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Americas: Human Rights Defenders: Persecution reaching emergency proportions

(Rio de Janeiro) The persecution of human rights defenders in the Americas is reaching emergency proportions. More killings of human rights defenders are documented in the Americas than in any other region in the world, said Irene Khan, Amnesty International's Secretary General.

Speaking from Brazil during her first visit to the country, Ms Khan launched the report *Essential actors of our time: Human Rights defenders in the Americas*. The report documents the killings, torture, "disappearance", arbitrary detention, spurious criminal charges, threats and surveillance that human rights activists suffer in Latin America, the Caribbean, the USA and Canada.

In Brazil as well as in the rest of the continent, human rights defenders are in increasing danger. They are often disqualified by authorities and parts of the media, as no more than "defenders of criminals". Human rights activists -- such as land activists, journalists, lawyers, indigenous leaders and relatives of victims of human rights violations -- face intimidations and threats and in some cases, are the targets of extra judicial executions. Impunity is common in most of these cases and governments are paying little, if any, attention to the reports of violations against human rights defenders.

"There is great disparity between the words and actions of government: in international forums they have led the way to create legal treaties to protect human rights defenders and yet these same principles are not enforced in their own countries," Ms Khan said.

Since August 2002, at least 15 human rights defenders and scores of trade unionist have been killed in Colombia. In Guatemala, one of the 18 human rights defenders killed between 2000 and 2003 had his tongue and ears removed. In Honduras several environmentalists and one human rights lawyer were killed between 2001 and 2003.

In many countries such as Argentina, Paraguay, Haiti, Bolivia, Canada and The United States, excessive and indiscriminate use of force during demonstrations has resulted in scores of killings, injuries, detentions and reports of torture against those exercising their right to peaceful assembly.

Cases of spurious criminal charges filed against human rights activists, including journalists, and complaints of defamation or other forms of *desacato* (disrespect to authority) offences have risen dramatically over the last two years, especially in Cuba, Guatemala and Colombia.

Surveillance, raids on the premises of non-governmental organizations and theft of important information have become commonplace and widespread.

"Human rights activists are an essential component of an open civil society," Ms Khan said.

"Lack of public trust in official institutions, corruption, weak or ineffective judicial and political institutions and impunity have pushed human rights defenders to the fore in the struggle to ensure states fulfil their duty to respect human rights."

Moreover, human rights activists in the Americas -- especially in Ecuador and Guatemala -- working to assess the relation between human rights and proposed free trade zones, investment and trade policies are increasingly facing attacks and intimidation.

"Criticism of governments cannot be deemed a threat to states. Criticism of trade policies and private sector companies cannot be deemed a threat to national economic interests, especially in countries where human rights defenders are essential parts of a dynamic society in the process of change," Ms Khan stressed.

Investigations into offences committed against human rights defenders are frequently veiled in secrecy, inconsistencies and irregularities as the perpetrators seek to cover up their crimes and pervert the course of justice. Most frequently, allegations are not taken seriously and no judicial investigation is initiated. Progress on a small number of cases is due in the main to pressure from the international community.

Five years on since the adoption by the UN General Assembly of the Declaration on Human Rights Defenders, a set of principles issued to ensure states guarantee the rights of those defending human rights.

"The challenge to the governments in the Americas is to convert human rights rhetoric into real commitments. They must establish the protection of human rights defenders as a priority on both national and regional human rights agendas," Ms Khan stated.

Amnesty International's report calls on all governments in the Americas to develop a plan to implement the principles of the UN Declaration. This plan should consider recommendations from local and national human rights organizations, as well as from international bodies.

Brazil has been the first country in the region to develop a National Coordination Plan for the protection of human rights defenders which will facilitate the creation of commissions in those states where insecurity of human rights activists is greatest.

"While structural problems and the lack of resources may be a constraint in pursuing improvements in the security of human rights defenders, in reality it is the absence of political will on the part of governments that allows violations against human rights defenders to continue, and the impunity with which these violations are perpetrated to prevail," Irene Khan concluded.

Background

Amnesty International's Secretary General, Irene Khan, is in Brazil for an 8 day visit where she will visit Sao Paulo, Rio de Janeiro and Brasilia to meet government authorities, representatives of civil society and victims of human rights violation. She will seek to establish a dialogue with the authorities on the human rights situation in the country and the government's role in the international arena.

For a full copy of the report:

***Essential actors of our time: Human Rights defenders in the Americas* please see:**

<http://web.amnesty.org/library/index/engamr010092003>

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For more information on Brazil, please see:

<http://web.amnesty.org/pages/bra-051103-summary-por> (Portuguese)

<http://web.amnesty.org/pages/bra-051103-summary-eng> (English)

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