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INTERNATIONAL COMMUNITY FLOUNDERS

IN FACE OF HUMAN RIGHTS DISASTERS

The world community is floundering in the face of today's human rights disasters -- from ethnic cleansing and growing refugee populations to the horrors of civil war and rising racism, Amnesty International's Secretary General Pierre Sané said today.

"The sad truth is that 45 years after the Universal Declaration on Human Rights was written, the world has singularly failed to meet the hopes it raised," Mr Sané said as he set out an agenda for action by governments, the United Nations, and human rights activists.

In a speech on the eve of Human Rights Day, marking the anniversary of the Declaration, Mr Sané pointed to the ethnic butchery in Burundi, the rising executions of juvenile offenders in the USA, and the continuing state terror in China where hundreds of thousands of people are arbitrarily incarcerated.

"In every region of the world it seems that human rights are being rolled back," Mr Sané said.

He criticized the hypocrisy of governments who today know that a bloodstained human rights record will damage their international relations, so many of them extol the virtues of human rights while going to great lengths to hide their crimes.

And the United Nations, which set forth today's human rights ideals in the 1948 Declaration, risks being overwhelmed by the scale and complexity of human rights disasters that test its impartiality and credibility.

In his speech at the London School of Economics, Mr Sane said the trend towards economic and social globalization is the backdrop for many of today's human rights violations, and creates pressures straining old and new nation states.

"Most intercommunal conflicts in central and Eastern Europe and Africa, the growth of religious fundamentalism and sectarianism in the Middle East, North America and parts of Asia, and the rise of the extreme right in Europe, can be interpreted as expressions of resistance to the global modernization process," Mr Sané said.

In his speech, Mr Sané spelled out what the United Nations, governments and human rights activists need to do to tackle the global threat to human rights.

United Nations

The United Nations must increase the resources for the human rights program, which now gets less than one per cent of the organization's budget. It should also establish a High Commissioner for Human Rights with a sharp and flexible mandate able to ensure that the UN identifies and responds to crises earlier and coordinate the UN's human rights program. The commissioner should ensure that human rights issues are integrated into all the UN's activities and particularly that human rights protection is part of all peacekeeping operations.

The UN General Assembly meeting in New York is now at a critical stage in the debate on the establishment of a High Commissioner, and many governments have made clear their resistance to a commissioner who could take really effective action to protect human rights.

Amnesty International has made clear that the commissioner should not simply be another bureaucrat, but should be someone with the capacity to make a substantial difference to the UN's human rights program -- responding to the needs of the victims and protecting people not governments.

Governments

Governments must back the work of the UN politically and financially, but above all they must take action in their own countries.

Amnesty International is calling on those governments to ratify all international human rights standards and treaties and to bring their laws and practices in line with those standards.

In practice, they must hold their own soldiers, police and prison guards to account and end the impunity which the perpetrators of human rights violations often take for granted.

They must extend their protection to refugees, stem the increasing attacks on human rights defenders, and start productive relationships with human rights organizations.

"Human rights violations are not an inevitable part of modern society. They are the consequence of decisions taken by state officials. These officials must be forced to change their ways," Mr Sané said.

Human rights activists

Human rights organizations already play a key role in exposing human rights violations and putting pressure on governments to end the abuses, Mr Sané said.

"Our experience shows that governments do respond to pressure. At Amnesty we see some of the rewards for concerted pressure."

Increasingly human rights groups will need to play a greater role in educating people about the rights enshrined in the Universal Declaration, and working together to push the entire human rights agenda forward.

The foundation for that cooperative work was laid at the World Conference on Human Rights, where 1,500 human rights organizations "proved that the human rights movement is a force to be reckoned with".

"It is ... up to the activists on the ground to develop a genuinely international movement that can challenge the way the world is run," Mr Sané said.

NOTE TO EDITORS

The full text of Mr Sané's speech is available from the Amnesty International press office on 071-413-5810.

The speech will be delivered at:

**5:30 pm, 9 December
London School of Economics, Old Theatre
Houghton Street, London
WC2A 2AE**

