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**PRESS CONFERENCE STATEMENT  
BY PIERRE SANÉ, SECRETARY GENERAL  
AMNESTY INTERNATIONAL**

**LISBON, 5 DECEMBER 1996**

**(CHECK AGAINST DELIVERY)**

Thirty five years ago a man called Peter Benenson started Amnesty International in response to the political repression in Portugal. He launched a campaign to free all prisoners of conscience. That is, women and men detained solely for expressing their political beliefs.

Twenty two years ago the Portuguese people brought an end to the dictatorship and since then successive governments have promised to guarantee political liberties in the country.

Ten years ago Portugal joined the European Community and subsequent governments have committed themselves to observing the standards of human rights protection agreed upon by the member states.

Throughout all this period Amnesty International has been closely associated with human rights developments in the country and our members around the world have worked consistently to protect the human rights and fundamental freedoms of all people living in Portugal by ensuring that international standards are observed.

Over the past years we have made known to successive governments our concerns regarding the behaviour of members of the police and the National Republican Guard (GNR) and in particular the use of torture and ill-treatment by officers against persons in custody.

The situation has been aggravated by the failure of successive governments to reform the judicial system and to bring offenders to justice. This failure has resulted in a state of relative impunity for officers who commit such crimes.

But now Amnesty International is encouraged by the messages given by the new Portuguese government to finally commit itself to addressing our concerns by introducing necessary legislative and administrative reforms. This will hopefully contribute to ending the impunity that the perpetrators of these crimes have enjoyed for so long.

We are encouraged by the assurances received from the government and, in particular, the statements of the Minister of Justice, of the Minister of Internal Administration and of the Vice Prime Minister. They have outlined to us a programme for reform which, if implemented, we feel could result in a significant improvement in protection of human rights in the country.

The delegation was told that proposals for important amendments of the Penal Code and the Code of Penal Procedure would be presented to the Parliament in the coming year. The ministers responsible felt that the effect of these reforms would improve access to the judicial process in cases of ill-treatment and would speed up the administration of justice.

We also welcome the programme of administrative reform and the proposals to improve safeguards for persons in custody.

We hope that the necessary financial resources that have been promised will be made available to the respective ministries in order to ensure implementation of the proposed reforms.

We also raised individual cases, including the recent shooting and decapitation of a detainee in a police station in Sacavem by GNR officers. In another case, the delegation met the father of a recently deceased youth, Fernando Pinto, who died in hospital at the end of November. The cause of death was allegedly meningitis, but Amnesty International is concerned over allegations of ill-treatment during the immediate preceding period which he had spent in police custody.

Presently Amnesty International groups worldwide are working on cases of torture and ill-treatment in Portugal - some dating back many years - where offenders have still not been brought to justice.

We presented ministers with copies of 26 documents relating to torture and ill-treatment in this country published by Amnesty in the last three years.

On international issues Amnesty International continues to welcome the assurances of the Portuguese government that it would strive to work for an improved international human rights order. The delegation emphasized to the President and the Ministry of Foreign Affairs the importance of a strong international human rights policy, especially in view of Portugal's forthcoming membership of the UN Security Council and as a member of the European Union and the Council of Europe.

The worldwide human rights movement expects from Portugal an emphatic contribution to the upholding of the international system of human rights protection, especially in those countries in Asia, Africa and Latin America with which Portugal has historical and cultural ties.

We raised with the government our concerns regarding the human rights situation in three countries in particular in view of forthcoming developments:

- In Angola, the UN Security Council will be discussing today the withdrawal of UN troops and Amnesty International has urged the UN to establish an international human rights monitoring presence to safeguard the peace process;
- In Macau, Amnesty International is calling for the maintenance of the international standards of human rights protection after the transfer of the territory to China in 1999;
- and in East Timor, we urge that respect for human rights be a central element in the forthcoming 9th round of talks under the UN auspices between the Indonesian and Portuguese foreign ministers in New York.

We welcome the statements of the Portuguese government assuring us that human rights considerations will form an integral part of its policies in developing its relationship with these countries. We will

continue to liaise closely with the Portuguese government on the evolution of the human rights situation in these three countries.

The delegation received information indicating important deficiencies in the legislation on refugees which is currently under consideration. We raised specific issues relating to the proposed legislation with the government, the President of the Republic and the President of the Assembly of the Republic. The proper protection of refugees and asylum seekers, above all the fundamental principle of non-refoulement, is an issue that is of particular concern to Amnesty International worldwide. This principle of non-refoulement means that asylum seekers must not be turned back at the borders and airports. The Portuguese section of Amnesty calls on all sectors of society in the country to demand that the international duty of protection for those who flee from persecution to Portugal is fulfilled.

In conclusion, we are in general satisfied with the assurances which we have been given, but at the same time we would like to emphasize our continuing concern over torture and ill-treatment in Portugal and the need for the government to institute the necessary reforms to remedy these problems. We further urge the Portuguese government as a responsible member of the international community to play a full part in improving the protection of human rights worldwide.

Thank you very much for your attention.

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