

**Press Conference Statement by Pierre Sané
Secretary General, Amnesty International**

**Commonwealth Summit
Edinburgh, Scotland, 23 October 1997**

Today, the representatives of around a billion people -- one fifth of the world's population -- gather in Edinburgh for the Commonwealth Heads of Government Meeting.

As they sit in diplomatic splendour and prepare to enjoy a retreat in picturesque St Andrews, Amnesty International is here to represent the hundreds of thousands of victims of human rights abuses occurring in almost every Commonwealth country.

We are here to give a voice to the men, women and children of all ages whose governments have been responsible for torture, unlawful killings, "disappearances", unfair trials and cruel and inhuman prison conditions.

Because, you can be sure, their governments won't be representing their struggle for justice in the light of often overwhelming opposition from the very authorities that are supposed to aid and protect them.

Although the spotlight may fall on one particular country's human rights -- and we welcome this attention to the situation in Nigeria for example -- it is no good for the other government leaders to sit around complacently congratulating themselves on having escaped scrutiny for yet another year.

Amnesty International this year is throwing its spotlight on eight countries where we have serious human rights concerns, although we have logged human rights abuses in nearly every Commonwealth state. I want to give you a brief overview of our concerns in these countries:

Since **Cameroon** was admitted to the Commonwealth two years ago, hundreds of opponents of the government have been harassed and assaulted, arrested and imprisoned. Torture by the security forces is routine, and some victims have died as a result.

In **India**, the security forces are able to kill, torture and "disappear" without any real fear that they will be brought to account for their actions. Legislation provides widespread powers to shoot to kill, and protects members of the security forces from investigation and prosecution.

In June this year, I led the Amnesty International delegation to **Kenya**. We witnessed the police brutally breaking up a peaceful demonstration and beating anyone -- including women, children and the elderly -- who was unlucky enough to get within range of their batons. In July, several demonstrations throughout Kenya were violently broken up by security forces -- at least 12 demonstrators were killed and those seeking sanctuary in a church were teargassed. No one has been charged with any offence.

Nigeria remains a human rights pariah state. The government has failed to take the steps which would suggest a determination to change both its policy and practice in any fundamental or long-term way. The threat of execution or lengthy imprisonment still hangs over political prisoners, human rights defenders and critics of the government.

In **Pakistan** this year, hundreds of people have died in police custody, unlawfully killed by the security forces or tortured to death. Prime Minister Nawaz Sharif is now seeking to deal with an escalating law and order problem by introducing repressive legislation which contravenes international and Pakistani law.

In **Papua New Guinea**, a truce has just been agreed to end the nine-year civil war in Bougainville. This conflict has been marked by gross human rights violations committed by the PNG defence forces. In the current peace talks it is essential that independent monitoring of human rights is set up and the victims of violations receive redress.

Ousted President Ahmad Tejan Kabbah of **Sierra Leone** is here in Edinburgh representing a country where the rule of law has completely collapsed following a military coup. It is a disastrous set-back for human rights -- arrests, ill-treatment, torture and killings are occurring daily.

In **Sri Lanka**, Amnesty International recorded more than 600 "disappearances" during 1996 and 41 in the first half of 1997 in the Jaffna peninsula. Torture is widespread and the government has failed to prosecute any member of the security forces for torture.

Amnesty International has submitted detailed recommendations to the Commonwealth to take up on all of these countries. Measures which could bring about concrete improvements in their human rights situation are needed.

Previous Commonwealth meetings in Harare and Auckland have seen some fine words about improving human rights. In Zimbabwe, governments came up with the Harare Declaration, aimed at strengthening respect for universal human rights and fundamental freedoms.

As long ago as 1985, the Commonwealth Human Rights Unit was set up. However, despite this declaration of intent, the Unit still lacks any real teeth to bring about change. For example, it does not have any powers to monitor implementation of the principles set out in Harare, or for that matter, to monitor human rights violations.

Since 1985 -- what have been the results in reality?

Human rights violations around the Commonwealth continue. While government leaders meet to discuss closer integration and multilateral ties, the security forces in many countries continue to oppress their citizens in the most horrific ways possible.

Many government leaders gathered here would prefer human rights by and large to be kept off the agenda, or limited in a token way to one or two countries. In the name of trade and economics some governments prefer to sideline human rights altogether.

As for Australia for example, you can expect Prime Minister Howard to pledge support for human rights if questioned here. Yet, back in Canberra, his government is proposing draft legislation which would allow officials to disregard any human rights treaty Australia has ever ratified.

If the Commonwealth is really a society geared at improving the lot of the people living within its member states then our challenge to the leaders here is to make human rights the centre of their work.

Because if the Commonwealth does not serve its people then it has no basis and no future as an organization relevant to the lives and aspirations of those one billion people.