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2005 UN Commission on Human Rights: Time to act to protect human rights

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(Geneva) Responding to the momentum created by the proposals to reform the UN Commission on Human Rights, Amnesty International's Secretary General challenged all member states of the Commission to rise above national and regional interests and restore the credibility and legitimacy of the UN to protect victims of human rights abuse.

"Responsibility to avoid selectivity and double standards rests with each member. Each member that calls on the Commission to address some human rights situation, but turns a blind eye to others; that supports or abstains from 'no-action motions', contributes to undermining the credibility of the Commission and fails in its obligation to address the human rights challenges of the moment," said Ms Khan. Her visit to Geneva, which coincides with the Commission's discussion of country situations, is intended to emphasize the need for the UN's human rights body to be able to effectively tackle such problems.

"Political factionalism has hampered effective action to address major human rights crises in countries such as Zimbabwe, Iraq and Chechnya. Others, like Guantánamo, do not even make it on to the Commission's agenda."

"The Commission on Human Rights must act forcefully and decisively to reverse the human rights catastrophe unfolding in Nepal," declared Ms Khan as she called on the Commission to adopt a strong resolution establishing a Special Rapporteur on Nepal and ensuring a strong international human rights monitoring presence in the country.

"Nepal is a test case to measure the Commission's willingness and ability to tackle human rights crises. Failure to act decisively will prove that not only do power politics prevent the consideration of serious human rights violations in large countries, but that the members of the Commission are incapable of acting to prevent a human rights disaster in any country."

In February 2005 an Amnesty International delegation, led by Ms Khan, was the first international NGO delegation to meet with Nepal's government after the declaration of the State of Emergency. The organization has documented how, as a result of the State of Emergency in Nepal, fundamental rights have been suspended; hundreds of people have been arrested and "disappeared"; and, the hand of the military has been strengthened, increasing the likelihood of intensified violence and human rights abuses in the decade-long conflict by both the security forces and Maoist rebels.

Ms Khan cautioned that human rights standards are being undermined by the measures taken by governments in the context of the "war on terror".

"The Commission has played a major role in setting standards for human rights. Now, as countries large and small erode them in the name of security, the Commission must urgently act to preserve its own legacy," Ms Khan warned.

Amnesty International is calling for the Commission to establish a Special Rapporteur on Human Rights and Counter-terrorism to continue the work of the Independent Expert appointed last year.

"The pursuit of security cannot be at the expense of justice and respect for human rights. The role of the Special Rapporteur on Human Rights and Counter-terrorism will be essential to ensure that respect for human rights and fundamental freedoms is a cornerstone in the efforts to enhance security," Ms Khan added.

Welcoming the UN Secretary-General's report, *In larger freedom: towards development, security and human rights for all*, Ms Khan stated: "At a time when the credibility of the Commission is at its lowest point ever, reform of the UN human rights machinery is urgently needed and must be substantial -- tinkering around the edges is not enough."

"Reform must be geared towards ensuring that the UN's human rights machinery can effectively deal with country situations, and retain its ability to name and shame countries with serious human rights violations," Ms Khan said.

"Human rights abuses must be tackled whenever and wherever they arise -- regardless of political interests."

Ms. Khan called on member states to encourage and support the High Commissioner for Human Rights to take independent initiatives as the UN's chief guardian of human rights.

"While governments talk shop, the human rights of women, men and children around the world are at risk as never before," Ms Khan concluded.

"Governments must make a demonstrable commitment to re-establishing the authority of the Commission at its 61st session."

For latest information on the 61st session of the UNCHR, please go to:

<http://web.amnesty.org/pages/unchr-intro-eng>

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