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**MIDDLE EAST: WOMEN'S RIGHTS UNDER ATTACK**

In the Middle East, where women are suffering a wide range of human rights violations because of their gender, Amnesty International reminded the governments in the region that human rights for women -- as for men -- are protected by international law.

"All governments in the Middle East should respect women's rights, and their right to freedom of association and peaceful activities," Amnesty International said.

In a report released today, the human rights organization documents the situation of women in 17 countries of the Middle East and North Africa. This report shows that in the violence of wars and conflicts, women are killed, taken hostage, raped and driven from their homes. In peace, they are imprisoned and tortured for opposing the government or simply for being related to political activists. .

Scores of women in Kuwait were deliberately killed or transferred to Iraq, when Iraqi troops invaded Kuwait. The end of the Iraqi occupation did not end the suffering for many women in Kuwait. Accused of "collaboration" with the Iraqi forces, some women were arbitrarily detained and faced unfair trials.

In Iraq, the aftermath of the war did not mean the end of the human right violations, particularly for women Shi'a Muslim Arabs in the south and Kurdish women in the north.

Because of the shame attached to rape, few of the victims in the Middle East have talked openly about their experience. Nevertheless some have described how rape has been used like a weapon by the Iraqi security forces.

"No matter how much I heard about the rape, nothing prepared me for the actual experience. It lives on inside me. I still bleed a lot. It was done not by just one man, but a group of them," a Kurdish woman said.

Despite their international obligations, the majority of governments violate human rights with impunity and when it comes to women's human rights, several of them take a particularly restrictive view, in violation of the international treaties that they have ratified.

\* In Tunisia, hundreds of women have been harassed, detained and ill-treated. At least six were imprisoned in the last two months on charges of links with an unauthorized Islamist group.

\* In Iran, a former female prisoner told Amnesty International: "We thought that we were in a world of death".

\* Since the outbreak of "pro-democracy" protests in Bahrain in 1994, women and schoolgirls have been arrested, held without charge or trial and ill-treated.

\* In Syria, Doha 'Ashur al-'Askari was arrested in 1993 for her political opinions. There has been no news of her since 1994. Her daughter, Kamilya, was born in Duma Women's Prison in Damascus.

\* In the West Bank, a young student was arrested in June 1992. For 52 days, Abir al-Wahaydi was kept in solitary confinement.

\* In south Lebanon, seven women remain locked up without charge or trial in the Khiam Detention Centre, which was set up in 1985 by the South Lebanon Army with Israeli Government assistance and supervision.

\* Several women have alleged that they were ill-treated in custody in the areas under the jurisdiction of the Palestinian Authority during the past year.

\* Many Sahrawi women have "disappeared" following their arrest by Moroccan security forces since 1975.

Women have continued to be killed and subjected to other abuses by armed opposition groups, Amnesty International said.

In Algeria, for example, the political leadership of armed groups defining themselves as "Islamic groups" declared that they respect women's rights, including the right of women not to wear the *hijab*. Despite these declarations, women continue to be targeted and killed by these groups. Women may receive threats warning them to cover their hair, stop working in the public sector and in the media. Women have also been killed and injured by the security forces.

In some countries, a woman can be arrested, tortured or ill-treated simply because she is the wife, sister or mother of an Islamist or political activist. Many such cases have been reported in countries such as in Egypt, Syria and Tunisia.

In others, women face cruel judicial punishments and even death. For certain offences, Iranian women face sentences of flogging and stoning to death. Iranian law even specifies the types of stone to be used.

If they don't cover their hair, women risk arrest and flogging in Iran or Sudan. If they do, they are harassed in Tunisia.

Despite these widespread violations, women in the Middle East defend their human rights in many organizations: Egyptian women run a centre for the management and rehabilitation of victims of violence; in Israel and the Occupied Territories Palestinian and Israeli women protest together against human rights violations; in Tunisia, a group of women signed a petition in 1994 calling on the authorities to respect freedom of expression. In Amnesty International sections and groups in the Middle East, women play a leading role.

Amnesty International will attend the Fourth United Nations World Conference on Women to be held in Beijing in September 1995 to affirm that women's human rights are universal and indivisible.  
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