

[Page 1]

[NB This article is embargoed until the launch of the SVAW campaign on 5 March]

Stop all violence against women: it's in our hands

Violence against women is the greatest human rights scandal of our times

The message from AI's groundbreaking report, published to launch a worldwide campaign to Stop Violence against Women, is that this is the greatest human rights scandal of our times.

At least one out of every three women has been beaten, coerced into sex, or abused in her lifetime. More than 60 million women are "missing" from the world today as a result of sex-selective abortions and female infanticide. Every year, millions of women are raped by partners, relatives, friends and strangers, by employers and colleagues, soldiers and members of armed groups.

Violence against women during armed conflicts has reached epidemic proportions. Civilians, and especially women, have become the primary targets of armed combatants. Gang rape has been so systematic and brutal in the war-torn Democratic Republic of Congo that doctors in the country are now classifying vaginal destruction as a war crime.

Violence in the family is endemic all over the world; the overwhelming majority of victims are women and girls. In the USA, for example, women account for around 85 per cent of the victims of domestic violence.

As victims of war, family violence and harmful traditional practices, and unable to control their own reproductive and sexual lives, women are denied their right to be free from violence. Governments not only fail to implement or introduce laws to protect women's rights, but also apply discriminatory legislation.

Everyone has the right to be free from violence and treated equally – these are basic human rights. When these rights are denied, women are prevented from enjoying other human rights, such as access to legal redress, to education or health care.

A global pattern

It is easy to think that violence against women only happens in places of conflict or repression, to other people, not to us. The truth is that it is an abuse that cuts across boundaries of wealth, race, culture and sexual identity. Wherever you live, women are suffering violence.

Actual or threatened violence creates an atmosphere of fear that limits the lives of women everywhere and society is impoverished economically, politically and culturally as a result.

Roots of violence

The underlying causes of violence against women lie in gender discrimination – the denial of women's equality with men in all areas of life.

Violence is used by men to dominate women, particularly through the control of their sexuality. Many women are targeted for specific forms of violence because of their race, class, culture, sexual identity or HIV status, or because they are from poor or marginalized communities.

During armed conflicts, violence against women is often used as a weapon of war, in order to dehumanize the women themselves, or to persecute their community. Women who flee their homes to escape violence or conflict, or leave to try to find a better life, often find themselves at risk of abuse and exploitation, with little or no protection.

Violence against women is not “natural” or “inevitable” - it persists because society allows it to. Virtually every culture in the world contains forms of violence against women that are nearly invisible because they are seen as normal or acceptable.

As long as violence against women is condoned or ignored by society and authorities, as long as the perpetrators are not punished, violence against women will continue.

Challenging Violence Against Women

All over the world, women have led brave and inspiring campaigns against this violence. They have achieved dramatic changes in laws, policies and practices. But the violence still persists.

AI's worldwide campaign will mobilize both men and women to counter violence against women, as a contribution to the efforts of women's rights movements around the world.

Change must come at international, national and local levels. Governments, communities and individuals must bring it about. International treaties must be respected, good laws must be adopted and bad ones abolished, better support systems for survivors must be put in place and attitudes, prejudices and social beliefs that foster and reinforce violence against women must be challenged.

If we are going to be successful we must:

- Speak out against violence against women, listen to women and believe them;
- Confront those in authority if they fail to prevent, punish and redress violence against women;
- Challenge religious, social, and cultural attitudes and stereotypes which diminish women's humanity;
- Promote women's equal access to political power, decision-making and resources; and
- Support women to organize themselves to stop the violence.

Only if we all work together can we end the cycle of violence - It's in our hands.

See: *It's in our hands. Stop violence against women* (ACT 77/001/2004).

[Picture caption: South Korean women used as sex slaves by the Japanese Imperial Army during the Second World War seek redress ©AP]

Women in Casamance speak out about rape

“They took off my knickers with a knife, they spread my legs and put sand and a piece of wood up my genitals with their four fingers. I bled, I fainted, I thought I was going to die. I couldn't walk for five days.” Testimony of Diminga Ndecky, victim of a

sexual assault in Casamance, Senegal

Diminga Ndecky was attacked in July 1999 by members of the *Mouvement des forces démocratiques de Casamance* (MFDC), an armed opposition group demanding independence for the southern Senegalese region of Casamance. More than four years later she still suffers from the physical and psychological after-effects.

Women have paid a particularly heavy price throughout this conflict between the Senegalese security forces and the MFDC, which has continued since 1982. Some women have been taken hostage, others have been kidnapped. Some have been raped or threatened with rape.

Dozens of women whose husbands have “disappeared” live with the harsh reality of the uncertain fate of their husbands. Many face raising a family with no material aid and often serious economic difficulties.

When her husband “disappeared” in August 1999 after being arrested by the Senegalese security forces, Khady Bassène was refused the right to her husband’s retirement pension because she could not produce his death certificate. Since then, her financial situation and that of her children has steadily deteriorated as she was not able to cultivate her fields alone and was evicted from her home in March 2002.

She had to cope with her children’s questions about their father. “I told the oldest ones that their father had been arrested by the soldiers and that I was looking for him but I did not tell the youngest ones the truth. Whenever they asked me where their father was I told them he was in the fields.”

For two years AI has followed the daily struggle of seven women victims of the Casamance conflict. The organization’s aim was to enable them to speak out and help them to find concrete ways to improve their situation.

In December 2003, four of the women attended a press conference for the publication of AI’s report, *Senegal: Casamance women speak out* (AFR 49/002/2003). They told their painful stories and asked firmly for justice and financial redress.

AI is launching an action to find ways to provide psychological and economic help in cooperation with Senegalese civil society and the international community. These seven women have shown admirable determination to overcome their ordeal for their own benefit and that of their children. It is time for the two parties to the conflict to show the same level of courage.

[Picture caption: These three women have spoken out in public about the human rights abuses they suffered during the long conflict in the southern Senegalese region of Casamance. They are demanding justice and compensation. © AI]

[Page 2]

AI takes its message to Brazil’s President

The election of metal worker and union leader Luiz Inácio Lula da Silva to the presidency of Brazil, in November 2002, marked a significant political change in the country and potentially in the region as a whole. His election offered AI an important opportunity to raise both its traditional and new concerns with the Brazilian government. In November 2003, AI’s Secretary General Irene Khan visited Brazil to meet President Lula and raise issues on human rights in Brazil, in the region and

around the world.

During the eight years since the last visit by AI's Secretary General to Brazil, when Pierre Sané met with former President Fernando Henrique Cardoso, the context of human rights in the country has changed. Today, thanks to the tireless work of local NGOs and the support of international campaigners, federal governments are no longer able to deny the extent of systematic violations suffered by a large part of the population. From the local Brazilian media to the UN, the problems of torture and summary executions by police have been widely analysed and denounced.

Nevertheless, during AI's visit to the cities of São Paulo, Rio de Janeiro and Brasília, Irene Khan saw the continued abuses suffered predominantly by the socially excluded. In Sapopemba, on the outskirts of São Paulo, she heard from many local residents of the discriminatory and heavy-handed policing which regularly targets the community as a whole and results in the violent deaths of numerous young men. In the community of Borel, in Rio de Janeiro, family members took her to the place where four young men were shot, apparently in a police ambush, a practice widely denounced throughout the city. In the Polinter police station, also in Rio de Janeiro, she saw hundreds of young men packed into small airless cells, in what she described as "depositories for the poor".

Time and again in meetings with NGOs, working on issues ranging from land rights, women's rights, indigenous rights, human rights defenders, torture and public security, AI heard how the socially excluded continue to suffer a growing number of violations at the hands of state officials and private actors and how those responsible go unpunished.

The Secretary General took the messages that she heard from these communities and the human rights activists to the governors of São Paulo and Rio de Janeiro. She urged them to reassess measures adopted to combat high levels of crime, stressing AI's message that security for some could not be a justification for human rights violations against poor sectors of society.

To the President, who made the ending of hunger his central social policy, Irene Khan brought AI's message of the need to protect all human rights equally. While welcoming the government's work to combat hunger, she stressed the need to ensure the end of violations by state officials and guarantee the right of all to live in peace.

To further this the Secretary General invited President Lula to champion AI's campaign for an international arms trade treaty. This was met with keen interest.

With extensive publicity, the visit proved an important basis for AI to continue its work on Brazil with a strong message on the indivisibility of human rights and the right of all to security and peace.

[Picture captions:

In November 2003, family members show AI where four young men were shot, apparently in a police ambush in Borel, Rio de Janeiro, Brazil © AI

AI's Secretary General (left) hands President Lula a copy of the Urgent Action issued on his behalf in 1982 © AI]

Breaking the silence on rape in Chechnya

'In our society rape is worse than murder'

Rape is a taboo subject in Chechen society, as it is in many countries around the world. However, Rosa and Visa Kungaev are prepared to brave the taboo in their quest for justice for their daughter Kheda. They speak of the rape of their daughter with clear unease. But for them acknowledging the fact is a necessity.

Kheda Kungaeva was abducted from her family home in the village of Tangi-Chu in Chechnya on 26 March 2000 by Russian soldiers under the command of Colonel Yuri Budanov. Colonel Budanov then strangled Kheda Kungaeva to death in his tent. After a long battle for justice, Colonel Budanov was finally convicted of kidnapping and murdering Kheda Kungaeva and of abuse of power on 25 July 2003. He was sentenced to 10 years' imprisonment and stripped of his military rank and awards.

However, despite the fact that the official post-mortem concluded that Kheda Kungaeva had been raped before her death, the prosecution failed to charge anyone with the rape. The Kungaev family – now living in Norway – are determined to seek justice and redress for the rape of their daughter through the European Court of Human Rights. An AI delegate met them in their new home in Florø in January 2004.

The Kungaev family left the Russian Federation in August 2003 – fleeing the ongoing conflict, insanitary conditions in their tent camp in Ingushetia and the media circus surrounding the Budanov trial. In spite of the severity of the charges against Yuri Budanov, he still enjoyed significant public and media support, and the family feared repercussions.

Rosa and Visa Kungaev, along with their four children, are settling into their new, comfortable home on the western coast of Norway. Both parents are, by their own admission, still very traumatized by what happened to Kheda. They are physically and emotionally drained by their momentous and protracted quest for justice. However, justice for Kheda is what drives them, what keeps them going.

Rosa and Visa Kungaev's remaining children – Khovazhi, Khadzi, Larissa and Kheva – do not talk about Chechnya. They are focused on their new lives, although 18-year-old Khovazhi is still haunted by the events of March 2000 – he tried to stop the soldiers from abducting first Larissa, and then Kheda. Rosa – who does most of the talking – believes wholeheartedly in the importance of receiving a good education. She says that the children did not receive any schooling for three years while living in a tent camp in Ingushetia, so it is vital that they catch up now. “We moved here for the children, for them to get an education.” An orphan herself, Rosa was unable to enter higher education, despite showing much promise. She intends to undertake some further education courses herself, in order to “set a good example” to her children.

The Kungaevs are a proud Chechen family, but in their quest for justice for their daughter they are prepared to tolerate the difficulties involved with acknowledging the rape of their daughter. Rosa emphasizes that in their society, rape is considered a crime worse than murder. Now, the European Court of Human Rights is their only hope.

[Picture caption: Rosa Kungaeva at the entrance to the tent where she and her family were living when her daughter Kheda was abducted in March 2000 © Paula Allen]

Reforms to the European Court of Human Rights

The Council of Europe is debating reforms to the European Court of Human Rights aimed at guaranteeing its long-term effectiveness in light of the huge increase of applications it has received and the backlog of pending cases. In May 2004, after three

years of debate, the Council of Europe's Committee of Ministers is likely to adopt a new treaty, Protocol No.14, which will amend the European Convention on Human Rights.

AI has been urging that reforms to the Court meet three objectives:

- better implementation of the European Convention at national level, which will reduce people's need to apply to the Court;
- more efficient screening of applications to weed out the more than 90 per cent of those received which are currently inadmissible;
- prompt judgments, particularly on cases where the Court's case law is clear.

AI considers that some of the proposals meet these objectives. However, AI vigorously opposes proposals to add new admissibility criteria. These will limit the rights of individuals to have their cases considered by the Court and risk slowing down the process. AI is also concerned by a proposal to allow a single judge to decide on the admissibility instead of the three currently needed. For AI's positions on the proposals see, *Amnesty International's comments on the Interim Activity Report: Guaranteeing the long-term effectiveness of the European Court of Human Rights* (IOR 61/005/2004).

Although these reforms have implications for individuals in all Council of Europe member states, only some 10 out of 45 member states, to date, have held consultations with members of civil society, the legal community and their national parliaments.

AI urges governments in the Council of Europe to:

- hold consultations in their countries before reaching final decisions on the reform of the Court;
- oppose the addition of new admissibility criteria, which will curtail the right to redress from the Court and slow down the admissibility process;
- consider alternative proposals for filtering the applications received by the Court based on additional information it should request from the Court and its registry.

AI also calls on individuals, NGOs and lawyers organizations to make their views known to their governments. To join our campaign, please e-mail:

europeigoteam@amnesty.org

[World Social Forum picture caption: "Small arms, big issues", an elephant brings the Control Arms campaign message to the World Social Forum in Mumbai, India, January 2004 © AI]

[Page 3]

Worldwide appeals

Myanmar

Long prison terms for Buddhist nuns

Two Buddhist nuns were arrested on 16 January 2003 for staging a peaceful demonstration in Yangon, the capital of Myanmar. They are now serving 15-year prison sentences.

On 16 January 2003 Ma Than Htay (top), also known by her Buddhist name as Mar Lar Yee, and Ma Tin Tin Oo, also known as Thayzawaddy (bottom), both in their

early 20s, demonstrated near Yangon City Hall. They held up red flags with flying peacocks on them, a traditional symbol of political opposition and student resistance in Myanmar. The two nuns reportedly shouted slogans calling for the authorities to lower the price of basic commodities such as rice and cooking oil. They handed out leaflets calling for the release of political prisoners and for progress in the political dialogue between the military government and the National League for Democracy, the political party that won election in 1990 and to whom the authorities failed to transfer power.

The authorities stated that the nuns were arrested for distributing “pamphlets to agitate the people to stage demonstrations” and for shouting slogans.

Ma Than Htay and Ma Tin Tin Oo were reportedly sentenced under vaguely worded laws that are frequently used to silence dissent in the country and which effectively criminalize peaceful political activity. Political prisoners in Myanmar habitually do not receive fair trials, including by having limited or no access to legal counsel.

AI considers them to be prisoners of conscience. They are among at least 1,350 political prisoners in the country, many of whom were sentenced for peacefully exercising their right to freedom of expression, assembly and association.

Please write, calling for the two nuns to be immediately and unconditionally released. Pending their release, call for them to be held in conditions which conform to international standards.

Send appeals to: General Khin Nyunt, Prime Minister, State Peace and Development Council, c/o Directorate of Defence Services Intelligence, Ministry of Defence, Signal Pagoda Road, Dagon Post Office, Yangon, Myanmar. Fax: + 95 1 652 624

Please send copies of your letters to the Myanmar embassy in your country and to amnestyis@amnesty.org

Saudi Arabia

Woman’s death sentence

A Moroccan national, Majda Mostafa Mahir, is reportedly under sentence of death and at risk of execution in Saudi Arabia.

Majda Mostafa Mahir has been convicted of the murder of Prince Farid bin Abdullah bin Mishari al-Sa’ud, and has been imprisoned for over seven years. She is said to have appeared before a court in Riyadh, but the details and the exact outcome of the trial are not known.

Majda Mostafa Mahir is reported to have had no access to a defence lawyer or any chance to appeal against her sentence. Her fate is said to depend on whether relatives of the murder victim will pardon her freely or in exchange for payment of *diya*, or “blood money”.

Saudi Arabia applies the death penalty for a wide range of offences and the law stipulates that in some circumstances, the payment of “blood money” to the victim’s family by the family of the accused may be permitted in order to pardon and therefore spare the life of anyone sentenced to death.

Since 2003 AI has recorded 50 executions in Saudi Arabia. Many of those executed were sentenced after grossly unfair trials in which even the most basic rights, such as the right to be defended by a lawyer and the right to an effective appeal, were denied.

Please write, seeking clarification of the legal status of Majda Mostafa Mahir and the exact sentence passed against her. If she has been sentenced to death, call for her sentence to be commuted. Express concern that she may have been sentenced to death after an unfair trial. Seek details of her trial proceedings and call for her to be given regular access to a lawyer and her family.

Send appeals to: His Royal Highness Prince Naif bin Abdul Aziz Al-Saud, Minister of the Interior, Ministry of the Interior, P.O. Box 2933, Airport Road, Riyadh 11134, Saudi Arabia. Fax: + 966 1 403 118

Malaysia

Human rights defender faces imprisonment

Irene Fernandez, Director of Tenaganita, a women's non-governmental organization (NGO), is facing a 12-month prison term after being convicted and sentenced in October 2003 on charges of "maliciously publishing false news".

She is currently free on bail, pending the outcome of her appeal. Her passport has been impounded, preventing her from taking up invitations to participate in international human rights conferences and workshops.

Irene Fernandez has already undergone an eight-year trial, the longest-running in Malaysian history. She was arrested and charged in 1996 following the release of a report on conditions in detention camps for migrant workers. The report, published by Tenaganita in 1995, provided details of alleged patterns of human rights violations in the camps, including beatings, sexual abuse and denial of adequate medical care.

It also reported a series of deaths caused by malnutrition, beri-beri and other treatable illnesses. The report was based on 300 interviews of migrant workers, mainly from Bangladesh, Indonesia or the Philippines, following their release from the camps.

The concerns expressed over conditions in Malaysian detention camps have been reiterated by other Malaysian and international human rights organizations and by foreign governments. AI remains gravely concerned that instead of conducting a full, independent, public inquiry into conditions in the camps, the authorities sought to prosecute and imprison Irene Fernandez for trying to do something about those conditions.

Please write, calling on the Malaysian authorities to withdraw all charges against Irene Fernandez and, by halting legal proceedings against her, to lift immediately the threat of imprisonment on account of her peaceful exercise of the right to freedom of expression.

Send appeals to: Prime Minister Abdullah Ahmad Badawi, Prime Minister's Department, Block 1, Federal Government Administration Centre, 62502 Putrajaya, Selangor, Malaysia. Fax: +603-88883444

Email: ppm@pmo.gov.my

For further information on the case, or to sign an online petition, please refer to Tenaganita's website: <http://www.tenaganita.net>

Uzbekistan

Sentenced to death after being beaten

Abror Isayev was sentenced to death after being convicted of killing two people by

Tashkent Regional Court in December 2002. He went to the police of his own accord as a potential witness, but was reportedly detained and beaten for a week to make him “confess” to the crime.

Abror Isayev consistently maintained his innocence. His co-defendant, Nodirbek Karimov, who admitted involvement in the killing, was also sentenced to death. Nodirbek Karimov also alleged that he had been ill-treated in pre-trial detention.

There are strong indications that Abror Isayev has become mentally disturbed while on death row. When his mother

visited him in Tashkent prison in April 2003, he was reportedly extremely pale and shivering. She said “Abror was completely beside himself. He whispered to me that the prison guards had told him right before the visit that they were taking him to be shot... When I visited him again in May I knocked at the glass screen between us and dangled a thread in front of his eyes, but his eyes did not follow. I said ‘It is mama’, but he did not recognize me. He was humming and had his eyes fixed on the ceiling.”

Guards told her that Abror Isayev had not spoken to anyone for two weeks. When she urged a prison doctor to treat him, he reportedly said that her son was just pretending. In June, a Ministry of Interior official told her that he was receiving medical treatment and was in satisfactory health. No independent medical examination has been carried out into his state of health.

In February 2003 the UN Human Rights Committee urged the authorities of Uzbekistan to stay the two executions while the case was under consideration by the Committee.

Please write, calling for the death sentences on Abror Isayev and Nodirbek Karimov and all other prisoners under sentence of death in Uzbekistan to be commuted.

Send appeals to: President Islam Karimov, President of the Republic of Uzbekistan, 700163 g. Tashkent; ul. Uzbekistanskaya, 43, Uzbekistan. Fax: +998 711391517

Updates

Egypt releases alleged gay prisoner

Wissam Tawfiq Abyad was released in January after serving three-quarters of his sentence. Those working on his case in Egypt believe that the international campaign on his behalf helped to secure his early release. He thanked AI for all the support that they gave during the past year. See *Worldwide Appeal* April 2003.

Zaki Sayid Zaki ‘Abd al-Malak (also *Worldwide Appeal* April 2003) will have completed three-quarters of his sentence in April. Both prisoners of conscience were imprisoned solely on the grounds of their actual or perceived sexual orientation. Please continue to send appeals for the release of Zaki Sayid Zaki ‘Abd al-Malak.

Syria releases political prisoners

After 20 years’ imprisonment, Palestinian Mustafa Dib Khalil (also known as Abu Ta’an) was released from Sednaya Prison in January, following a presidential amnesty. Mustafa Dib Khalil’s son called to thank AI for their support “...on behalf of my family and the Palestinian people”. Scores of political prisoners were among the reported 122 men released as well as dozens of Islamists, pro-Iraqi Ba’athists, one Communist and a Kurd. See *Worldwide Appeal* September 2003.

Recent Reports

Report: *It's in our hands. Stop violence against women* (ACT 77/001/2004)

Summary: *It's in our hands. Stop violence against women* (ACT 77/003/2004)

[Page 4]

Control arms: guns and policing

Incidents of police officers shooting civilians or using excessive force against them are reported regularly. Why does this happen and how can it be stopped? The Control Arms campaign calls for action.

Deliberately repressive government policies may mean that law enforcement officers engage in violent policing. But inadequate training and equipment can also lead to excessive and arbitrary use of guns and other force by police officers.

The global proliferation of guns means that police and other law enforcers are under pressure to counter rising levels of violent gun crime and are expected to confront armed offenders in the course of their work. In many countries the resources for police equipment and training are insufficient. Resources may be available to provide guns and to train officers how to shoot them, but not, crucially, when to shoot. If communities do not have trust in their police, they may be more likely to keep and use weapons themselves.

Agreed international standards exist to control the use of force and firearms by the police. They include the UN Code of Conduct for Law Enforcement Officials and the UN Basic Principles for the Use of Force and Firearms by Law Enforcement Officials. At their heart is the question of what constitutes legitimate force. Police sometimes need to use force, or lethal force, to do their job of keeping communities safe and protecting people from life-threatening attacks. The force used must not be arbitrary; it must be proportionate, necessary and lawful. It must only be used in self-defence or against the imminent threat of death or serious injury. To comply with this essential principle, police must know how to assess rapidly when a threat to life is being made so that they can judge whether to use force, including lethal force.

Too few governments have incorporated the UN standards into their law and practice. AI's new report, *Policing and guns* (ACT 30/001/2004), published as part of the Control Arms campaign which is run jointly with Oxfam and the International Action Network on Small Arms (IANSA), shows how police forces ignore the standards.

- The UN Code of Conduct states that law enforcement agencies "should be representative of and responsive and accountable to the community as a whole." Yet repeated testimony from the poorest communities in Rio de Janeiro, Brazil, for example, shows that policing practice discriminates violently against them, with frequently fatal consequences.

- The UN Basic Principles state that firearms should only be used by police in self-defence or against the imminent threat of death or serious injury. Yet in Jamaica, which has the highest rate of police shootings per capita in the world, evidence repeatedly contradicts police claims that they were fired upon first and indicates instead a disturbing pattern of extrajudicial executions.

However, some positive steps have been made by police and governments towards a greater respect for the UN standards. In South Africa, for example, under previous legislation, police were allowed to shoot suspected thieves, drug dealers and fleeing suspects who posed no threat to life, a clear violation of the UN standards. This law

has now been amended. In Cambodia, an ambitious project for storage and management of weapons is underway.

AI and its Control Arms partners, Oxfam and IANSA, are campaigning for governments and law enforcement agencies to invest significant resources in improvements in policing to meet the UN standards. The standards need to be incorporated into law and practice; donors should require adherence to them before funding projects concerned with policing or community safety; and guns, ammunition and other policing equipment with a potential for abuse should not be sold or transferred to states whose police forces do not comply with the standards.

For more information see: www.controlarms.org

[Picture caption: Police point riot guns at demonstrators in Cincinnati, USA. Police fired bean bags and rubber bullets to quell demonstrators who broke windows in downtown Cincinnati in protest over the shooting of an unarmed black man, April 2001 ©AP]

Asylum helps find safety for Hossein Mashoufi

Hossein Mashoufi was reportedly beaten severely and detained on disciplinary grounds by the People's Mojahedin Organization of Iran (PMOI) in July 2001. The PMOI was, at that time, an armed group based in Iraq, from where it opposed the authorities in Iran. It has been an illegal organization in Iran for over a decade.

Hossein Mashoufi said the beatings he received from the PMOI severely damaged his kidneys and that he was hospitalized for a time in Baghdad. In July 2001, AI wrote to the PMOI about the reports that Hossein Mashoufi had been tortured in Iraq and received a prompt reply from the organization. It included a letter, allegedly in Hossein Mashoufi's hand, claiming that he had not been detained and that the allegations were false. The PMOI offered to arrange for AI to speak with him – while he continued to be under PMOI supervision – if there were further concerns.

Following his eventual escape from the PMOI, Hossein Mashoufi sought refugee status in a European country. Research undertaken by AI helped support his successful asylum claim and Hossein Mashoufi is now safe. AI has been able to speak freely with him.

He confirmed that he was forced to write the letter stating that he was safe. He also confirmed that he still requires medicine to control the functioning of his kidneys, which remain damaged as a result of the beating he claims to have received at the hands of the PMOI.

According to unconfirmed reports received by AI, the PMOI, now disarmed and under US supervision in Iraq, continues to hold prisoners at its facilities in Iraq. These reports have been vigorously denied by the PMOI, which is banned in the European Union, USA and many other countries.

AI's work on opposition groups does not imply any legal or international status or recognition and is aimed strictly at securing the protection of human rights. AI calls on all political groups to uphold fundamental human rights standards and international humanitarian law.

[Picture caption for Solomon Islands picture: Weapons destruction ceremony in Solomon Islands. More than 3,800 guns have been destroyed since August 2003 by a military backed regional intervention force invited by Solomon Islands to help restore

law and order following five years of internal conflict.]