

AI Index: IOR 41/29/93

16.00 hrs gmt Tuesday 1 June 1993

Distr: SC/PO

UN WORLD CONFERENCE ON HUMAN RIGHTS:

"SLAP IN THE FACE OF HUMANITY"

Amnesty International's Secretary General, Pierre Sané, today (Tuesday 1 June 1993) attacked the lack of commitment and political will shown by the world's governments on the UN World Conference on Human Rights as "a slap in the face of humanity".

In an outspoken speech to the Foreign Press Association in London, Pierre Sané said: "Governments have waited until virtually the last minute before drafting a final document for Vienna, and it shows. The text is littered with contradictions and radically differing proposals on which a great deal of work remains to be done.

"The draft document reflects the deep divisions on basic human rights issues that have dogged the preparations for this conference from the very beginning. With only two weeks left, there is a real risk that the conference will do nothing of significance to improve the lot of the thousands of victims of human rights violations around the world."

The first draft of a final document for the conference - which will have to undergo extensive negotiations to achieve consensus and all of which could still be substantially changed - was prepared at the final meeting of the intergovernmental Preparatory Committee in April, which spent most of its time arguing about process rather than substance.

"The United Nations decided to convene a World Conference on Human Rights in December 1990. Since then, while governments have been busy arguing about procedural issues, there have been at least 2,200 "disappearances" reported from some 25 countries. At least 4,000 people are known to have been executed and at least 7,500 people sentenced to death in over 30 countries," said Pierre Sané.

"During that time, Amnesty International has taken up the cases of over 4,400 people known or believed to be imprisoned for the non-violent exercise of their human rights in at least 65 countries. We have launched more than 2,000 urgent appeals in efforts to save detainees from torture, death in prison or other impending threats to their lives or fundamental rights. And these cases represent only a sliver of the entire spectrum of human rights abuse in the world."

Amnesty International has put forward specific proposals for improving the UN machinery for human rights protection. These include the establishment of a high-level Special Commissioner for Human Rights with the status, authority and resources to take independent and effective action in human rights crises involving grave violations, to co-ordinate human rights initiatives and to integrate them into all the UN's activities.

The draft final document does contain several alternative proposals for the establishment of a High Commissioner for Human Rights, but governments are still very far from reaching consensus on this issue.

Also, these proposals envisage a Commissioner established within the existing UN bureaucracy, appointed by the Secretary General - rather than mandated by the General Assembly and able to act with greater independence and initiative, not constrained by day-to-day management of a large secretariat.

Amnesty International is challenging all governments at Vienna to improve human rights protection in their own countries, to commit themselves to the universality, indivisibility and interdependence of all human rights, to ratify international human rights treaties and to initiate independent national reviews of the way those treaties have been respected.

As well as attending the official conference, Amnesty International will be participating in a full and varied program of parallel activities organized by non-governmental organizations (NGOs) during the two weeks, including an NGO Forum at the conference site between 10-12 June.

Amnesty International's theme for the conference is "Our World: Our Rights." On 14 June, the organization will piece together a vast patchwork in the centre of Vienna, consisting of hundreds of thousands of cards sent from individuals all over the world demanding that the World Conference take action to protect the human rights of everybody, everywhere.

"What is at stake in Vienna is a vision of a world in which all human beings can live in the knowledge that certain basic rights are inviolable," said Pierre Sané.

"The success of the World Conference will not be measured in fine-sounding words but on whether it will have any real impact on the lives of countless millions of victims suffering daily."

EMBARGOED FOR 16.00 HRS GMT TUESDAY 1 JUNE