

Human rights forgotten in USA's 'war on terrorism'

Bisher Al-Rawi and Jamil Al-Banna were arrested on 8 November 2002 with two other men on suspicion of links with al-Qa'ida when they arrived in Banjul, Gambia. The two men, one an Iraqi and one a Jordanian with refugee status, had travelled from the UK where they were resident.

Questioning was initially conducted by Gambian security agents, but was quickly taken over by US agents. At least one of the men was alleged to have been threatened by the US agents that if he did not cooperate he would be handed over to the Gambian police who would rape and torture him. The two men were held incommunicado in undisclosed locations in Banjul for about two months, before being transferred to the US airbase in Bagram, Afghanistan, in January 2003.

The detention, interrogation and transfer of Bisher Al-Rawi and Jamil Al-Banna flouted international human rights law. They were denied access to defence counsel or the courts to challenge the legality of their detention and subsequent transfer into US custody. Gambian and US officials refused to confirm their whereabouts or the reason for their detention.

Since the attacks in the USA on 11 September 2001, more than 3,000 people who are alleged to be al-Qa'ida "operatives and associates" have been arrested in over 100 countries, according to the Director of the US Central Intelligence Agency (CIA). The USA is likely to have had some involvement in many of those detentions.

The USA continues to hold detainees in Afghanistan. In an article in December 2002, *The Washington Post* alleged that certain detainees in the US airbase in Bagram were subject to CIA "stress and duress" techniques, such as hooding, blindfolding, forced prolonged standing or kneeling, 24-hour lighting and sleep deprivation. The exact number of detainees at the base is not known but it is thought to be between 40 and 60. All are held without charge and with no opportunity to challenge the basis of their detention.

Over the past 18 months, AI has repeatedly raised with the US government allegations that it has transferred suspects for interrogation in third countries with less stringent safeguards against torture or ill-treatment than exist in the USA. Countries mentioned in this regard include Jordan and Egypt.

More than 600 detainees remain held without charge or trial, and without access to lawyers or the courts, in the US naval base in Guantánamo Bay in Cuba. Some have been held there for over a year. They are held in small cells, where they face the prospect of indefinite detention. Some may yet be brought to trial before military commissions, executive bodies with the power to hand down death sentences against which there would be no right of appeal to a court of law.

AI's repeated attempts to gain access to the US airbase in Bagram have either been denied or ignored. Similarly, requests to visit the US naval base in Guantánamo Bay have gone unanswered.

Governments have a duty to protect the safety of the public, to investigate crime and to bring those responsible to justice. Where the threats or crimes in question cross national boundaries, governments need to cooperate to this end. However, as AI has repeatedly reminded the US Government since 11 September 2001, human rights must be at the heart of the search for justice. The USA has failed to meet this obligation. In September 2002, the former head of the CIA's Counterterrorist Center referred to "operational flexibility" in the agency's response to the 11 September attacks on the USA. All he would say about this "highly classified area" was that there was "before 9/11 and after 9/11", and that "after 9/11 the gloves come off." AI is concerned that the USA, as it pursues its so-called "war on terrorism", is undermining crucial human rights standards.

Guns and greed in Solomon Islands

Serious human rights violations have marred a Solomon Islands police operation against militant leader and former policeman Harold Keke. In 1998, his Guadalcanal Liberation Front (GLF) helped initiate civil war, terrorizing civilians on Guadalcanal, the country's main island. Since September 2002, police Special Constables (SCs) and civilian volunteers armed by police have joined regular police officers in operations against the GLF and its supporters.

Since then SCs and civilian volunteers have tortured suspected GLF supporters, burned down their homes and killed their livestock. Suspects have been beaten in custody. Since December 2002, SCs and volunteers have tortured wives of suspected GLF supporters, severely beating some with heated wire and "bush cane". Villagers who told journalists about the beating have themselves been threatened by people involved in the police operation.

Such violations present a challenge for the new Police Commissioner from the UK, appointed in January 2003, who has pledged to prioritize stability, defence of human rights and professional policing. While a few senior police officers openly opposed a foreign commissioner, the majority seem eager to end a legacy of unpunished abuses of power which have often benefited people in positions of influence.

From 1998 to 2000, economic inequality fuelled ethnic conflict on Guadalcanal. A two-year civil war displaced some 30,000 people, paralysed the regular police and devastated the economy and health and school systems.

Following a peace accord in 2000, the government allowed an estimated 2,000 militants to keep their guns, escape justice and enlist as SCs. In parts of the country, SCs have cooperated with police in restoring law and order. Others soon abused their status and became notorious for their role in widespread extortion and human rights violations. By February 2003, at least 1,100 SCs, nicknamed "Special Criminals", remained on the police payroll.

Under a UN-assisted peace program, most SCs are offered incentives to demobilize. Among them are people responsible for torture, rape, extortion, intimidation and deliberate and arbitrary killings. Their guns and influence have so far prevented the regular police from ensuring they are brought to justice. Successful demobilization will therefore be crucial for restoring law and order, and for protecting civilians from human rights abuses.

Former Police Commissioner Frederick Soaki was assassinated in February while helping to prepare a demobilization workshop. A masked gunman shot him dead as he sat in a hotel lobby opposite Auki police station in the company of his demobilization team. He was a highly respected member of the newly-founded National Peace Council which was set up to foster disarmament and mediate local disputes.

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Jamaican justice system on trial: killing of 'Braeton Seven'

In the early hours of 14 March 2000, police officers arrived outside a small house in Braeton, Jamaica. Minutes later, seven young men inside were dead.

Police claimed that the youths, aged between 15 and 20, had opened fire on officers after being told to surrender.

Witnesses, however, claimed that police had executed the seven as they begged for their lives.

From the start, the official investigation into the deaths was inadequate, with vital forensic evidence destroyed. Despite the likelihood that the seven were dead – suffering a total of 46 gun shot wounds, including 15 to the head – officers moved the bodies to a nearby hospital before their positions could be documented by forensic specialists. Within a few hours the police allowed relatives and community members to enter the house.

An inquest ordered by the Director of Public Prosecutions (DPP) started in January 2002. After 37 weeks its jury found, in a 6-4 verdict, that no one was criminally responsible for the deaths.

AI sent a member of the Bar Association of England and Wales as an observer to monitor the proceedings. He concluded that the fact-finding mechanism was crucially flawed. At various times, the coroner leading the proceedings made statements showing clear bias. Officers who admitted firing shots in the house and whose bullets were found in the bodies were allowed not to testify on the grounds that they had the right not to incriminate themselves. The court was so ill-prepared that a national human rights organization had to provide a TV and video to show tapes of the crime scene. Relying on lawyers working for free, victims' relatives could not afford to pay for forensic experts. (AI provided a pathologist who observed the autopsies and testified at the coroner's inquiry). By contrast, the police were represented by two adequately resourced attorneys and the state was represented by the Deputy DPP.

Crucial questions remain unanswered. How did several of the dead come to have multiple head wounds, when the first shot would have caused them to fall down immediately? Why was a bullet from one officer's gun found in one of the bodies when that officer claimed not to have fired his weapon? Why did the bodies have so many bullet wounds when the house had relatively few bullet holes in it?

The deaths continue a long line of Jamaica Constabulary Force killings occurring in suspicious circumstances. In 2002, 133 people were shot dead by police officers, many in alleged extrajudicial executions.

Despite this, trials of police officers charged with offences relating to human rights abuses are rare. To AI's knowledge, the last time officers were convicted was in 1998, when two policemen were found guilty of murder. AI can only conclude that the Jamaican authorities lack the political will to hold the police force accountable to the law.

Please write, expressing concern that the killing of the Braeton Seven may have amounted to extrajudicial executions. Call for the investigation to be resumed and completed in a thorough, impartial and accurate manner; and that any officers implicated in the killings are held to account for their actions. Send appeals to: The Honourable Dr Peter Phillips, Minister of National Security, Ministry of National Security, Mutual Life Building, North Tower, 2 Oxford Road, Kingston 5, Jamaica.

See AI's report: *Jamaica: The killing of the Braeton Seven: Jamaican justice system on trial* (AMR 38/001/2003) published on 13 March.

Freedom of expression restricted in Tunisia

Zouheir Yahiaoui, aged 34, was arrested in Ben Arous in the outskirts of Tunis on 4 June 2002. Using a false name, *Ettounsi* (The Tunisian), he was an operator of the website TUNEZINE, a forum for exchange of information on Tunisia. He was reportedly brought to the Ministry of Interior and tortured by a group of security officers before being remanded in custody. He said that he was beaten while suspended from the ceiling with his hands tied. Despite requests by his lawyers he apparently had no medical examination. No investigation is known to have been carried out into his allegations of torture.

Despite these and other breaches in the legal proceedings, Zouheir Yahiaoui was convicted and sentenced to two years and four months' imprisonment (reduced to two years' imprisonment on appeal in July 2002) on charges of spreading false information and misuse of telecommunication lines. AI considers him a prisoner of conscience.

Zouheir Yahiaoui is currently imprisoned at the Borj al-Amri prison where he, like hundreds of political prisoners and prisoners of conscience, suffers harsh prison conditions. On at least one occasion, he has reportedly been ill-treated by prison guards. Like many other prisoners, he is denied adequate medical care.

Zouheir Yahiaoui's case is one of many examples of freedom of expression being severely restricted by the authorities in Tunisia. Sophisticated means of controlling communications are increasingly used. Fax and telephone lines are believed to be routinely tapped and are regularly cut or diverted; Internet

access is arbitrarily blocked and e-mail to selected accounts never arrives. Regular mail may be opened and torn. Changes in the law in Tunisia over recent years have brought some positive steps towards compliance with international human rights standards. However, there is a gap between law and practice. The security forces continue to violate legal guarantees deliberately, a situation apparently for the most part tolerated by the highest state authorities. There are frequent cases of arbitrary arrests without warrant; falsifications of the dates of arrest; detentions which exceed the lawful maximum period; detainees denied their right to call for a medical examination or to have their family informed of the detention. Torture continues to be reported in a general climate of impunity.

When Arab states' ministers met in Tunis in January to agree a strategy to combat "terrorism", they left the way open to broaden provisions of the 1998 Arab Convention on the Suppression of Terrorism dealing with the media to include the Internet. In particular it was agreed that printing or publishing anything which might promote or encourage "terrorism" should be a criminally punishable offence.

In the absence of a clear legal definition of terms like "terrorism", "violence", terrorist "purposes" and "attacks", there is a risk that the Convention will be further abused to punish people for non-violent acts, including those related to freedom of expression and human rights work.

AI is concerned that the measures relating to the media agreed at the meeting would seriously infringe freedom of expression already eroded by censorship, routine intimidation and persecution of journalists, publishers and proprietors of independent media groups. Measures to prevent "terrorism" can only be effective if they also respect and protect human rights.

Please send appeals for the immediate and unconditional release of Zouheir Yahiaoui to the Minister of Justice and Human Rights, M. Bechir Tekkari, 31 Av. Bab Benat, 1006 Tunis - La Kasbah, Tunisia. Fax: + 216 71 568 106, e-mail: mju@ministeres.tn

A bleak future for Zimbabwe

One year after the presidential elections in March 2002, the situation in Zimbabwe is worse than ever. The economic crisis in the country has deepened, with inflation reaching close to 150 per cent in October 2002.

The fast-track land resettlement program has contributed to a serious decline in agricultural productivity in the commercial farming sector, Zimbabwe's main source of income. The economic collapse of the country has aggravated the food crisis and at least 6.7 million people are at risk of starvation. There have been widespread reports that government officials and supporters have denied food aid distributed through government channels to people perceived to be supporters of the opposition Movement for Democracy (MDC).

Human rights activists in Zimbabwe are increasingly under threat. Those who continue to expose human rights violations are at risk of arrest and torture. Those who defend an independent judiciary or the right to peacefully express opinions have themselves become the victims of intimidation or unfair legal process. Officials and supporters of the MDC, teachers, students, journalists and non-governmental organizations (NGOs) are increasingly subjected to harassment, arbitrary arrest and torture by members of the Zimbabwe Police Force. The beginning of 2003 saw a new wave of arrests and torture of human rights activists.

In January the Amani Trust, a human rights organization which works with victims of torture, received threats to fire-bomb its offices. The organization closed its offices in late 2002.

On 11 January Elias Mudzuri, the mayor of Harare and a member of the MDC, was arrested together with 21 councillors and municipal workers for allegedly addressing a political meeting without clearance from the relevant authorities. Elias Mudzuri and the 21 other detainees were released without charge two days later.

Paul Madzore, an MDC Member of Parliament (MP), was arrested and allegedly beaten by police on 12 January. He was charged with public violence and contravening the Public Order and Security Act. He was subsequently released on bail.

On 15 January Job Sikhala, MDC MP for St Mary's in Harare, Gabriel Shumba, a lawyer with the

Zimbabwe Human Rights NGO Forum, Charles Mutama, Bishop Shumba and Taurai Magaya were arrested by the police. Medical evidence presented in court indicated that the five men had been beaten on the soles of their feet and that Job Sikhala and Gabriel Shumba had been tortured with electricity.

On 20 January Pauline Mpariwa, MDC MP for Mufakose, Harare, was arrested and held for two days before being released without charge.

This recent wave of arrests appear to be part of a strategy by the authorities to undermine and stifle public protest while the world's attention is focused on Zimbabwe as it hosts cricket World Cup matches.

Many human rights activists feel that the future is bleak, and are calling upon the international community, in particular the governments of southern Africa, to publicly condemn the deteriorating human rights situation in Zimbabwe.

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Worldwide appeals

Turkey

Tortured in detention

“They dragged me inside by my hair ... From now on I was blindfolded ... they stripped me naked and started to hang me up. They brought my shoulders to a beam and hoisted me up ... They held me under cold pressurized water ... They did not let me sleep ... For days they subjected me to countless hanging sessions. They made an unsuccessful attempt to rape me...” Gülderem Baran

Twenty-two-year-old Gülderem Baran was detained at the Anti-terror branch of Police Headquarters in Istanbul in August 1995. She was allegedly beaten, hosed naked with cold pressurized water, kept blindfolded and deprived of sleep, sexually molested and repeatedly hung by the arms which left her with a loss of movement in both arms.

A trial of five policemen in connection with Gülderem Baran's allegations of torture was dropped. Despite admissions of using force and beatings from a chief commissioner and a police officer during the course of their trial, the case was discontinued on 12 March 2002. Many of the court sessions were adjourned by the court at the request of lawyers for the police officers. Their reasons included the non-attendance of the defendants and their failure to provide photographs of themselves for identification purposes. One of the officers on trial for torture was not suspended from his duties while proceedings against him were pending, and was subsequently promoted to chief superintendent. AI is concerned that lengthy delays in court proceedings may contribute to impunity for perpetrators of torture – including sexual torture – and other human rights violations.

AI has documented numerous cases of women being sexually tortured while in police and gendarmerie detention in Turkey. Their search for justice is difficult and numerous factors combine to allow such cases to remain uninvestigated and the perpetrators to go unpunished.

Lawyers representing women who have been sexually assaulted in custody in Turkey have been subjected to official, media and peer persecution. This makes it even more difficult for survivors of sexual violence to obtain justice, and contributes to the silence surrounding sexual crimes.

Please write, expressing concern at allegations that Gülderem Baran was tortured by police officers and calling for an independent investigation into these allegations and for those responsible to be brought to justice.

Send appeals to: Minister of Justice, Mr Cemil Çiçek, Ministry of Justice, Adalet Bakanligi, 06659 Ankara, Turkey. Fax +90 312 418 5667, e-mail: cemilcicek@adalet.gov.tr

Liberia

Human rights activists under attack

Human rights activists in Liberia have been repeatedly subjected to arbitrary arrest and detention, torture and ill-treatment as the government attempts to stifle criticism of its appalling human rights record.

A prominent human rights activist, Aloysius Toe, is now facing trial on a trumped-up charge of treason. He is Executive Director of the Movement for the Defence of Human Rights, a leading member of the National Human Rights Center of Liberia and also Secretary General of the Liberia Coalition of Human Rights Defenders, which groups some 20 human rights organizations. AI believes that the charge is completely unfounded and that he has been specifically targeted because of his persistent and legitimate work in defence of human rights.

He was arrested and charged on 4 November 2002 after emerging from a week in hiding. On 29 October, his home had been raided by police and his wife, Vivian Toe, was briefly detained. Other human rights activists – Dempster Brown, Blamoh Sieh and Peter Nicholson – were also arrested and detained for several days.

The “writ of arrest” against Aloysius Toe referred to a document by the armed opposition group Liberians United for Reconciliation and Democracy (LURD), entitled “LURD’s Blueprint for Liberia”, which he was alleged to have received by e-mail. This document has been widely diffused, including on the Internet, and sent to many individuals by e-mail both in Liberia and abroad. No other evidence to substantiate the charge of treason has been produced.

The arrest of Aloysius Toe followed the launch of a campaign by the Liberia Coalition of Human Rights Defenders to secure the release of fellow human rights activists Hassan Bility, a journalist on The Analyst newspaper, and Sheikh K.M. Sackor, Executive Director of Humanist Watch, who had been held incommunicado and tortured since their arrests in June and July 2002. Although the government announced on 28 October 2002 that they were to be released, Hassan Bility remained held until 7 December 2002 and Sheikh Sackor is still detained.

Please write, calling for the immediate and unconditional release of prisoner of conscience Aloysius Toe and for an end to arbitrary arrest and detention of those legitimately and lawfully defending human rights in Liberia.

Send appeals to: President Charles Taylor, Executive Mansion, Capitol Hill, Monrovia, Liberia.

Saudi Arabia

Arrested for religious beliefs

Kamil 'Abbas al-Ahmad was arrested at his home in Safwa city in the Eastern province on 13 September 2001. He was taken to Safwa police station where he was reportedly deprived of sleep for three days. In November 2001 he was transferred to the General Investigation headquarters in Dammam and is currently detained there without access to lawyers. AI is concerned that he may be at risk of torture or ill-treatment and that he may be a prisoner of conscience.

Kamil 'Abbas al-Ahmad is a member of the Shi'a religious community in Saudi Arabia, known for its criticism of the Saudi Arabian authorities. AI believes that he may be detained solely for the non-violent expression of his political or Shi'a religious beliefs.

Shi'a Muslims constitute about seven to 10 per cent of the population of Saudi Arabia and are often the victims of political, social and cultural discrimination based solely on their religious beliefs. The expression of religious belief by a Shi'a Muslim can be interpreted as an act of political dissent leading to arrest, detention and torture.

Kamil 'Abbas al-Ahmad was previously arrested with his brother for his religious beliefs in July 1996. His brother was released on 1 November 1997 and Kamil 'Abbas al-Ahmad was not released until 5 May 1999. During this period he was allegedly tortured.

Please write, calling for the immediate and unconditional release of Kamil 'Abbas al-Ahmad if he is not charged with a recognizably criminal offence and given a prompt and fair trial.

Send appeals to: His Royal Highness, Prince Naif bin 'Abdul-'Aziz, Minister of the Interior, Ministry of the Interior, PO Box 2933, Airport Road, Riyadh 11134, Saudi Arabia. Fax: +966 1 403 1185

Updates

Taiwan death penalty acquittals

Liu Bing-lang, Su Chien-ho and Chuang Lin-hsun (pictured left to right) were acquitted of murder on 13 January 2003.

The Taiwan High Court ruled that they be released immediately. The acquittal of the three, known as the “Hsichih Trio”, was the end of an ordeal which began in August 1991 when, aged 18, they were arrested on charges of robbery, rape and murder. They were sentenced to death in February 1992 and the sentences were upheld by the Supreme Court in February 1995.

The three always maintained that they were innocent, had been tortured in custody and forced to sign confessions. Following their trial, the Prosecutor General publicly expressed doubts about the conviction and launched three special appeals on their behalf which were rejected by the Supreme Court. However, thanks to the dedication of their lawyer, appeals by AI, academics, lawyers, human rights activists and government officials, the three were eventually granted a retrial which started in November 2000.

See Worldwide Appeals May 1999.

Senior religious leader freed in Iran

Prisoner of conscience Grand Ayatollah Hossein Ali Montazeri, a religious leader who is 80 years old and in poor health, was freed from house arrest on 29 January.

His detention began in March 1989, after his criticism of the mass executions of political prisoners the previous year led to his dismissal as the successor to Grand Ayatollah Khomeini, the then Leader of the Islamic Republic of Iran.

In November 1997, following a speech in which he criticized the assumption of supreme powers by the Leader of Iran, Ayatollah Sayed 'Ali Khamenei, he was arrested and held incommunicado for almost two months. He was then returned to house arrest in Qom, a city south of Tehran, and prevented from teaching at his religious school.

Grand Ayatollah Hossein Ali Montazeri was detained because of his non-violent opposition to government policies. Despite his detention, he remained influential and continued to call for tolerance and democracy. It has been reported that his release is conditional on his silence on political matters. However, on release he was reported to have said, “Just as I did during my detention, I will continue to talk about issues and to act. It is my religious duty.”

Family members and supporters of Grand Ayatollah Hossein Ali Montazeri have also been persecuted. In 1988, 240 of his supporters were arrested and at least 12 of them were executed. During May and June 1998, following protests calling for the lifting of all restrictions imposed on him, there were renewed reports of widespread arrests of his supporters and relatives.

See Worldwide Appeal October 1998.

Togo prisoner of conscience released

Claude Améganvi was released on 8 February at the end of his sentence. He thanks all those who wrote on his behalf and expressed their solidarity and support during his six months in detention. His sister, Isabelle Améganvi, who forwarded letters from all over the world to him, is also very grateful.

See Worldwide Appeal October 2002.

Thirty years of Urgent Actions

Urgent Actions (UAs), issued by AI, call on members to appeal immediately on behalf of people in imminent danger of serious human rights violations.

The first UA was written on 19 March 1973. The UA network now has 60-70,000 members in over 80 countries. Last year alone 468 UA appeals and 346 updates to appeals were sent on behalf of people in a total of 83 countries and territories.

Kenya elects a new president

Mwai Kibaki, of the National Rainbow Coalition is the new President of Kenya. Following presidential, parliamentary and civic elections on 27 December 2002, former President Daniel arap Moi left office after 24 years in power. Despite apprehensions of political violence and intimidation, there were fewer human rights abuses in the context of the elections than had been feared.

Giving a positive sign for human rights in Kenya, two weeks after the elections the Justice and Constitutional Affairs Minister, Kiraitu Murungi, declared that “capital punishment is a barbaric punishment”. He further stated that the fundamental right to life should be respected. The death penalty has not been carried out in Kenya since 1984.

Recently, the Minister also stated that he would favour setting up a South-African-style Truth and Reconciliation Commission to focus on human rights violations under the previous government. Tribal clashes would also be addressed. The Commission would listen to victims of violations, as well as perpetrators wishing to “cleanse” themselves.

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Globalizing human rights

“Globalize yes – but globalize justice and equality, globalize respect for human rights and globalize our struggle to end impunity!”

Paul Hoffman, chair of AI’s International Executive Committee, speaking before an audience of 15,000 at the World Social Forum

From 23 to 28 January political and business leaders from around the globe met in Davos, Switzerland, at the World Economic Forum. At the same time, tens of thousands of grassroots activists converged on Porto Alegre, the capital of Brazil’s southernmost state, Rio Grande do Sul, for the 2003 World Social Forum. AI delegations attended both these important events with the message of “globalizing human rights”.

World Economic Forum

The theme of the 2003 World Economic Forum was “Building Trust” and AI Secretary General Irene Khan was one of six official rapporteurs to the Forum, covering themes of trust and values. In a speech to the Forum, she called for corporations to be held legally accountable for human rights under international law. On the same day, AI launched a booklet, *“Doing business in the Russian Federation: The human rights approach”* (EUR 46/059/2002) as part of the ongoing campaign on the Russian Federation.

US Secretary of State Colin Powell gave a speech to the plenary in which he set out the case for a war on Iraq. After he spoke, Irene Khan challenged him, asking how the threat which Iraq poses today weighs against the threat that military action poses for human rights and the humanitarian issues it will inevitably raise.

AI delegates had a number of meetings with political and business leaders at the Forum. Among them was a constructive discussion with representatives of the De Beers company on diamonds and conflict. The AI delegation also spoke at meetings organized by the Public Eye on Davos, an entirely independent gathering of NGOs and civil society groups. This gathering acts as a reminder to the world’s state leaders attending the World Economic Forum that international civil society is watching them, and scrutinizing their conduct.

World Social Forum

On the opening day of the World Social Forum, some 70,000 people marched through Porto Alegre with an array of flags, banners, slogans, chants and languages. They represented countries as diverse as Bangladesh, Brazil, Israel, Palestine, South Korea, South Africa and the USA — civil society coming together across borders to claim rights and call for change, unified by the will to make “another world possible”.

For AI, the World Social Forum offered a great opportunity to meet and learn from other participants and to promote the message that human rights need to be globalized. International Secretariat and section delegates coordinated and participated in seminars and panel discussions on issues from violence against women to corporate accountability, international justice to the death penalty, the fight against discrimination on the grounds of sexual orientation, to the effects of torture and the relationship between security and human rights.

AI delegates, including members and volunteers from Argentina, Brazil, Paraguay and Uruguay also carried out campaigning and awareness-raising activities. These included running an AI stand at the Gigantinho stadium, collecting signatures on a petition to counter US efforts to undermine the International Criminal Court and actions to ensure the accountability of companies for human rights violations in which they might be implicated.

Women and men unite for women’s rights

International Women’s Day (8 March) is celebrated by women’s groups and their supporters all over the world. It marks the story of ordinary women as makers of history and is rooted in the centuries-old struggle of women to participate in society on an equal footing with men.

AI’s campaigning focus for International Women’s Day in 2003 is “Violence against Women in the Russian Federation”. According to Russian officials themselves, every year 14,000 Russian women die at the hands of their husbands or other relatives.

Sociological surveys show that 30 per cent of married women are regularly subjected to physical violence. The situation is exacerbated by the attitude of police, who view such violence not as a crime but as “a private matter” within the family.

The Russian authorities are failing in their obligation to protect women from violence in the home.

The UN Committee on the Elimination of Discrimination against Women has criticized the Russian authorities for not taking sufficiently urgent measures to combat domestic violence and for failing to enact into law any of the numerous draft bills on domestic violence.

AI members around the world will be campaigning:

- * to support NGOs working on violence against women in the Russian Federation, commending their work with women victims of violence and their development of partnerships with government in some of the regions;
- * to remind the federal government of its responsibility to protect women at risk of violence, and to act with due diligence to prevent such abuses of women’s rights;
- * to ask the federal government to take comprehensive action nationally on domestic violence;
- * to call on the federal government to ratify the Optional Protocol to the UN Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women;
- * to raise public awareness of violence against women, one of the most pervasive yet often hidden human rights abuses.

Breaking down the wall of silence on Colombia

Since President Álvaro Uribe took office in August 2002, AI has used every opportunity to challenge his government's human rights policies. There is little doubt that measures included in his "democratic security" doctrine are having a negative impact on the human rights of all Colombians.

As well as being dragged increasingly into the armed conflict, the civilian population is becoming a target for abuses committed in the name of security. Many of these abuses occur unnoticed behind a wall of silence that the government is making more and more impenetrable. Legitimate monitoring and reporting by human rights organizations is being increasingly hindered.

AI has used every opportunity in recent months, through meetings with government authorities, support for human rights defenders, lobbying internationally and mobilizing its membership, to ensure that Colombia continues to be in the public eye. AI's visibility and presence in Colombia has increased, with campaigning activities in the country, major reports on San Vicente del Caguán in the former demilitarized zone and on the impact on President Uribe's security policies, and ongoing international action by the AI movement.

The international community, however, has been slow to challenge the government, especially its hardline security policies and lack of implementation of UN recommendations. Some governments have argued that the new administration should be given time to adopt measures to tackle the human rights crisis. The USA has increased its military aid to Colombia's armed forces, which continue to be responsible for human rights violations in collaboration with their paramilitary allies.

As the international community turns a blind eye to the human rights crisis in Colombia, President Uribe's government is proposing a new arms law. The law will give judicial police powers to the military and amnesties for perpetrators of serious human rights violations and will create networks of informants and peasant soldiers. This could result in paramilitarism being disguised under a new legal cloak.

These are all steps backward and must not be ignored by the international community. AI has warned that those responsible for human rights violations must be brought to justice. For the victims and those working on their behalf, there may be no option but to resort to the international justice system, including the International Criminal Court.

Every effort must be made to prevent the civilian population from becoming a target for abuses committed in the name of security. The international community must not allow the Colombian government to maintain an impenetrable curtain of silence on the ongoing human rights crisis.