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THE AMERICAS:
AMNESTY INTERNATIONAL CALLS FOR END TO
CENTURIES OF ABUSE OF INDIGENOUS HUMAN RIGHTS

The time has come for governments throughout the Americas to stop turning their backs on the human rights of indigenous peoples -- and end the hundreds of years of violations they have suffered, Amnesty International said today as it launched its latest report in Mexico City.

"For centuries, governments have often treated the rights of indigenous people with contempt," Amnesty International said. "Torturing, 'disappearing', and killing them in the tens of thousands and doing virtually nothing when others murder them."

In its report on indigenous peoples in the Americas -- released in the 500th anniversary year of the arrival of Europeans in the region -- the organization said discrimination against indigenous people means they are more likely to have their rights trampled on in the first place and then be let down by the justice system.

And those most vulnerable have sometimes been hit hardest -- young children have been extrajudicially executed; women have been raped by soldiers during armed conflict; and isolated Indian groups that have only recently come into contact with the surrounding society have been killed with impunity by miners and settlers.

In one striking case a one-month old baby "disappeared" with her mother in 1990 when they were among 85 Indian peasants seized by Guatemalan soldiers. Most of the others were returned to their village; Maria Josefa Tiu Tojin and her daughter have not been seen since.

As part of its ongoing work on indigenous peoples, Amnesty International is calling on governments to urgently tackle some of the key issues on indigenous human rights by carrying out effective investigations into abuses against indigenous peoples, bringing to justice those responsible and justly resolving land disputes that all too often lead to abuses.

For the 1993 UN Year of Indigenous Populations, the organization is pushing for all governments to establish commissions to review their country's record in implementing all international human rights standards for indigenous people.

"Disputes over land and resources are often at the root of many of the human rights abuses against indigenous people," Amnesty International said. "Thousands have also died, 'disappeared' or been tortured when they've been caught in the middle of the 'war on drugs' or civil conflicts."

Some of the most horrific human rights violations inflicted on indigenous peoples have taken place during the armed conflicts that have racked countries such as Colombia, El Salvador, Guatemala, and Peru. Entire villages were destroyed and thousands of indigenous peasants massacred during the height of the armed conflict in Guatemala in the early 1980s and in Peru thousands of Indians have been tortured and killed by both sides when the loyalties of whole communities have been questioned. In Colombia, three Arhuaco indigenous leaders were abducted, tortured and killed in 1990 on suspicion that they sympathised with an armed opposition group that operated in their territories despite the Indians' protests; the army officers implicated in the killings are still in active service.

Attacks on Indians in many countries including Brazil, Chile, Honduras, and Venezuela have often been stepped up during disputes over land – which is frequently wanted by the state or others for mining, logging, energy or tourism projects. In Brazil alone, scores of Indians have been murdered in land disputes with the apparent acquiescence of the authorities and in Honduras 10 members of the Xicague tribes have been killed in recent years. In Canada, inquiries into the allegations that several Mohawk Indians were ill-treated by police in 1990 during a prolonged confrontation over plans to develop a golf course near a sacred burial site have still not been completed.

The “war on drugs” has also taken its toll on indigenous lives, especially because many indigenous peoples live in drugs growing areas. A Quechua leader in Bolivia, for example, was picked up and tortured by the security police in 1989 because they believed he had protected a drug trafficker, a charge he denied.

“Prosecutions for such human rights abuses virtually never happen - whether those responsible are state agents, death squads or hired guns,” Amnesty International said. In Chile, the agents who arrested, “disappeared” and tortured Mapuche Indian leaders following the coup in the early 1970s were never brought to justice and in Brazil most killings of indigenous peoples are never prosecuted.

Indigenous peoples have at times been confronted by a different side of the law, however, being subjected to arbitrary detention and unfair trials. Last year in Mexico, members of the Ch’ol and Tzeltal indigenous communities peacefully protested against police abuse and discrimination in the courts, with more than 100 of them arrested, kicked, beaten and most of those threatened with death before being released without charge. And in the USA, Amnesty International has expressed concern about the fairness of trials of American Indian Movement leaders, including Leonard Peltier who was convicted of the murder of two Federal Bureau of Investigation (FBI) agents. In his case there is concern that fabricated evidence was used to extradite him from Canada and that FBI misconduct prejudiced the fairness of his trial.

“The leaders of indigenous movements have often been singled out for attack when they speak out on environmental issues, land claims or discrimination and are seen as a threat to government policies,” Amnesty International said. In Ecuador, for example, indigenous leaders involved in land disputes have been particularly singled out as targets of abuse including harassment, torture and killing.

Despite that risk, groups defending indigenous rights have been formed in increasing numbers in recent years. A number of major protest marches have been held in countries like Bolivia and Ecuador, relatives of victims have joined together in Guatemala and indigenous peoples are increasingly forming regional or international organizations to press for their rights to be respected.

“From the local to the international level, the message is that the centuries of violating the rights of the region’s original inhabitants must end once and for all,” Amnesty International said. “That’s a message to governments not only in the Americas, but also in other regions of the world.”