
AMNESTY INTERNATIONAL NEWS SERVICE 71/95

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NEWS SERVICE ITEMS: EXTERNAL - SYRIA (This item is embargoed until a 11 April international release), PAPAL ENCYCLICAL (this item is being sent to targeted media interested in death penalty/religious affairs), and BRAZIL (This item is being sent international press contacts from the IS).

NOTE TO PRESS OFFICERS: RWANDA Amnesty International has learned that the trial of seven people, including a juvenile, accused of involvement in the mass killings in 1994 has been adjourned indefinitely. A Letter to the Government of Rwanda is being prepared and a press statement will prepared on the basis of that letter.

NOTE TO PRESS OFFICERS: ITALY The Italy report will not go in the weekly mailing until the 26 May, so the researchers will try to mail some copies directly to the sections before that date.

FURTHER NOTE TO PRESS OFFICERS: We have copies of Mr dos Santos' handwritten letter. Please contact Soraya Bermeyo, Americas/Europe Press Officer, if you would like a fax of this for press work.

INTERNATIONAL NEWS RELEASES

SYRIA - 11 April - SEE NEWS SERVICE 32/95

MONGOLIA - 18 APRIL - SEE NEWS SERVICE 67/95

ETHIOPIA - 19 APRIL - SEE NEWS SERVICE 59/95

TIBET - 9 MAY- SEE NEWS SERVICE 64/95

GERMANY - 16 MAY - SEE NEWS SERVICE 59/95

ROMANIA - 22 MAY - SEE NEWS SERVICE 66/95

TARGETED AND LIMITED NEWS RELEASES

**** ITALY - 25 APRIL **** - See NEWS SERVICE 70/95

JAPAN - 4 MAY - SEE NEWS SERVICE 64/95

ISRAEL AND OCCUPIED TERRITORIES - 11 May - SEE NEWS SERVICE 59/95

IRAN - 31 May - SEE NEWS SERVICE 59/95

EVENTS AND MISSIONS

The details below are for your information only, and there may or may not be media work involved. Can you please not publicize anything until further notice from the IS.

MISSION TO HAITI 18 March - 3 April - SEE NEWS SERVICE 58/95

MISSION TO GUATEMALA 21 MARCH - 10 APR - SEE NEWS SERVICE 67/95

MISSION TO PARAGUAY & URUGUAY 22 MARCH - 12 APRIL - SEE NEWS SERVICE 67/95

MISSION TO CHAD - 27 April - SEE NEWS SERVICE 59/95

AI INDEX: MDE 24/WU 01/95

EMBARGOED FOR 0001 HRS GMT TUESDAY 11 APRIL 1995

SYRIA: RADICAL MEASURES NEEDED TO IMPROVE APPALLING PAST HUMAN RIGHTS RECORD

In Syria, thousands of men and women remain in prison on political grounds at the mercy of the government security forces, who are subjecting them to gross human rights violations without any fear of accountability.

"Thousands of these political prisoners have been denied the right to fair trial, scores have simply 'disappeared', others continue to be held years after they have fully served their prison sentences and dozens have died in custody, allegedly as a result of torture," Amnesty International said in a report released today.

For decades, different branches of the Syrian security forces have special powers granted under a state of emergency legislation to arrest political suspects as they wish and hold them secretly for as long as they wish without any fear of being held to account.

Security forces act separately from each other, reinforcing the secrecy of detention and making it difficult for relatives to trace detainees' whereabouts or find out any information about them, according to the Amnesty International report "Syria -- Repression and impunity: The forgotten victims."

Relatives frequently end up going from one security branch office to another, searching for news about their detained loved ones, only to have security officers totally deny holding their relatives or having any knowledge of their whereabouts.

Such relatives are left with no option but to wait:

- ◆ The family of Riad Al-Turk, a prisoner of conscience arrested in October 1980 and held without charge or trial, waited 13 years before they were allowed to visit him in July 1993. They have not been allowed to see him again.
- ◆ The family of Michael Sa'adey, a physician reportedly arrested or abducted from a street in Damascus by two people riding in a jeep, have not received any official response about his whereabouts.
- ◆ In other cases there has been no news at all: Walid bin Khalis Al-Humsi, a university student; Muhammad Ahmed Al-Sha'ar, a doctor; Ihsane bin Murad, a dentist; and Muhammad Mustafa Salihand Ziyad Mahmoud Al-Shayekh "disappeared" following arrest. The first two were reportedly arrested in 1982 in Damascus, the third in 1991 in Hama, and the last two during the 1980s in Aleppo.
- ◆ Similarly, the families of hundreds of detainees held in connection with various political organizations, as well as foreign nationals such as Lebanese, Palestinians, and Jordanians, are all still waiting for word of their fate.

In July 1994 Amnesty International submitted a memorandum to the Syrian Government describing its concerns with details of more than 1000 cases of individual victims of human rights violations, from arbitrary arrest to indefinite incommunicado detention, unfair trials, "disappearances" and torture. The memorandum also made recommendations of redress.

In October of the same year, an Amnesty International delegation visited Damascus and held lengthy talks with government ministers and other high-level officials about the organization's concerns. These authorities said they would study the memorandum and respond.

To date, no response has been received by Amnesty International.

Although torture is a crime punishable by imprisonment in Syria, it remains widespread, indicating the Syrian Government's failure to act and to stop its use. And in most cases in which political detainees have died in custody in recent years, torture and ill-treatment have allegedly been the main or a contributory factor.

No deaths in custody are known to have been subjected to any thorough, independent and impartial investigation, including that of Salah Jadid, who died suddenly on 19 August 1993 in Al-Mezze prison after almost 23 years in detention without charge or trial.

Executions after unfair trials remain of serious concern. Hundreds of people have been sentenced to death over the past two decades; most were executed. Amnesty International is also concerned about the government's expansion of the scope of this cruel, inhuman and degrading punishment during the past two decades.

The Syrian Government has taken some positive steps in the field of human rights in recent years, including the release of several thousand political prisoners, but these actions have fallen far short of what is required, according to Amnesty International.

To redress these gross human rights violations, Amnesty International calls on the Syrian Government now, as a matter of urgency, to:

- ◆ release immediately all prisoners of conscience,
- ◆ review the cases of all political prisoners serving sentences after unfair trials,
 - ◆ clarify the fate of "disappeared" prisoners,
- ◆ set up an independent and impartial body to investigate all allegations of torture, deaths in custody and "disappearances",
- ◆ halt executions and abolish the death penalty.

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PAPAL ENCYCLICAL A CLEAR AND IMPORTANT STEP FORWARD ON DEATH PENALTY ISSUE

Amnesty International welcomed references in the Pope's encyclical on life issued last week that substantially support the non-use of the death penalty.

"This is a clear and important step forward by the Catholic church on this question, reflecting the growing opinion within the church and in civil society that state executions are a violation of human rights," Amnesty International said.

Amnesty International noted that the encyclical made public on 30 March was in line with the current practice in the Vatican where the Pope frequently intercedes with state authorities in an effort to prevent imminent executions.

In the 56th paragraph of the document Evangelium Vitae, or The Gospel of Life, the Pope expresses strong reservations about the use of the death penalty, although he does not exclude it entirely.

The Pope notes that in society, as well as in the church, there exists "a growing tendency to demand that [the death penalty] be applied in a very limited way or even that it be abolished completely."

Later in that same paragraph, the Pope states that the death penalty should not be used "except in cases of absolute necessity: in other words, when it would not be possible otherwise to defend society." He affirms that such situations are becoming less and less likely: "Today... such cases are very rare, if practically non-existent."

Earlier in the encyclical the Pope also refers positively to the abolition of the death penalty, Amnesty International noted. In paragraph 27, when speaking about the "signs of hope" in today's world, he cites "growing public opposition to the death penalty, even when such a penalty is seen as a kind of 'legitimate defence' on the part of society."

The Pope goes on to state: "Modern society in fact has the means of effectively suppressing crime by rendering criminals harmless without definitively denying them the chance to reform."

The grounds on which the death penalty may be applied as stated in the encyclical are clearly more restrictive than in the Catechism of the Catholic Church issued in December 1992, which stated that public authority must limit itself to "bloodless means" to protect "public order and the safety of persons", if such means are available.

At a press conference presenting the encyclical at the Vatican on 30 March, Cardinal Josef Ratzinger, Prefect of the Vatican's Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith, said that the Catechism would be revised in relation to the death penalty in light of the encyclical.

ENDS\

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BRAZIL: AMNESTY INTERNATIONAL'S SECRETARY GENERAL RAISES CONCERN ON SAFETY
OF KEY WITNESS TO CANDELARIA MASSACRE

In a communication addressed directly to President Fernando Henrique Cardoso, Mr. Pierre Sané -- currently visiting Brazil -- raised the organization's concern for the physical safety of a key witness to the killing of eight children in Rio de Janeiro in July 1993, in what has become known as the "Candelaria Massacre."

Based mainly on Mr Wagner dos Santos' testimony, three military police officers were charged and are awaiting trial for the killings. Amnesty International has already expressed its concerns on the safety of this key witness in previous communications to the authorities. He is currently at the Firemen's Hospital in Rio de Janeiro for medical treatment and for his own protection, after an attempt against his life in December 1994.

In his communication -- dated 3 April 1995 -- Amnesty International's Secretary General expressed his concern at denunciations made personally by Wagner dos Santos during Mr Sané's visit to the hospital. According to dos Santos' own verbal testimony, he has been threatened and harassed by the lawyer of one of the accused police officers and by other unidentified individuals -- believed to be members of the military police -- in an attempt to force him to alter his testimony.

Furthermore, Mr Sané emphasized his disquiet at a letter -- also dated 3 April this year -- which Wagner dos Santos sent to his lawyer asking for a place to stay until the trial: "because I have been placed in a room and prevented from going out to walk in the corridor or talk to people, which means that I am held incommunicado."

The letter continues: "I know that this is unnecessary. I can see that I am being treated as a prisoner, but even prisoners have the right to sunbathe and talk to whoever they choose. Why deprive me of this right if I am not a prisoner?"

Mr Sané stressed his belief that the treatment described by Wagner dos Santos can only be a reprisal for denunciations he made during his visit, and urged President Cardoso to take action to ensure the Brazilian state fulfils its obligation to guarantee the safety of the witness.

In this, his first visit to Brazil, the human rights organization's Secretary General has conducted official meetings with the Brazilian authorities and met victims of human right violations.

Discussions during Mr Sané's meeting with the President on 29 March included issues such as the need for a national program for the protection of witnesses, prosecutors, lawyers, human rights defenders and victims as an essential tool in the fight against impunity in Brazil. Mr dos Santo's case accentuates the need for immediate steps in that direction.

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News editors note: For an interview with Amnesty International representatives currently visiting Brazil, please contact Mr José Arbex at (55) 11 - 571 - 8799 or the organization's research team at (55) 11 978 - 7900 or call the Hotel Continental at (51) 225 - 3233.