hundreds more have been killed in a series of massacres of a dozen or more people at a time

The recent massacres have taken place against a backdrop of increasingly widespread human rights abuses and violence over the past six years.

Security forces have been responsible for extrajudicial executions, "disappearances", and torture.

Armed groups which call themselves “Islamic groups” have killed, abducted and tortured civilians.

And militias armed by the state have been responsible for deliberate and arbitrary killings.

The government’s attempt to lay the blame for all killings squarely on the shoulders of “terrorist groups” and wash its hands of any civilian deaths is a disgrace.

It is true that armed groups have killed many civilians and committed terrible atrocities, but it is also true that security forces who should be protecting the population have been responsible for many killings of civilians.

The authorities have also been arming civilian militias to join in the “anti-terrorist fight”. Thousands of these groups are now operating outside the law effectively as vigilantes, many headed by relatives of people killed by armed groups who want to seek revenge.

In doing this, the government has not only abdicated its responsibility for law and order but also drawn civilians ever more into the centre of a conflict in which they are increasingly the victims.

This escalation of violence against the population and erosion of law and order belies the statements by the authorities that the security situation is “under control” and that “terrorism is residual”.

The security situation is certainly under control in the south, the north-east and north-west of the country, in areas dotted with oil and gas refineries and outlets, where foreign oil companies are indeed well protected.

But in others parts of Algeria, especially in poor areas where oil and money do not flow, the civilian population, increasingly impoverished, is denied the protection of the state and lives in fear of massacres and attacks.

There is also little protection for the population in the areas where the massacres have taken place, areas where large numbers had voted for the now banned Islamic Salvation Front in the 1990 and 1991 elections. It is in these areas that armed “Islamist” groups have had most support after the beginning of the conflict, even though many people may have supported these groups out of fear of retaliation.

This is also the area with the richest agricultural land, where the privatization of land is an issue of intense and controversial debate among fears that much of this rich land may end up being grabbed by powerful interest groups.

There have been allegations that some of the massacres were perpetrated with the aim of punishing the local population for having supported or failed to denounce armed groups, and to force villagers and peasants to flee and abandon the land.

Accepting the argument of the Algerian authorities that the massacre of tens of thousands of civilians is an “internal affair”

may be an easy option for those who do not - for whatever reason - want to know the truth and who do not want to stop the killings.

But human rights are not just an "internal affair" or an issue of national sovereignty especially when citizens are being slaughtered en masse week after week and when disregard for human rights has become the rule rather than the exception. Algeria cannot be above international scrutiny. Why should it be?

The need to investigate and reveal the truth is the first step to finding solutions to this human rights tragedy. For this reason, we are calling for the establishment of an international investigation to ascertain the facts, examine allegations of responsibility and make recommendations in respect of the massacres and other abuses by all sides in Algeria.

Such an investigation has to be provided with broad powers, adequate staff and resources. It should collect evidence, statements, including testimony from victims, witnesses and responsible officials, to discover the truth.

The tragedy of the situation in Algeria is now universally recognized, and it is time for action to stop the massive human rights violations and to ensure the protection of the civilian population.

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