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UN: Time for decisive action to prevent torture

The UN Economic and Social Council (ECOSOC) is due tomorrow to approve the text of a new treaty which aims to prevent torture: the Optional Protocol to the Convention against Torture and Other Cruel, Inhuman and Degrading Treatment or Punishment (the Optional Protocol).

"A vote against this Optional Protocol would be a disastrous set back in the fight against torture," said Martin MacPherson, Head of Amnesty International's Legal Program, on the eve of this crucial vote.

According to the organization's Annual Report 2002, people were reportedly tortured or ill-treated by security forces, police or other state authorities in 111 countries.

"Any attempts to derail this process must be resisted by all members of ECOSOC: the victims of torture deserve no less," Mr MacPherson stated as it urged that the text be forwarded to the General Assembly for its approval.

The Optional Protocol has been discussed for the last ten years and already addresses many countries' concerns. It currently enjoys wide support from ECOSOC members, including the European Union and countries in most regions of the world, but is opposed by the USA.

"US opposition to a development in international law which would prevent torture is appalling," Mr MacPherson said.

"To re-open negotiations at this time could only lead to watering down the text -- so that it will fail to fulfil its aim, to prevent torture and ill-treatment still so prevalent around the world."

This Protocol creates a mechanism to prevent torture by establishing an international system of unannounced inspection visits to places of detention, such as police stations and prisons: the experts making the visits would then be able to make recommendations on practical measures to prevent torture. It would only apply to those states who chose to become parties to the Protocol.

"The international community has a duty to those who are victims of torture to take all possible action to prevent this vile crime being repeated," Mr MacPherson added.

Amnesty International has been campaigning against torture for nearly 40 years. For more information please visit <http://www.stoptorture.org>

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