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Fighting torture -- a global problem, a common goal

“They took ninety of us prisoners to Mitrovica (Kosovo) for questioning. This was done by ordinary policemen They put a knife to my throat and told me that I had to give them the names of people in the Kosovo Liberation Army. When I said that I had no names, they threatened to kill me. They threatened to execute my family. They said that they had raped my mother, my wife. They beat me with a stick and made me count as I was beaten, 50 on my back, 60 on one knee, 60 on the other. They brought in a Serbian school boy of 12 or 13 and asked him if he wanted to beat one of us ... We heard the man whom he picked screaming, but we didn't dare look to see what was happening.”

Statement by a torture victim, May 1999

On the eve of the 26 June United Nations' International Day in Support of Victims of Torture, the aim of completely eradicating torture and ill-treatment still remained a distant dream due to governments' indifference, Amnesty International said today.

In a groundbreaking decision, the United Kingdom House of Lords again denied former General Augusto Pinochet of Chile immunity from prosecution for acts of torture on 24 March 1999, sending a loud and clear message that head-of-state immunity does not grant freedom to torture.

Nevertheless, all over the world, people continued to be tortured on a large scale. As part of the ongoing campaign to fight such practices, Amnesty International representatives from 60 countries worldwide gathered at a major meeting in London today.

Quoting figures from its 1999 Annual Report, the organization said people in 125 countries worldwide were tortured or ill-treated by state authorities in 1998, and that deaths in custody resulting from these practices, as well as lack of medical care or cruel, inhuman or degrading prison conditions, occurred in 51 countries around the globe.

“Torture is a global problem which can only be overcome if all governments take seriously their obligation to protect their citizens and abide by international law,” Amnesty International said.

“Until individual states recognise that all members of the international community have a part to play in the fight against torture, pain and suffering will continue to be inflicted on people in the majority of the world's countries.”

As recent reports from victims of torture in Kosovo has shown, suffering torture and ill-treatment is a traumatic experience which leaves serious physical and psychological scars. The experience can affect victims for the rest of their lives.

Although 114 governments have so far acceded to or ratified the UN Convention against Torture and Other Cruel, Inhuman or Degrading Treatment or Punishment, (CAT), it remains the least ratified of all international human rights treaties.

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For more information please call Amnesty International's New York office on 1 212 867 8878 or the press office in London, UK, on 44 171 413 5566.