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Media update: Amnesty International urges Bangladesh government to request UN assistance in investigating war crimes

Amnesty International Secretary General Irene Khan told civil society in Dhaka today that the human rights violations carried out during the Liberation War of 1971 must be investigated.

Ms Khan urged the Caretaker Government to approach the United Nations to request assistance in following processes of international law and in setting up an inquiry. She added that the government could be assured of independent, impartial advice based on the experience of the thirty three commissions already established elsewhere around the world.

“Today there’s a worldwide global anti-impunity movement, like the global hunger movement” said Irene Khan referring to the progress made in this area in the Americas, Africa and Asia.

In a meeting with the Foreign Affairs Advisor, the Amnesty International delegation called on the Caretaker Government to uphold its international human rights law obligations, including the issue of derogation of human rights under the state of emergency in accordance with the UN Covenant on International Civil and Political Rights to which Bangladesh is a party. Welcoming the decision to establish the National Human Rights Commission, Ms. Khan called on the government to establish a strong and effective body.

Later in the day Amnesty International’s Secretary General gave the keynote speech at a “Human Rights Overcoming the Disappointment of Democracy” seminar.

She reiterated the strong consensus among the Bangladeshis the delegation has met this week that there should be a democratic government through free and fair elections by November 2008. But Ms Khan also acknowledged growing disparity, marginalisation and poverty had led to disappointments with democracy. She also pointed to the negative impact on human rights of the counter-terrorism strategies of western governments.

Acknowledging a vibrant civil society and an independent media as essential attributes of democracy, Ms. Khan urged the Caretaker Government to relax certain human rights restrictions imposed by the emergency regulations and called on the government to follow the rule of law in the prosecution of political leaders.

“Democracy is more than politics and political leaders. For true democracy, one must understand the relationship between the citizen and state,” said Irene Khan, “the citizen as the right-holder and state as the duty-holder.”

“Ordinary people can bring about extraordinary change. People power will change the world in the 21st century” she said, “democracy is the explicit expression of people power.”