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Violence against women rife in war-torn countries

"When I bled the soldier hit me in the face because he said I had 'dirtied' him. At some point my mother and brothers were brought in and forced to watch. When one group [of soldiers] finished, another came in." Edith, 16, Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC)

Tens of thousands of women and girls have been raped by combatants from all hostile forces in eastern DRC. Similarly, sexual violence and exploitation of women have formed an integral part of the 40-year armed conflict in Colombia.

These countries are among the latest highlighted by AI's Stop Violence Against Women (SVAW) campaign. As the following accounts illustrate, in both countries, the use of sexual violence is precisely calculated to subjugate and humiliate civilian communities.

In the DRC, gang rapes – sometimes committed in public – of individual women or girls by up to 20 combatants have been reported. Many women have been abducted by armed groups for use as sex slaves. Often, acts of extreme physical cruelty have accompanied the assaults, including bayonets, sharpened sticks or other objects being forced into the vagina or gunshots to the genital area.

"Every day I was raped by up to three men," said Stephanie, 72, who was held by an armed group in DRC for three months. "When we tried to refuse, they would beat us. They also pushed wooden sticks inside me. Now I have a collapsed womb." Sometimes, victims were killed after being raped. In other cases, women were raped next to the corpses of loved ones.

Punished for 'collaborating'

The scale and indiscriminate nature of rapes in eastern DRC suggests that sexual violence is being used to destroy the social fabric of civilian life. Armed groups frequently use rape to punish and terrify a population they believe to have collaborated with an opposing force, or to reinforce their control over a particular area and population.

The story is the same in Colombia where rape and other sexual crimes, such as genital mutilation, are frequently used by the security forces and their paramilitary allies against those suspected of collaborating with armed opposition groups. "When the army comes, I start thinking that it's going to happen to me all over again. Like a nightmare that never ends," said one woman, speaking to AI in 2003.

Armed opposition groups use rape and sexual violence, including against women and girls suspected of fraternizing with army-backed paramilitaries or the security forces. Many women have been abused after being kidnapped by such groups or while being detained by the security forces. Women have also been kidnapped by paramilitary and armed opposition groups to provide sexual services to group commanders. Others have been sexually abused by their co-combatants after they have been recruited.

Paramilitaries and armed opposition groups have sought to control the most intimate aspects of women's lives by imposing intrusive regulations, intervening in family and community disputes, and inflicting punishment, such as rape, sexual mutilation and flogging, on those who dare to transgress.

No redress for the abused

Impunity for such crimes is the cornerstone of the human rights crises in both Colombia and the DRC. Governments and the leaders of armed groups have failed to take action to prevent sexual violence or to hold perpetrators to account. Continuing lack of protection for civilians means that many victims are too frightened to lodge official complaints.

Whether in the DRC or Colombia, the tactics remain the same. Commenting on the treatment meted out by the Colombian security forces, paramilitaries and armed opposition groups on women, a Medellín psychologist told AI: "They mark their territory by leaving scars on the

bodies of the women. It is a terror without sound." By sowing terror and exploiting women for military gain, women's bodies have been turned into a battleground.

AI is calling on the governments concerned and the international community to protect women in Colombia and the DRC from acts of sexual violence, bring the perpetrators to justice, and provide the survivors of sexual violence with the health and psychological care they need.

See *Colombia: Scarred bodies, hidden crimes* (AMR 23/040/2004) and *Democratic Republic of Congo: Mass rape - time for remedies* (AFR 62/018/2004), both published in October. For a global view of the human rights abuses against women in war time, see the briefing paper, *Casualties of war: women's bodies, women's lives* (ACT 77/072/2004).

Gujarat authorities fail Muslim women

Bilqis Yaqoob Rasool fled Randhikpur village in Gujarat, India, when it was attacked by right-wing Hindus on 28 February 2002. The attackers burned the mosque, and houses and crops belonging to Muslims in the village. They caught up with Bilqis and her family three days later. Shouting "kill them" and "cut them up", they gang-raped Bilqis, her mother, sisters, aunt and cousins in front of their family. Fourteen of her relatives were then killed. Bilqis saw an attacker kill her three-year-old daughter with a rock. She fell unconscious and was left for dead.

What happened to Bilqis is typical of what happened to hundreds of other Muslim women in Gujarat in 2002. Large-scale violence against the Muslim minority erupted in the state after 59 passengers, mostly Hindu activists, died in a fire on the Sabarmati Express train in Gujarat on 27 February. While the cause of the fire remains unclear, officials claimed that it was part of a planned attack by local Muslims on Hindus. Official figures say 762 died in the ensuing violence, but human rights groups estimate that over 2,000, mostly Muslims, were killed in the following weeks.

Muslim men and women were attacked in the violence, but women were particularly targeted because of their gender. Girls and women were reportedly dragged naked before their families and thousands of attackers. They were then raped, often gang-raped, beaten, had rods violently pushed into their vaginas, had breasts cut off and wombs slashed open by swords. Many of them were then cut into pieces or burned to death. The victims included young girls and old women, pregnant women and babies.

To date, no one has been brought to justice for the rape and killing of women in Gujarat in 2002. The Supreme Court of India ordered that the case against those accused of raping and killing Bilqis' family be investigated by a central police agency. The Gujarat police were found to have sided with the offenders and closed the case, claiming that the culprits could not be found. The case is now being heard outside Gujarat.

Failure to prosecute the perpetrators of such grave abuses sends the message to women of the minority community that the state does not take their protection seriously. AI believes that dozens of women who suffered sexual violence in Gujarat in 2002 have not filed complaints because of the attitude of the Gujarati authorities and the shame which they feel about the sexual violence they experienced.

The National Human Rights Commission and the Supreme Court have provided some relief in selected cases, but the majority of Muslim women have been failed by the criminal justice system in Gujarat. Some survivors, supported by human rights activists, have shown enormous courage in pursuing their cases in the face of state indifference to its human rights obligations.

In November, AI is publishing a report on the failure of the authorities in Gujarat to protect women in the 2002 violence.

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Excessive use of tasers in USA

"We got Borden into the booking area. Borden was still combative and uncooperative. I dried [sic] stunned Borden in the buttocks area..." After the final shock, the officer "noticed that Borden was no longer responsive and his face was discoloured." Extract from officer's

statement on James Borden, a mentally disturbed man being booked into jail, Indiana, USA, November 2003.

James Borden died shortly after receiving six electro-shocks in November 2003. The official cause of death was given as a heart attack, drug intoxication and electrical shock. James Borden is one of thousands of individuals shocked with stun devices by US law enforcement agents each year as a growing number of agencies adopt such weapons.

More than 5,000 US law enforcement agencies are currently using tasers: hand-held stun guns which fire two barbed darts, causing instant incapacitation by delivering a 50,000 volt shock. They can also, as in James Borden's case, be applied directly to the skin as a stun gun.

Agencies using tasers claim they reduce injuries and save lives by providing an alternative to firearms or batons. However, AI's research shows that tasers are being used where police use of lethal force – or even batons – would never be justified.

In the past three years, more than 70 people have died in the USA and Canada after being struck by M26 or X26 tasers. Some medical experts believe taser shocks may exacerbate a risk of heart failure in cases where people are agitated or under the influence of drugs. In at least four cases, coroners have found the taser directly contributed to death.

Electro-shock weapons are particularly open to abuse as, portable and easy to use, they can inflict severe pain at the push of a button without leaving substantial marks. Despite such risks, there is little independent scrutiny of taser use in the USA, and no consistent standards or guidelines.

Many US police agencies routinely use tasers to subdue unarmed, non-compliant individuals who do not pose a serious danger to themselves or others. For example, police have used tasers against unruly schoolchildren; mentally disabled and elderly people; and people who simply argue with officers. Often, individuals have been subjected to repeated shocks, sometimes while in restraints.

Despite contravening inter-national guidelines on police use of force, in most cases documented by AI the officers were not found to have violated any departmental policies.

AI is concerned that many US police departments now issue tasers to every patrol officer, substantially increasing their potential for abuse. M26 or X26 tasers are also deployed by the US army for use in Iraq; are available to members of the public; and are deployed or are being trialled in other countries.

AI is calling on the US state, federal and local authorities to suspend all use of tasers and other electro-shock weapons pending a rigorous, independent inquiry into their use and effects.

Where US agencies refuse to suspend tasers, the organization urges that they limit their use of tasers strictly to situations where the alternative under international law would be use of deadly force, with strict guidelines and monitoring.

For further information see *USA: Excessive and lethal force? Amnesty International's concerns about deaths and ill-treatment involving police use of tasers.* (AMR 51/139/2004) published 10 November 2004.

Unfair food distribution in Zimbabwe means millions of people may go hungry

Millions of people in Zimbabwe are going hungry as access to food continues to diminish. Until mid-2004 international food aid programmes provided much needed relief. But international food aid stopped when the government of Zimbabwe told the UN and donors that the country had had a "bumper harvest" in 2004 and no longer needed assistance.

The government's claims have been widely discredited. According to the Zimbabwe Vulnerability Assessment Committee, which comprises UN agencies, non-governmental organizations and government departments, at least 2.3 million rural people will need food assistance before next April's harvest. Some 2.5 million people in urban areas are also expected to have difficulty accessing adequate food.

Stories of growing hunger and food insecurity in Zimbabwe emerge almost daily. Rather than fulfil its obligation to ensure the right to food for everyone under its jurisdiction, the government of Zimbabwe is manipulating the country's food shortages for political purposes and to punish political opponents.

During the armed struggle for independence in the 1970s, the minority government of Ian Smith deliberately withheld food from areas in an attempt to starve out nationalist combatants. The manipulation of food for political ends is a tactic that the newly independent government, headed by Robert Mugabe, was to employ again in 1984 in Matebeleland. Hoping to prevent a few hundred armed fighters from accessing food, stores were closed and relief aid to a drought-stricken region was stopped. Thousands of civilians suffered. Today, Zimbabweans are facing the same threat.

The cessation of most international food aid distribution has left millions of people dependent on grain distributed by the government-controlled Grain Marketing Board (GMB), which has a near monopoly on the trade in and distribution of maize – the staple food in Zimbabwe. But it is unclear whether the GMB has sufficient stocks to meet the country's grain needs. The GMB also has a history of discriminatory distribution of the grain it controls. Those who do not support the ruling party, the Zimbabwe African National Union – Patriotic Front (ZANU-PF), have regularly been denied access to GMB grain. At elections, government officials and supporters have publicly threatened people's access to food if they do not vote ZANU-PF.

Parliamentary elections are due to be held in Zimbabwe in March 2005, the height of the "hungry season". Given the GMB's history of discriminatory distribution, AI is gravely concerned about further violations of the right to adequate food and the right to freedom from discrimination in the run-up to the 2005 parliamentary elections.

Discrimination and the manipulation of Zimbabwe's food crisis for political ends are among the issues covered in the report, *Zimbabwe: Power and hunger – violations of the right to food* (AFR 46/026/2004), launched in South Africa on 15 October, World Food Day.

To find out more about violations of the right to food in Zimbabwe and how to take action, visit: <http://web.amnesty.org/wire/> and follow the links in the left-hand column.

Women's rights weakened in Middle East and North Africa

Most of the countries in the Middle East and North Africa have ratified or acceded to the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women (CEDAW). However, this positive step forward is seriously undermined by the reservations or declarations that several countries have made to the Convention which significantly limit its application and run contrary to the spirit and purpose of the Convention.

AI is greatly concerned that these reservations undermine the right of women to lead lives free of violence and discrimination. Some of the reservations are so wide-ranging that it is difficult to measure the implications. The reasons given for the reservations are not consistent between the countries, but the most commonly used justifications for rejecting or limiting the scope of the articles are conflict with national legislation and *Shari'a* law (Islamic law). What they do have in common across the region is their disagreement and inconsistency with international law.

Although six of the articles have been subject to reservations or declarations, three articles (2, 9 and 16) in particular have a very fundamental and direct impact on the rights in CEDAW. They deal with states' obligations to introduce and implement legislation to eliminate discrimination against women, women's right to choose their nationality and that of their children, and the elimination of discrimination against women in all matters relating to marriage and family relations.

In November, AI is launching the report, *Reservations to the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women: Weakening the protection of women from violence* (IOR 51/009/2004). In this report, AI calls on states in the region to immediately lift all reservations to the Convention, and to take steps to review relevant national legislation, in order for women in the region to enjoy their full human rights.

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Worldwide Appeals

Albania

'Disappearance' and torture

Remzi Hoxha (*pictured with his wife*) was driven away from his workplace in Tirana, in October 1995, by men in civilian clothes in a car reportedly belonging to the National Information Service (ShIK), the secret police. Nine years later his family still do not know what has happened to him. Remzi Hoxha, married with five children, was politically active in support of the Albanian nationalist cause and moved to Tirana from Kosovo in 1992.

A few days before Remzi Hoxha "disappeared", another man, Ziso Kristopulli, was abducted, allegedly tortured and interrogated by ShIK officers. They apparently suspected him of being a Serbian agent and of conspiring with Remzi Hoxha (whom he says he has never met) to smuggle arms from Kosovo to overthrow the government. Ziso Kristopulli says he strongly denied these accusations but was forced to "confess". He was released five days later.

In May 2003, three former ShIK officers were arrested. In court, two of them appear to have admitted having taken part in the arrest of Remzi Hoxha and Ziso Kristopulli. They said they had followed orders, had not taken any part in acts of torture and did not know what had happened to Remzi Hoxha. The third, the former chief of Tirana ShIK, reportedly denied all the charges. Arrest warrants have apparently been issued for up to six other ShIK police officers, but it seems that most or all of them have left the country and may be in the UK.

Despite press reports that the investigation had been completed and the case would be shortly sent to court for trial, charges were dropped against one of the three in November 2003. In May 2004, the two other defendants were released, reportedly because the evidence against them was not strong enough to justify their continued detention.

Please write, calling on the Albanian authorities to clarify the fate of Remzi Hoxha and to bring to justice those responsible for his "disappearance". Please call for the alleged torture of Ziso Kristopulli to be effectively investigated.

Send appeals to: Alfred Moisiu, President of the Republic of Albania, Office of the President, Tirana, Albania. Fax: + 355 4 2 36925

Email – go to: <http://president.al/english/pub/kontakt.asp>

Barbados

Tightening the noose

On 15 September, Chief Marshal John Trotman read Lenox Boyce and Jeffrey Joseph their execution warrants and scheduled them to be hanged in Barbados on 20 September. The authorities issued the warrants despite the fact that both men had used their right to appeal to the Inter-American Commission on Human Rights only a few days before.

AI is gravely concerned that death warrants have been issued while appeals remain unresolved, a violation of inter-national human rights laws and standards. The executions were stayed pending further appeals.

Government officials have made numerous statements supporting the resumption of executions as an answer to violent crime. Over the last two years, the government has taken a number of steps toward the reintroduction of hanging. In 2002, it passed the Constitutional (Amendment) Act. This removed a number of legal protections previously afforded to condemned prisoners by the appeal courts, most notably, a decision by the final court of appeal for Barbados which ruled that it was unconstitutional to keep a person under sentence of death for longer than five years. Prisoners on death row for more than five years would previously have had their sentences commuted to terms of imprisonment.

AI fears that Barbados will resume executions in the near future, contradicting the international trend away from the use of the death penalty.

The last hangings in the country took place in 1984, when three men were executed on the same day.

Please write, urging the Government of Barbados not to take the retrograde step of resuming executions against the international trend away from the use of the death penalty. Please express sympathy for the victims of crime and their loved ones, but stress that the death

penalty has never been shown to be more of a deterrent to crime than other harsh punishments.

Send appeals to: The Rt Hon Owen Arthur, Prime Minister, Office of the Prime Minister, Government Headquarters, Bay Street, St Michael, Barbados. Fax: +1 246 436 9280

Email: info@primeminister.gov.bb

Nepal

Schoolboy 'disappears'

Prahladh Waiba, a 17-year-old student, was taken from his school classroom in Chaimale, Kathmandu, Nepal, by five security personnel on 1 March. The exact reasons for his arrest are unclear but it is thought that he is accused of being involved in an ambush near his home village, which killed a soldier and injured three others on 13 February.

Hundreds of people have reportedly "disappeared" at the hands of the security forces since the latest ceasefire broke down in August in the eight-year conflict with the Communist Party of Nepal (CPN) (Maoist). The CPN (Maoist) has also abducted many civilians in recent months. Some 54 students and teachers were taken by CPN (Maoist) from Prahladh's school in July. They were reportedly forced to undergo "political education" but returned to the village two days later.

Prahladh's father, an office worker at the school, has visited the army camp in Pharping, near Chaimale, a number of times. He was told that the boy is being held by the army but cannot receive any visitors. More recently, army officers have denied that he is being held at the camp.

Prahladh's family say that he is conscientious and hardworking. Before his arrest Prahladh would fetch water for his family each day after school. His younger brother has now fled the village in fear.

Many of those detained by the security forces are tortured to try to get information from them. AI is concerned that Prahladh may have been detained in retaliation for attacks by the CPN (Maoist) on security force personnel.

Please write, calling for Prahladh Waiba's whereabouts to be made public, for him to be given access to his family and for him to be released unless charged with a recognizably criminal offence.

Send appeals to: Chief District Officer Baman Prasad Neupane, Office of the Chief District Officer, Kathmandu District, Nepal. Fax +97714267691

Saudi Arabia

Three women tried in secret Majda Mostafa Mahir, Siti Zainab Binti Duhri Rupa and Sarah Jane Dematera, reportedly have been sentenced to death and may be at imminent risk of execution.

AI is appealing to King Fahd of Saudi Arabia to commute the death sentences against the three women at the start of the holy month of Ramadan.

Moroccan national, Majda Mostafa Mahir, is detained in Briman Prison. Held for over seven years in connection with the murder of Prince Farid bin Abdullah bin Mishari al Saud, the 40-year-old mother of two is said to have appeared before a court in Riyadh. The exact details and outcome of the trial are unknown to AI.

Siti Zainab Binti Duhri Rupa of Indonesia, a 34-year-old mother of two, has been detained in Medina Prison since 1999. Arrested in connection with the murder of her employer, she is reportedly psychologically ill and is said to have "confessed" to the charges during police interrogation.

Sarah Jane Dematera, thought to be around 31 years old, is detained in Al Dammam Prison. A Filipina national, she has been in prison for twelve years in connection with the murder of her employer. She arrived in Saudi Arabia in November 1992 to work as a domestic helper. Four days after starting her new job, she was arrested for murder.

The fates of all of the women depend on whether the families of the murder victims pardon them freely or agree to accept *dīya* or compensation. To mark the end of Ramadan and the Eid-al-Fitr celebrations, the King can commute, pardon or grant clemency to prisoners in Saudi Arabia.

All of the women have been sentenced in secret trials that failed to meet the minimum international standards for fair trial. They were not given access to lawyers during investigations and trial hearings.

Please write, appealing to King Fahd of Saudi Arabia to commute the death sentences against Majda Mostafa Mahir, Siti Zainab Binti Duhri Rupa and Sarah Jane Dematera.

Send appeals to: The Custodian of the Two Holy Shrines, His Majesty King Fahd bin 'Abdul 'Aziz Al-Saud, Office of His Majesty The King, Royal Court, Riyadh, Kingdom of Saudi Arabia. Telegram: H.M. King Fahd, Riyadh, Saudi Arabia.

Worldwide Appeal update

Former Malaysian deputy prime minister Anwar Ibrahim and his adopted brother, Sukma Darmawan – both prisoners of conscience – were released in September. Malaysia's Federal Court upheld a final appeal against their conviction in 2000 on charges of sodomy. The court found that a key prosecution witness was unreliable and, expressing concern at reports of police brutality, found that Sukma Darmawan's "confession" had not been made voluntarily. Since the two men's arrest in 1998, AI repeatedly expressed grave concerns that the charges against them were politically motivated, that police ill-treated Sukma Darmawan to coerce an incriminating "confession" and that the trial proceedings were unfair.

See *Worldwide Appeal* November 2000.

Updates

UK announces inquiry into killing of Patrick Finucane

The UK authorities have finally announced the creation of an inquiry into the 1989 killing of Patrick Finucane in Northern Ireland. However, instead of announcing a public inquiry, they stated that the inquiry would be held on the basis of legislation to be introduced shortly which will take account of "the requirements of national security". AI is concerned that the UK authorities may attempt to use "national security" to prevent the inquiry exposing state collusion in the killing of Patrick Finucane.

See *UK: An inquiry into Finucane – but what kind?*(EUR 45/024/2004).

Human rights in Iran reviewed

As the UN General Assembly is expected to consider Iran's human rights record in November 2004, AI is looking to the international community to address the growing human rights violations in Iran and reinforce the importance of commitment to international human rights standards and mechanisms. A resolution acknowledging progress in the field of human rights, but criticizing the authorities for continued and grave violations, was passed by the General Assembly in 2003.

More states sign up to ICC

In September, Burundi, Liberia and Guyana ratified the Rome Statute of the International Criminal Court (ICC). The ICC can prosecute crimes of genocide, crimes against humanity and war crimes. However, AI is concerned that Liberia has signed an unlawful agreement with the USA, agreeing not to surrender US nationals accused of such crimes to the ICC.

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Civilians under threat in Sudan

"I have come here, but still don't feel safe...When the government tried to pressure us to return to our villages, I refused and was attacked by two gunmen. So I complained to the police, but they said they could not accept my complaint because it was a state of emergency." M. at Riyad camp for displaced persons, west Darfur, Sudan

The 1.4 million people driven from their homes in Darfur are still unsafe, traumatised by the losses of the past, in fear for the present and unsure of their future, concluded AI's Secretary

General Irene Khan following a visit to Sudan in September. Thousands of people have had their families torn apart by the violence. M. (quoted above) explained how his village was attacked and bombed in November 2003 by militia and military aircraft, killing 160 people, including 29 from his own family.

AI delegates listened to hundreds of displaced persons in camps and towns in north, south and west Darfur as well as in the capital, Khartoum. Their testimonies confirmed the enormous mistrust in the Sudanese government by those who have been forced out of their villages and are too afraid to leave their camps without international protection. The government continues to deny the extent of the killings and rapes, and refuses to take responsibility for the human rights and humanitarian crisis in Darfur.

To date, AI's work on Sudan has contributed to the engagement of key governments and institutions, including the UN Security Council. An arms embargo on armed groups is in place, humanitarian access has improved considerably, some prisoners of conscience have been released, a small number of African Union ceasefire monitors and UN human rights monitors have been deployed, and an international commission of inquiry is being established. The findings of AI's September visit to Sudan demonstrate, however, that the situation in Darfur remains extremely grave and that much more needs to be done.

The international community's attention has been shifting from one crisis area to another in Sudan. But to strengthen the human rights situation now in Darfur, a comprehensive approach to the situation in the whole of the country is needed. Impunity for human rights violations, the lack of freedom of expression or association, harsh conditions of detention, unfair trials and an unreformed judiciary as well as human rights violations against women, the misuse of militias, and arms proliferation – all are issues that need to be urgently addressed throughout Sudan.

For further information, see *Sudan: Civilians still under threat in Darfur, an agenda for human rights protection* (AFR 54/131/2004).

Anti-death penalty speakers' tour comes to the UK

To those who accuse her of protecting "criminals", Tamara Chikunova's response is clear. "I'm protecting human beings, first of all," she says. The founder of Mothers Against the Death Penalty and Torture, a human rights organization based in Uzbekistan, visited the UK in October as part of a Europe-wide tour, along with fellow anti-death penalty activist, Dilobar Khudoberganova. Co-ordinated by AI and launched in Venice in September, the tour went to Italy, the Netherlands, Poland and Canada (the only non-European country on the itinerary), before touching down in the UK.

Speaking to AI in London, Tamara Chikunova explained that the tour was aimed at raising awareness about the situation in Uzbekistan while campaigning as a whole for an end to the death penalty in her country and eventually the world. The death penalty, she said, "is a violation of the most basic right to life."

Mothers Against the Death Penalty and Torture was created in response to the execution of Tamara Chikunova's son, Dmitry Chikunov, in Tashkent in 2000. Since its inception, it has succeeded in reducing 17 death sentences to prison terms. The organization is not only concerned with issues in Uzbekistan, but also deals with cases in other republics, for example in Kazakstan, before the country introduced a moratorium in December 2003.

Dilobar Khudoberganova joined the organization when her brother, Iskandar Khudoberganov, was sentenced to death in Tashkent in 2002. Speaking of her last visit with him in early September, she told AI that he had not been outside the prison for two years and was not receiving adequate food. "He is like a slowly dying man," she said. Although he is permitted visits once a month, these can be no longer than 30 minutes and must always be in the presence of a prison official.

Uzbekistan and Belarus are the only countries in Europe and Central Asia to continue to execute people. In both countries, prisoners on death row and their families face callous treatment from the authorities. Neither death row inmates nor their families are told of the execution date in advance, robbing them of a last opportunity to see one another. Once an execution is carried out, the prisoner's family is not given the body for burial, nor is it told where the body has been buried.

“The most important thing is that international organizations take joint action in such cases,” said Dilobar Khudoberganova. On an individual level, concerted letter-writing campaigns are an integral part of this action. “When relatives visit their loved ones and show them the letters of support from people all over the world,” said Tamara Chikunova, “the prisoners almost get wings – they start to have hope.”

The tour continues to Sweden, France and Germany, before ending in December in Italy.

To take action visit AI's website: www.amnesty.org/deathpenalty

[Boxed caption Belarus prison]

In Belarus, a former death row prisoner alleged he was frequently beaten on his head, back, stomach and genitals by prison guards who reportedly forced him to say, “thank you very much” after each beating.

Cell on death row in SIZO No.1 in Minsk, Belarus

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Survey shows child soldiers used in almost every armed conflict

“They give you a gun and you have to kill the best friend you have. They do it to see if they can trust you. If you don't kill him, your friend will be ordered to kill you. I had to do it because otherwise I would have been killed. That's why I got out. I couldn't stand it any longer.”
Bernardo, aged 17, speaking to Human Rights Watch. He joined a paramilitary group in Colombia as a street child, aged seven.

Boys and girls under the age of 18 have fought in more than 20 of the world's major conflicts since 2001. Some fight with armed groups, some with government forces. Child fighters have been on the front line in Burundi, the Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC) and Myanmar. In other countries, governments have made informal use of children as informants, spies or collaborators, including Israel, Indonesia and Nepal.

The Coalition to Stop the Use of Child Soldiers, which includes AI sections worldwide, launches its second global survey on the use of children in war this month. The *Child Soldiers Global Report 2004* provides country-by-country evidence that governments and armed groups are using children to fight wars, exposing them to violence, injury and death.

The policies of North American and European countries are also scrutinized in the report. The US has failed to adhere to its treaty obligations to keep soldiers under 18 years old out of conflict zones. Sixty-two US soldiers aged 17 were in Afghanistan and Iraq in 2003 and 2004. In Europe, otherwise strong proponents of child rights continued to recruit under-18s into their armies, including Germany, Ireland, the Netherlands and the UK.

On the positive side, by October 2004 84 states had ratified the Optional Protocol to the Convention on the Rights of the Child on the involvement of children in armed conflict, and 116 had signed it.

The UN Security Council has repeatedly identified and condemned those who enlist children in their wars, but has failed to act on their condemnations. “The problem is not that we lack the power to do this – the problem is our failure to use the power effectively, consistently and urgently,” according to Graça Machel, the author of a 1998 UN study, *The Impact of Armed Conflict on Children*.

The *Child Soldiers Global Report 2004* calls on the international community to back up its rhetoric with decisive action – including the prosecution of child recruiters, restrictions on military assistance and training, and appropriate sanctions.

Members of the Coalition to Stop the Use of Child Soldiers include AI, Human Rights Watch, Save the Children and World Vision. It also works with local grassroots organizations in Colombia, the DRC, the Palestinian Occupied Territories, the Philippines, Thailand, Uganda and some 25 other countries.