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**50 YEARS OF THE UNIVERSAL DECLARATION OF HUMAN RIGHTS
AND 50 YEARS OF HUMAN RIGHTS ABUSES**
Amnesty International's Annual Report details human rights abuses in 141 countries

Fifty years on from the adoption of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights (UDHR), the victims of human rights violations have yet to see the world without cruelty and injustice promised by governments in 1948, Amnesty International said today as it released its 1998 Annual Report.

The report -- covering human rights abuses in 141 countries during 1997 -- details atrocities committed by governments and armed opposition groups including unlawful killings, torture, "disappearances" and the jailing of prisoners of conscience.

"For most people around the world, the rights in the UDHR are little more than a paper promise," said Pierre Sané, Secretary General of Amnesty International. "A promise which has not been fulfilled for the 1.3 billion people who struggle to survive on less than US\$1 a day; for the 35,000 people who die of malnutrition and preventable diseases every day; for the billion adults, most of them women, who cannot read or write; for the prisoners of conscience jailed in half the world's countries, and for the victims of torture in a third of the world's countries."

"Driven by political expediency and self interest, governments continue to trample on their citizens' rights in order to maintain power and privilege for the few. What is relatively new, and deeply worrying, is that some governments are trying to excuse this behaviour by challenging the whole ethos of the universality and indivisibility of human rights set out in the UDHR."

Countering the arguments put by their governments are thousands of human rights defenders around the world -- men, women and children who risk their lives protecting and promoting the human rights of others. Many of them have been killed, "disappeared", jailed and harassed for their work, and Amnesty International dedicates this year's annual report to these courageous individuals.

"The UDHR has been called 'the world's best kept secret', despite governments agreeing in 1948 to actively promote it wherever possible," Mr Sané said. "Our current campaign to promote the UDHR in the run up to the 10 December anniversary hopes to change that."

"We all owe it to the victims, their families and future generations to ensure that the next 50 years really do see that promise of a better world realized."

During 1997, Amnesty International documented extrajudicial executions in 55 countries and judicial executions in 40 countries. Prisoners of conscience were in jail in at least 87 countries. The organization recorded cases of torture in 117 countries and "disappearances" in 31 countries, although Amnesty International believes the true figures for all these statistics to be much higher.

REGIONAL HIGHLIGHTS:

AFRICA

In 1997, ongoing armed conflicts and further social and political unrest led to appalling human rights violations in Africa. There was little accountability for these abuses and the perpetrators continued to act with impunity. In the **Great Lakes Region**, mass killings were widespread and the human rights situation continued to worsen, while in the **Democratic Republic of Congo**, the new government obstructed the United Nations investigation on massacres. In **Liberia**, Amnesty International stressed the necessity of accountability and of rebuilding institutions to uphold the rule of law and international human rights standards.

Torture, lack of medical care or cruel, inhuman or degrading prison conditions were believed to have led to the death of hundreds of people in 14 countries. Freedom of expression and freedom of association were seriously curtailed, and in 27 countries confirmed or possible prisoners of conscience were held. Across Africa, the debate on the tragic impact of female genital mutilation became one of urgency and reflected widespread concern.

AMERICAS

Cases of torture, ill-treatment, “disappearances” and extrajudicial executions were regularly reported throughout the Americas, where human rights defenders and journalists denouncing these and other abuses often themselves became victims. In **Argentina** and **Mexico**, for instance, information received in some cases of intimidation, repeated death threats and attacks against journalists indicated the possible involvement or acquiescence of the security forces.

In **Mexico**, where President Zedillo increased the participation of the army in law enforcement, cases of torture, “disappearances” and extrajudicial executions by members of the security forces and paramilitary groups showed a marked increase. In **Cuba**, several hundred prisoners of conscience were believed to be imprisoned, while the government of Fidel Castro continued to justify repression of political dissent on the grounds of persistent hostility from the USA. The main victims of the spiralling conflict in **Colombia** continued to be civilians, mostly peasant farmers in disputed areas. Hundreds of people were killed by the security forces or paramilitary groups, and at least 140 “disappeared” after detention.

ASIA

In the 50th anniversary year of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, challenges to the universality and indivisibility of human rights were prevalent throughout the Asia Pacific region. Amnesty International was particularly concerned about the effects on human rights of the economic crisis in many countries. Economically disadvantaged groups, migrant labourers, and ethnic minority groups all faced the consequences of political and economic instability.

Workers in **China** protesting against corruption were injured by police and many were arrested. In **Indonesia**, independent trade union activist Muchtar Pakpahan began serving a four-year prison sentence for his peaceful activities, while also facing a separate trial for subversion, and 26 people were detained for three days for organizing a labour rights workshop. The **Myanmar** military were responsible for extrajudicial killings, forcible relocations and torture of ethnic minorities. Thousands of people were reportedly detained because of their ethnicity or “un-Islamic” behaviour in **Afghanistan**, where torture and ill-treatment were widespread. Tens of thousands of women remained physically

restricted to their homes by Taleban edicts. In **Cambodia**, at least 16 people were killed in a grenade attack on a peaceful opposition demonstration in March, and government forces deliberately killed more than 43 suspected opposition supporters following the July coup. **Australia** moved to introduce legislation effectively allowing the authorities to disregard any human rights treaty previously ratified by the government.

EUROPE

Torture and ill-treatment by security forces, police or state authorities continued to be the most widely reported human rights violations in the Europe region, with cases recorded in 28 countries. Victims died as a result of torture in at least five European countries during 1997; nevertheless, there were some positive moves in the region.

In October, President Yeltsin signed a decree which envisaged step-by-step reform of the penitentiary system in the **Russian Federation**, where cases of torture and ill-treatment by law enforcement officers and in the military are regularly reported. In **Turkey**, where torture continued to be widespread, a new law shortening the maximum terms of police detention in provinces under state of emergency legislation had some positive impact. However, incommunicado detention, widely recognized as being conducive to torture, continued. Approximately 1.4 million people from **Bosnia-Herzegovina** remained refugees or internally displaced due to bureaucratic obstacles or because it was still unsafe for them to return home.

MIDDLE EAST

In 1997, thousands of people were victims of systematic torture or unlawful killings, and were denied the minimum of justice. Hundreds of cases of unfair trials were recorded in most countries in the Middle East and North Africa, leading to widespread human rights violations and a significant rise in the number of death sentences and executions.

In October, Amnesty International, together with other human rights organizations, issued a joint appeal calling for an international investigation into the human rights situation in **Algeria**. The UN Committee against Torture stated that methods of interrogation used by **Israel** constituted torture.

Cruel and inhuman judicial punishments, such as amputations, flogging and stoning were widely imposed in various countries in the Gulf Region, including **Iran**, **Saudi Arabia** and **Yemen**. In **Ras al-Khaimah (United Arab Emirates)**, a Sri Lankan woman and an Indian man were reportedly sentenced to 130 and 90 lashes respectively. The punishment of flogging was extended to traffic offences and reportedly to begging. In **Egypt**, the Supreme Administrative Court upheld the decree banning female genital mutilation from being carried out in state hospitals.

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