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NEWS SERVICE ITEMS: EXTERNAL - COMMONWEALTH HEADS OF GOVERNMENT MEETING (embargoed for 18 October 1993), RUSSIA

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COMMONWEALTH: AI RENEWS CALL TO HEADS OF GOVERNMENT TO DO MORE TO PROMOTE AND PROTECT HUMAN RIGHTS

On the eve of the Commonwealth Heads of Government Meeting (CHOGM) in Limassol, Cyprus (21 to 25 October 1993), Amnesty International is calling again for the Commonwealth to take effective steps to promote and protect human rights in its member states.

Every two years the 50 heads of government of the Commonwealth meet to discuss matters of common interest, including human rights. Before the 1991 CHOGM in Harare, Zimbabwe, Amnesty International sent a proposal with a nine-point program of action for strengthening the promotion and protection of human rights by the Commonwealth to all 50 heads of government.

The 1991 CHOGM adopted a number of these recommendations, but did not provide for increased funding for human rights or recommend safeguards for those working to protect human rights. The CHOGM adopted a Declaration pledging the Commonwealth and its member states "to work with renewed vigour" to protect and promote "fundamental human rights". The Declaration was an advance in that the Commonwealth member states expressly pledged to protect as well as promote human rights. However, it did not include any concrete steps to do so.

In a separate communiqué the heads of government called on the Commonwealth Secretariat "to give greater impetus to its current activities to promote human rights", recognized the role that non-governmental organizations could play in this area and called on all member countries which had not yet done so to ratify the International Covenants on Civil and Political Rights and Economic, Social and Cultural Rights.

Said Amnesty International: "The Commonwealth has taken a number of positive steps in the past two years to promote human rights within Amnesty International's mandate. For example, the Commonwealth Observer Mission to South Africa (COMSA) has been widely praised for its effectiveness in monitoring and mediating in the political conflict. The Human Rights Unit has conducted human rights training programs and has begun helping to establish national human rights institutions. The Legal and Constitutional Division has been making human rights jurisprudence widely available through the Commonwealth Law Bulletin, soon to be supplemented by a public database, and sponsors workshops for judges on the practical application of international human rights.

"But much remains to be done - that is why we are renewing our appeal to take actions as a matter of priority." Amnesty International has again submitted a list of recommendations to the CHOGM, asking them to:

Ratify and implement human rights treaties. Since the 1991 CHOGM only three more states have ratified the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights and only three more the International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights. Indeed, as of 1 September 1993 less than half of the 50 members of the Commonwealth had become parties to these two human rights treaties, only 14 to the (First) Optional Protocol, only two to the Second Optional Protocol and only 11 to the United Nations Convention against Torture and Other Cruel, Inhuman or Degrading Treatment or Punishment. Amnesty International recommends that those states which have not yet done so should ratify these treaties as soon as possible and urges all parties to those treaties to comply with their reporting requirements and to implement them in national law and practice.

Incorporate human rights considerations into all the work of the Commonwealth. The Commonwealth should ensure that a human rights component is integrated into all programs where appropriate. It should also ensure that the Human Rights Unit has adequate resources to fulfill its mandate effectively and request it to develop clear criteria and procedures which the Unit could use to evaluate

the impact on human rights of all Commonwealth assistance programs before such assistance is granted. Non-governmental organizations should be invited to participate in this process.

Strengthen the role of non-governmental organizations. The Commonwealth Secretariat has taken a welcome first step by accrediting non-governmental Commonwealth organizations to the CHOGM in Cyprus, but it has not extended accreditation to other international non-governmental organizations such as Amnesty International. Amnesty International hopes that the Commonwealth will extend accreditation to all interested national and international non-governmental organizations. It also renews its call on the Commonwealth before the last CHOGM to "take all appropriate steps to ensure that non-governmental organizations and individuals working to defend and protect human rights are able to carry out their activities in Commonwealth member states without intimidation or interference and with adequate protection wherever necessary". The Commonwealth should speak out forcefully whenever these organizations or individuals are threatened.

Improve human rights training programs. In the past, the Commonwealth did not involve local non-governmental organizations and training institutions in the development and running of training programs, did not incorporate follow-up components into these programs and did not publish sufficient information about them to enable their value to be publicly assessed. As the Commonwealth develops its new training manuals for foreign ministry officials, law enforcement officials, prison officers and the judiciary, Amnesty International hopes that it will take these steps to ensure that the training programs are effective.

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RUSSIA: AI FEARS POLITICAL REFUGEES ENDANGERED BY FORCIBLE RETURN TO HOME STATES FROM MOSCOW

Amnesty International has learned that people without Moscow residence permits are being deported from the city, following identity checks during the state of emergency currently in force. Amnesty International is gravely concerned that people being deported reportedly include political refugees from republics of the former Soviet Union who face serious violations of their human rights should they be returned to their home republic or region.

Many of the people who have been expelled from Moscow have reportedly been sent back to the location listed in their identity papers as their place of permanent residence. Some of these people are reportedly being sent to places where their lives will be at risk, or where they face other serious human rights abuses. For example, deportees are said to include Georgians who have been forcibly returned to Sukhumi - recently the scene of armed conflict. Amnesty International has received allegations that non-combatant Georgian civilians have been extrajudicially executed in Sukhumi since the city fell to Abkhazian forces.

Refugees are also reported to have been returned to Tadjikistan, a country where Amnesty International has documented a wide range of very serious human rights abuses, including extrajudicial executions and "disappearances" of people, solely on the basis of their regional origin, and the detention of prisoners of conscience and political prisoners, some of whom have been tortured.

Amnesty International has also received allegations about incidents in Moscow in which forces of the Interior Ministry have verbally abused and beaten people detained for identity checks, and have extorted money or stolen personal possessions from them. In one incident on the night of 7-8 October around a dozen members of the OMON special forces are alleged to have entered an apartment occupied by eight refugees from Tadjikistan. The OMON troops beat the occupants and ordered them at gunpoint to lie on the floor, then ransacked the apartment and stole money and clothing. Other people have alleged that police officers and OMON troops have demanded large sums of money from them in order not to deport them for being without residence permits.

Amnesty International is extremely concerned about all these allegations and has written to the Russian authorities, urging them to investigate all the claims thoroughly. The human rights organization has also asked the Russian government to ensure that no asylum-seekers or political refugees are forcibly returned to their home republic if they might be at risk of human rights violations there.

Amnesty International has also asked the authorities to look at ways of speeding up the processing of asylum cases in Moscow. People who are political refugees in Moscow have complained that they are unable to apply for official registration as a resident of the city because they are still waiting for a decision about applications made for political asylum to the Russian Federal Migration Service. While they remain unofficial residents of Moscow, they continue to be at risk of forcible repatriation.

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