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MIDDLE EAST: QUESTIONS AND ANSWERS ON THE GULF CRISIS

Press Officers and other people in AI have been receiving questions from the media and the public about various aspects of AI's policies in relation to the Gulf crisis. Here is guidance to help handle such queries. If you have other questions, please do not hesitate to check with the Press Office at the IS.

1. What is AI's position on the current armed conflict in the Gulf?

AI's concerns focus strictly on the question of human rights. It takes no position on political, military or territorial questions. The organization has consistently reported patterns of human rights violations in virtually all the countries involved in the current crisis. It has been increasingly disturbed by the failure of the international community adequately to address these long-standing issues and by the selective use of Amnesty International reports by parties to the conflict.

The Charter of the United Nations explicitly recognizes the fact that human rights violations can threaten international peace and stability. At the same time, bearing in mind also the United Nations objective of securing world peace, the international mechanisms that have been adopted to protect people's rights aim to do so without recourse to the suffering that war inevitably entails.

2. Does AI take a position on the question of peace?

The Universal Declaration of Human Rights clearly states that

"recognition of the inherent dignity of the equal and inalienable rights of all members of the human family is the foundation of freedom, justice and peace in the world".

Through its work for universal human rights AI contributes to this vision. The organization, however, does not address issues that fall outside its precise mandate in the field of human rights and does not take positions on the much broader questions of peace and international stability.

Note: AI's position on peace is spelled out in the circular on AI and Peace: An Explanatory Note -- AI Index: POL 03/01/85

3. Does AI regard war itself as a human rights violation? Shouldn't AI oppose it on these grounds?

The starting point for all AI's policies is its Statute, which specifies the precise objectives of the organization. These are to free prisoners of conscience, ensure fair trials for political prisoners and oppose torture and executions. The organization has not adopted policies that fall outside this very specific framework. It therefore takes no position on other issues in the field of human rights or on the broad questions of war and peace. It is nevertheless confident that its efforts to protect human rights are, in the words of the Nobel peace prize citation awarded to AI in 1977, a contribution to "securing the ground for freedom, for justice and thereby also for peace in the world".

4. What is AI's position on human rights violations occurring during armed conflict?

The human rights that AI seeks to protect are the same in times of peace and war. We will adopt as prisoners of conscience anyone imprisoned solely for the non-violent expression of his or her beliefs. AI guidelines on the adoption of conscientious objectors to military service remain in force. We will continue to press for fair and prompt trials for all political prisoners. We will maintain our opposition to torture, other cruel, inhuman or degrading treatment punishment of all prisoners and our opposition to the death penalty.

5. What is AI's position on prisoners of war?

The organization mandated in international law to protect prisoners of war is the International Committee of the Red Cross. However, AI is naturally concerned that in any armed conflict captives may be at risk from human rights abuses such as torture and execution. It will monitor any allegations that prisoners of war are being subjected to such treatment, and raise these with the relevant authorities. AI urges all parties to a conflict to give the International Committee of the Red Cross access to all prisoners of war, as a safeguard against ill-treatment, as well as to other victims of the conflict.

AI has no reliable information on the current treatment of prisoners of war now being held. It received allegations about the treatment of prisoners of war held by both sides during the Iran/Iraq war but was unable to verify any of these. Journalists or others seeking detailed information on the rights and procedures affecting prisoners of war should be advised to contact the Press Office of the International Committee of the Red Cross in Geneva, Tel: 41 22 - 346001.

6. What is AI's position on the killing of civilians, including by bombing?

The two forms of killing that fall within the mandate of AI are: the imposition of the judicial death penalty and the carrying out of extrajudicial executions. AI opposes both of these regardless of whether a state of war exists or not. AI's opposition to such killings is based in part on determining that the killings are intentional. For example, AI would act if it learned of cases in which defenceless civilians or captured combatants were executed. It does not, however, become involved in cases where civilians are killed in cross-fire between opposing forces or as a consequence of government attempts to achieve military objectives, for example by aerial bombardment.

7. Some people feel that AI may have contributed to the outbreak of war by issuing its report on human rights violations in Iraq-occupied Kuwait. What is AI's answer to that charge?

AI rejects this suggestion. The organization has, in recent months, issued statements on human rights abuses in a number of the countries involved in this crisis. It has shown its usual impartiality in so doing -- and each statement was part of the organization's continuing efforts to expose and halt the abuses taking place in the region, as elsewhere. AI is familiar with the tendency of governments of all persuasions to use human rights selectively, but AI must continue to report on human rights issues consistently. It has repeatedly made clear its deep-seated objection to the selective use of human rights issues by governments and opposition groups alike.

In issuing its statements on human rights violations in Iraqi-occupied Kuwait, AI repeatedly made clear that it took no position on the territorial or other aspects of the Gulf crisis. AIUSA expressed its deep distress at the selective use of AI's report on human rights violations in Iraqi-occupied Kuwait during the debates in the US Congress about the authorization of military action.

8. There have been doubts cast on the accuracy of some of the statistics cited in AI's report on Kuwait. What is AI's position on these criticisms?

In its 19 December 1990 report "Iraq/Occupied Kuwait: Human rights violations since 2 August", Amnesty International detailed the torture and extrajudicial execution of hundreds of victims and the imprisonment of several thousand prisoners.

The report was based on medical evidence and in-depth interviews with more than 100 people from about a dozen countries, including interviews by investigators who travelled to Bahrain and Saudi Arabia to talk to victims of abuse, doctors who treated them, relatives and eyewitnesses.

As with all reports where Amnesty International is unable to enter the country concerned, it has been impossible to verify all details. Nevertheless Amnesty International believes its report paints an accurate picture of the horrifying violations which were inflicted on victims in Kuwait.

In this regard, Amnesty International believes there is compelling evidence that the large-scale killing of babies resulted from the removal of infants from incubators by or on the orders of Iraqi security forces. This killing occurred in the first three months of the occupation of Kuwait.

Since the report's publication conflicting reports about the numbers of baby deaths after removal from incubators have emerged and doubt has been cast on the credibility of the statement quoted in the report that 312 babies had died in this way.

In its report Amnesty International cited reports by doctors and other medical personnel, including those belonging to the Red Crescent.

Amnesty International is in no doubt that babies died on a largescale. Since the report, it has continued to receive further information confirming this. In keeping with its normal working practices, it will assess the various accounts relevant to the numbers who died in the light of its most up to date information.

8. As a "Western organization", how can AI have the objectivity necessary to make judgments about this crisis?

This question is, itself, based on two fundamental mistakes. First of all, AI is not a "Western organization". It is an international movement of over a million people in more than 150 countries. These are people of almost every faith and culture. They belong to AI because it is an impartial organization that concentrates on the international protection of human rights without taking stands on partisan, political issues. Secondly, AI does not make judgments about issues that fall outside its mandate: it concentrates exclusively on the protection of a set of human rights standards that have been agreed by the international community as applying to all nations both in time of peace and in time of war.

