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UNITED NATIONS: AMNESTY INTERNATIONAL URGES WORLD LEADERS TO TAKE CONCRETE STEPS TO ESTABLISH A PERMANENT INTERNATIONAL CRIMINAL COURT

NEW YORK -- More than 140 world leaders attending a commemorative session of the General Assembly of the United Nations -- held to mark its 50th anniversary -- plan to adopt a declaration that ignores the need to end impunity for those responsible for grave human rights violations.

"This declaration should call for prompt action to establish a permanent international court which could bring to justice those responsible for genocide, other crimes against humanity and serious violations of humanitarian law," Amnesty International said today.

For nearly half a century since the end of the Nuremberg and Tokyo trials, the United Nations (UN) has been studying the possibility of establishing a permanent international court. In that period, millions of people have been victims of these grave crimes but only a handful of cases have been tried by national courts.

The human rights organization stated that the two ad hoc international criminal tribunals established by the Security Council for Rwanda and the former Yugoslavia were a major step forward. These tribunals need continued support from all UN member states, but they are only a temporary stop gap.

"There is no justification to have temporary tribunals for permanent problems. It is now up to the General Assembly to establish quickly a permanent court which would try suspects in all countries," Amnesty International said.

The organization urged world leaders to agree that the General Assembly should agree to convene a conference and preparatory meetings in 1996 to draft a statute for such a court at the earliest possible date.

A permanent international criminal court would not be able to try every person suspected of such crimes, but it could act whenever national courts were unable or unwilling to do so. It would send a powerful signal to all those who think they are above the law and free to commit grave human rights violations with impunity. Governments should also show they are politically and financially supporting the two ad hoc tribunals.

"World leaders should comply with UN Security Council resolutions requiring all UN member states to cooperate with the two ad hoc tribunals by gathering evidence and transferring suspects to those tribunals," Amnesty International said.

"It is deeply shocking that only 12 out of 185 UN member states have adopted the necessary legislation more than two years after the establishment of the tribunal for former Yugoslavia. Further more, only three states have adopted such legislation nearly one year after the establishment of the tribunal for Rwanda." In many countries without such legislation, suspects cannot be arrested and transferred to the tribunals.

Amnesty International has declared that there could be no lasting peace in either Rwanda or former Yugoslavia without justice. It is, therefore, essential to bring to justice those responsible for genocide, crimes against humanity and serious violations of humanitarian law. They should not benefit from any special amnesty law or similar measures that might have the effect of exempting them from any criminal proceedings or sanction.

The organization has also called upon the leaders to ensure that the tribunals have adequate resources and to ensure that the current financial crisis facing the UN wouldn't interfere with the current work.

"Today, the world's governments have a rare opportunity to enhance the system of international justice. Last year's UN General Assembly once more postponed the decision on launching the court. This year is crucial," Amnesty International said. "This opportunity must **not** be lost."

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