

# The Wire

December 2004 Vol. 34. No. 11

AI Index: NWS 21/011/2004

[Page 1]

## A bitter wind in Bhopal

Twenty years after the catastrophe in Bhopal, India, thousands of survivors are still struggling for justice and fair compensation

“There were thousands of bodies,” said Mohammed Owais, a volunteer at a local hospital in Bhopal. “There were bodies everywhere. And people were dying all round.” The Bhopal gas leak of December 1984 is acknowledged as one of the worst industrial disasters of the 20th century. More than 7,000 people died in the immediate aftermath of the incident, and a further 15,000 died in the following years. Some 100,000 continue to suffer from associated illnesses, including respiratory disease, breast and cervical cancer, and anxiety and depression.

The leak devastated Bhopal’s poorest communities. Its impact reverberated across the globe, raising questions about government and corporate responsibility for large-scale industrial accidents. But two decades later, survivors of the tragedy have yet to receive fair compensation or proper medical assistance and support. The plant site, polluted since the 1970s, still has not been cleaned up, leaving toxic waste seeping into the earth and contaminating water. No one has been held to account for the damage.

Union Carbide Corporation (UCC), then owner of the pesticide factory in Bhopal, and Dow Chemicals, which merged with UCC in 2001, have publicly denied all responsibility for the leak and the resulting damage. Attempts by survivors’ organizations to bring the company to justice through US and Indian courts proved fruitless.

In 1989, the Indian government, backed by the Indian Supreme Court, cut short any further attempts to pursue UCC through the courts by agreeing a settlement of US\$470 million with the company. The agreement was made without any consultation with survivors, and the amount, nominal given the extent of the catastrophe, still has not been fully distributed. About 30 per cent of claims for injuries have been rejected by the government while around 16,000 are still outstanding. Successful claims have resulted in minimal payments which began only in 1992. As late as September 2004, around US\$330 million remained held by the Reserve Bank of India.

In return for a small financial payment, UCC bought itself civil and criminal immunity, despite its mismanagement of the site. The company’s decision to store bulk quantities of ultra-hazardous material (methyl isocyanate or MIC) in Bhopal without introducing corresponding safety precautions undermined any possibility of effectively managing a breach. Residents in the surrounding area were not warned of the possibility of a leak, even though the company was aware, as early as two years

prior to the incident, that the plant was unsafe. After the event, UCC refused to divulge any information about the chemical content of the leaked substances making it very difficult to properly treat victims.

The Bhopal disaster is a case not only of corporate negligence, but also of the failure of the Indian government to stand up for the concerns of its blighted citizens. Neither the local nor central government appear to have taken the necessary steps to evaluate the risk posed to local communities by the UCC plant. UCC was not required to review its safety procedures. A decade after the disaster, the government ceased all medical research on the effects of the Bhopal disaster without explanation, and has refused to publish any results.

Although the government has taken steps to support victims, these have proved ineffective. Shamshad Bi was a trainee at a state-supported training centre set up for women victims of the Bhopal gas leak in 1985. She earned Rs320 (US\$7) a month until the centre was closed in 1992. She told AI: “My husband is sick and is incapable of doing his carpentry regularly and the compensation money is already spent on treatment and other domestic expenses. Where do I go? And how does the government expect us to survive?”

In its report, *Clouds of injustice: Bhopal disaster 20 years on* (ASA 20/015/2004), AI is calling for the immediate clean-up of the groundwater and affected areas of the Bhopal site by UCC/Dow, a detailed assessment of the damage to health and the environment caused by the leak, and the payment of full and fair compensation to survivors.

AI also recommends the implementation of an international human rights framework, based on the UN Norms for Business, that can be applied to companies directly. AI considers such a framework essential to guarantee victims effective access to justice.

## **USA shows contempt for human dignity**

In the “war on terror”, the USA has failed to practice what it has preached on the treatment of prisoners. Thousands of detainees and their families, as well as the rule of law, have suffered as a result of this two-faced strategy.

In public the US administration has proclaimed itself to be leading the global struggle against torture. In private it has discussed ways in which US agents can escape criminal liability for torture. In public the USA has promised that its commitment to human dignity is “non-negotiable”. Behind the walls of its detention facilities in Afghanistan, Iraq, Cuba and elsewhere, human dignity has repeatedly been denied. A selective disregard for international law contributed to conditions ripe for torture and ill-treatment as the USA embarked on the “war on terror”.

The now infamous Abu Ghraib photographs stand as an indictment of a government’s failure to put human rights at its heart. While the official reviews and investigations conducted since the Abu Ghraib revelations are to be welcomed, they are not enough. The world still does not know the full story of what torture and other cruel, inhuman or degrading treatment has occurred at the hands of US agents; or of who was responsible for authorizing, condoning or committing such human rights violations.

What we do know is that interrogation techniques which violate the USA's international obligations have not been renounced by the administration. Detainees remain in secret and incommunicado detention, in some cases amounting to "disappearance". In other words, the conditions for torture and ill-treatment remain in place.

The full picture, and full accountability, will only be achieved via an independent and comprehensive commission of inquiry. Such a commission must investigate all aspects of the USA's "war on terror" detentions, including secret detainee transfers between countries. It should have the power to investigate all agencies of government, and all levels of government, up to and including the President.

In a recent 200-page report, *USA: Human dignity denied – Torture and accountability in the 'war on terror'* (AMR 51/145/2004), AI provides a framework for change, the 12-Point Program for the Prevention of Torture by Agents of the State. Within this framework the report makes 65 recommendations to the US authorities.

AI's basic message is simple, however. It is that the prevention of torture is primarily a matter of political will. From now on, when the US administration says it is committed to the global struggle against torture and ill-treatment, it must demonstrate through its actions that it means what it says.

[Page 2]

## **Protecting migrant workers' rights**

Up to 86 million people around the world are migrant workers, according to an International Labour Organization estimate. The International Convention on the Protection of the Rights of All Migrant Workers and Members of Their Families (or Migrant Workers Convention) defines a "migrant worker" as a person who is, or has been, "engaged in a remunerated activity in a State of which he or she is not a national". Migrant workers include those who have moved voluntarily in search of economic opportunities, refugees and asylum-seekers who are in paid employment in countries other than their own, and people trafficked for the purpose of labour exploitation.

Many migrant workers are vulnerable to human rights abuses including restrictions to their freedom of movement, arbitrary detention, discrimination, harassment and physical or sexual violence. In Thailand for example, migrant workers are routinely paid far less than the Thai minimum wage and work in inhumane conditions. Those demanding labour rights are often arrested and deported as a means of punishment. In the Gulf states, female migrant domestic workers are excluded from the protection of labour laws and are at risk of being subjected to rape or other sexual violence by their employers. Rape victims do not normally obtain justice and are often not given access to legal advice and adequate interpretation. A climate of impunity exists that allows perpetrators of crimes against migrant domestic workers to go unpunished.

The Migrant Workers Convention protects all migrant workers and members of their families regardless of whether they are registered with authorities or undocumented.

The Convention entered into force in July 2003 and sets out the obligations and responsibilities of migrant workers' countries of origin, host states and states which migrant workers transit through.

Twenty-seven states, most of which are from the developing world, have ratified the Migrant Workers Convention. On the occasion of International Migrants Day on 18 December 2004 AI urges all states, particularly industrialized countries, to follow suit. It also urges signatories of the Convention to fully and effectively implement its provisions and promptly report progress to the UN Committee on the Protection of the Rights of All Migrant Workers and Members of their Families.

[Picture caption] Illegal migrant workers queue for documents outside the Indonesian embassy in Kuala Lumpur, October 2004. The Malaysian government granted an amnesty allowing 1.2 million illegal workers to leave the country without being prosecuted. Most of Malaysia's migrant workers are Indonesian. According to reports from other human rights organizations, over half of them do not have legal immigration status, making them more vulnerable to abuse and exploitation.

## **Women, HIV/AIDS and human rights**

*“The enjoyment of the highest attainable standard of health is one of the fundamental rights of every human being...”* World Health Organization, 1946

Women are fighting sickness and discrimination in the battle against HIV/AIDS. Across the world, their risk of HIV infection is increased because of gender-based discrimination. Many women suffer sexual violence and are coerced into sex inside and outside marriage. Their vulnerability to the virus is compounded by other human rights issues, including inadequate access to education and sexual health services, harmful traditional practices and lack of legal rights.

AIDS is a preventable disease yet some 38 million people live with the HIV virus, and the proportion of women affected is increasing. UN statistics show that about twice as many young women as young men are infected.

Women are more likely to become infected during unprotected vaginal intercourse than men both because their sexual physiology is more vulnerable and because they are more likely to be at the receiving end of violent or coerced sexual intercourse. One of the most common risks women face is being married to an HIV-positive man. Women who live with violent partners suffer not only psychological trauma and physical injury, but also the difficulty of protecting themselves from sexually transmitted infections. Physical or sexual violence by a man living with HIV can contribute directly to the transmission of the virus to a partner.

HIV increases the suffering of women who have been raped during conflict. T. was repeatedly raped during the genocide period in Rwanda. She told AI: “Since I learned I was infected, my husband said he couldn't live with me. He divorced me and left me with three children, so now I don't know how to pay for food, rent, school and so on. I have no family left...”

In many countries the stigma of rape and living with HIV means that some women do not seek medical treatment following an assault for fear of being identified as rape victims within their community. Political will is needed to ensure that rape is considered an unacceptable crime and perpetrators are punished. Police and medical professionals must be trained to investigate rape sensitively and laws must be reformed to adequately address the issue.

For many women, financial dependence on men means that they cannot control the circumstances in which they have sex. Wife inheritance – the transfer of the widow of a deceased man to his brother – can often expose a woman to HIV. In some traditions, if a woman refuses to consent to the new marriage she will not receive any of the property associated with her previous married life and will lose her home.

Around five to six million people do not have access to necessary life-saving anti-retroviral drugs. Prevention of HIV and AIDS requires basic health education, social empowerment, provision of protective measures such as condoms and implementation of a programme of anti-retroviral provision. If the epidemic is to be controlled, violence against women must be addressed.

To mark World AIDS Day on 1 December, AI is publishing the document, *Women, HIV/AIDS and human rights* (ACT 77/084/2004).

[Picture caption] HIV-testing kit at a rural health centre in the Democratic Republic of Congo, 2004. Despite efforts to increase capacity, the need for voluntary testing, counselling and long-term treatment is unfulfilled for millions of people.

## **Fighters target women in Central African Republic**

Hundreds of women in the Central African Republic (CAR) were raped and sexually assaulted as the government of President Ange-Félix Patassé repelled insurgents in late 2002 and early 2003. Some women and children died, some became pregnant and many were infected with sexually transmitted diseases as a result. The government failed to protect them.

MN was raped by three members of the armed political group, *Mouvement de libération du Congo* (MLC), on the road to Damara in November 2002. Her attackers demanded money and when she told them she did not have any, they raped her in turns while her four children cried. They left her unconscious. When she regained consciousness, her attackers had left with all the valuables they could find in her relatives' house.

After learning of her rape, MN's husband left her to live with another woman. Later MN found that she was HIV positive and had tuberculosis. She told AI that she worried about her children's future in case she was incapacitated by illness.

In late 2002, the President of CAR called on members of the MLC from neighbouring Democratic Republic of Congo to come to his aid to quell a rebellion in the army. The armed rebellion was led by former army chief of staff François Bozizé. The insurgents were driven north by members of the army still loyal to President Patassé and

members of the MLC who raped and pillaged the local population and others fleeing the fighting, as they advanced.

Combatants loyal to François Bozizé are also reported to have committed rape in the areas that they occupied. For example, four women were raped in January 2003 by his combatants in the town of Sibut. One of the victims was the daughter of a senior government official. She was raped in front of her father.

It appears that most of the rapes took place in two areas where a large section of the population are Muslims. However, few Muslim women are prepared to talk about their ordeal, fearing stigma and rejection by their husbands. AI has chosen not to use the victims' full names to protect their identity. The women and girls were aged between eight and 60. They were attacked in their homes, as they fled the combat zones and at roadblocks. They were raped in front of their husbands, children or parents. Some women who resisted were reportedly beaten severely, injured with weapons such as bayonets or killed. Relatives who attempted to intervene were threatened and some are reported to have been killed.

The MLC eventually acknowledged the abuses and announced that it would bring to justice the perpetrators whom it called "uncontrolled elements". However, so far no member of the MLC has been prosecuted for committing rape in CAR. A number of national laws and international treaties exist to protect women against violence in CAR. However, most people there are unaware of these laws and the authorities do little or nothing to enforce them.

See AI's report, *Central African Republic: Five months of war against women* (AFR 19/001/2004).

[Page 3]

## **Worldwide Appeals**

### **Kenya**

Continued impunity for police brutality

Margaret Muthoni Murage was six-months pregnant when she was arrested on 4 May in Nairobi, the Kenyan capital. Accused of stealing gold jewellery from her employer, the 17-year-old was taken to a police station for questioning.

When AI delegates visited her in prison some two weeks later, she described how one of the interrogating officers repeatedly beat her while demanding she return the "stolen" gold. "He first kicked me on the side and then knocked me on the wall, my stomach facing that wall. Then he took me to the counter and pushed me under it." Shortly afterward, she found herself in severe pain and, after repeated requests, was eventually taken to an office where she suffered a miscarriage. "I was given a paper bag and I was told to put my foetus in the bag and all that in a cardboard box," she said.

Margaret Murage was taken to the hospital and her baby placed in the mortuary. She was then brought back to the police station and released the following day. On 10 May, she returned to the station to make a statement against the police regarding the beatings and torture. Refusing to take her statement, they arrested her again and detained her overnight. She appeared in court on 14 May and was charged with the alleged theft. On 20 May, she was released on police bond, pending the trial.

AI presented Margaret Murage's case to the police on 19 May. Despite promises to investigate, no action appears to have been taken. AI followed up the case in late October and was told that the investigations had still not been completed. Impunity within the Kenyan police force is a long-standing concern for AI.

Please write, urging the authorities to swiftly complete their investigations and bring to justice those responsible for the torture of Margaret Muthoni Murage.

Send appeals to: Maj. Gen. M. H. Ali, Commissioner of Police, Police Headquarters, Vigilance House, Harambee Avenue, PO Box 30083, Nairobi, Kenya. Email: [info@kenyapolice.go.ke](mailto:info@kenyapolice.go.ke)

## **Lebanon**

A decade in detention

Samir Gea'gea', leader of the banned Lebanese Forces (LF), and Jirjis al-Khourri, a member of the LF, have been held in solitary confinement in underground cells since 1994. They were among scores of individuals linked to the LF – the main Christian militia during the Lebanese civil war – who were arrested in connection with the bombing of Sayidat a-Najat (Lady of Deliverance) Church in February that year. They are imprisoned at the Ministry of Defence Detention Centre in the capital, Beirut.

Samir Gea'gea' and Jirjis al-Khourri were arrested and held incommunicado without access to lawyers or their families during most of their pre-trial detention. Jirjis al-Khourri told the court that his "confessions" were extracted through torture – including receiving electric shocks and being denied food or sleep for more than 40 days. He claimed his beatings took place in front of judges and the public prosecutor. The two were tried before the Justice Council which failed to investigate the allegations of torture and ill-treatment and whose decisions are final. AI has repeatedly expressed concerns that the two men were unfairly tried and that the conditions of their detention amount to cruel, inhuman and degrading treatment.

In September 2004 a medical team reported that Samir Gea'gea' suffers from osteomalacia, a disease of the bones that may be due to a lack of exposure to adequate sunlight, and tachycardia, an irregular heartbeat which may be the result of "physically and mentally stressful conditions". Ten days later the authorities announced that Samir Gea'gea' had been moved to a new cell with reportedly better conditions.

For more information, see *Lebanon: Samir Gea'gea' and Jirjis al-Khourri - Torture and Unfair Trial* (MDE 18/003/2004).

Please write, calling for the immediate release of Samir Gea'gea' and Jirjis al-Khoury or for them to be retried promptly and fairly before an independent criminal court. Request also that allegations of torture and ill-treatment be investigated fully.

Send appeals to: His Excellency 'Adnan 'Addoum, Minister of Justice, Ministry of Justice, Rue Sami Solh, Beirut, Lebanon. Fax: +961 1 862 622 (when answered, say that you want to send a fax)

## **Ecuador**

'Disappearance' and arbitrary detention

Luis Alberto Sabando Vélez and Lenin Cedeño Treviño were arrested on 29 September by police in Los Ríos province on the Ecuadorian coast. According to the police, Luis Sabando Vélez escaped while being transferred for further questioning the following day. His current whereabouts are not known.

AI believes that Luis Sabando Vélez has "disappeared". Lenin Cedeño Treviño is still said to be in police custody but it is not known whether he has had access to a lawyer. The two were reportedly travelling in a car when armed police ordered them to stop. The police officers searched the vehicle and arrested the men after finding a weapon that belonged to Lenin Cedeño Treviño – despite the fact that he owned a licence for the weapon. Both men were accused of illegally possessing a firearm and were detained.

On 30 September, Luis Sabando Vélez's mother tried to visit her son in detention, but she was told that he had escaped. When his mother asked how a man who was handcuffed could have escaped from four police officers, they did not answer. That same day, the family of Luis Sabando Vélez lodged a complaint regarding his "disappearance" with the public prosecutor's office.

On 4 October, the mother of Luis Sabando Vélez returned to the public prosecutor's office where she was told that according to a police report dated 1 October, her son and Lenin Cedeño Treviño had been arrested in connection with a robbery and a murder. However, these offences had not been reported until 30 September, when the two men were already in police custody.

For information about other similar cases, see AI's report *Ecuador: Broken Promises – Impunity in the police court system continues* (AMR 28/018/2004).

Please write, calling for a full investigation into the alleged "disappearance" of Luis Alberto Sabando Vélez. Ask that Lenin Cedeño Treviño be humanely treated while in police custody and that he be given immediate access to his family and a lawyer.

Send appeals to: Attorney General, Dra. Mariana Yépez de Velasco, Ministra Fiscal General del Estado, Fiscalía General del Estado, Av. Eloy Alfaro N° 32-240 y República, Quito, Ecuador. Fax: +593 2 2558 561 (when answered, say, "tono de fax, por favor")

## **China**

## Defender of minority rights jailed

Abdulghani Memetemin, a 40-year-old teacher and journalist, was detained in 2002 in Kashgar in the Xinjiang Uighur Autonomous Region (XUAR) of China. Almost a year later, he was sentenced by the Kashgar Intermediate People's Court to nine years' imprisonment on charges of "providing state secrets for an organization outside the country". According to unofficial sources, he had no access to a lawyer or his family while in pre-trial detention, and had no legal representation at his trial.

According to the verdict, Abdulghani Memetemin had secretly been providing information to the East Turkestan Information Centre (ETIC), a non-governmental organization (NGO) run by exiled Uighurs in Germany which publicizes reports of human rights abuses against Uighurs in China and advocates independence for the region. The ETIC was formally labelled a "terrorist organization" by the Chinese authorities in December 2003, although the evidence for this conclusion is unclear.

Among the articles Abdulghani Memetemin sent to the ETIC were reports about Uighur farmers being forced to work without pay in government projects, the confiscation and burning of Uighur history books and limits placed on Islamic religious practices. High levels of repression in the XUAR have seriously restricted the flow of information from the region about human rights abuses and other sensitive issues. Anyone who breaches this silence is at risk of arbitrary detention, torture and other human rights violations.

Abdulghani Memetemin is a human rights defender, reporting peacefully on human rights violations against the ethnic Uighur community in the XUAR. AI considers him to be a prisoner of conscience detained in violation of his rights to freedom of expression and association.

Please write, calling for the immediate and unconditional release of Abdulghani Memetemin. Ask that he be given full and prompt access to a lawyer, family members and any necessary medical treatment. Urge the authorities to ensure that human rights defenders are able to carry out peaceful activity without fear of arbitrary detention or intimidation.

Send appeals to: Chairman of the Xinjiang Uighur Autonomous Regional People's Government, Ismail Tiliwaldi Zhuxi, Xinjiang Weiwuer Zizhiqu Renmin Zhengfu, 2 Zhongshanlu, Wulumuqishi 830041, Xinjiang Weiwuer Zizhiqu, China.

## Updates

### **Russian Federation**

In February 2002, Sergei Lapin was arrested in connection with the "disappearance" of Zelimkhan Murdalov. Sergei Lapin's trial eventually started in October 2003 due to the persistence of Zelimkhan Murdalov's father and thousands of letters to President Vladimir Putin from AI members all over the world, calling for a fair and independent trial. Many cases of human rights violations in Chechnya never make it to court because of alleged "lack of evidence". The trial of Sergei Lapin has been

repeatedly postponed. Continued international pressure is necessary to prevent the closure of this case.

Meanwhile, the mother and sister of Zelimkhan Murdalov have left the country following threats by members of the Russian federal and Chechen forces that they would “disappear” as well. While out of the country they have also received letters threatening that they would “pay for Lapin”.

Please continue to send appeals – they really do make a difference.

See *Worldwide Appeal* April 2003.

## **Saudi Arabia**

Dr Sa'id Bin Zu'air has been moved from a local hospital in Riyadh back to al-Ha'ir prison but it is unclear if he is still on hunger strike.

His son, Mubarak Bin Sa'id Zu'air, was sentenced to 10 months' imprisonment on 27 October. The charges reportedly included campaigning for his father's release. The status of his second son, Sa'ad Bin Sa'id Zu'air, remains unknown. AI believes that all three may be prisoners of conscience.

See *Worldwide Appeal* October 2004.

## **Albania**

On the ninth anniversary of his “disappearance”, Remzi Hoxha's family held a press conference to urge the Albanian authorities to clarify his fate and to bring those responsible for his “disappearance” to justice. AI and several Albanian human rights organizations issued a joint statement in support of the family's plea.

This generated considerable publicity in the Albanian media, with one other former security officer and two police officers being identified as having been involved in the “disappearance”. However, the two police officers apparently refused to cooperate with the authorities and all three are believed to have left the country.

See *Worldwide Appeal* November 2004.

## **India**

The AI report, *India: Justice, the victim – Gujarat state fails to protect women from violence* (ASA 20/096/2004), has been delayed at the request of the government of India to allow it time to provide comments.

See *the Wire*, November 2004.

[Page 4]

## **Young AI members take action in Thailand**

Pupils (above), at the New International School of Thailand, Bangkok , have become a diligent force in AI's continuing campaign for justice. One out of five senior school students is an AI member and at least 70 attend AI meetings every week. They tackle 40 cases a year.

“The UA [Urgent Action] network is the absolute life-blood of our Amnesty group,” says Paul McDermott, one of the teachers who runs the group. “My colleague Barry Wells and I use UA briefings we receive in our personal capacities as individual AI members, as well as the monthly *Worldwide Appeals* to identify the focus for each week's appeal.”

AI activities, including the “Appeal of the Week”, are publicized through the school's notice boards and internal electronic bulletin. Meetings follow a general pattern, explains Paul McDermott: “A quick survey of the main world headlines, drawing out the patterns and principles concerned. Then we get down to the appeal, citing AI's Urgent Action network or *the Wire*.”

While considering a case, students are encouraged to discuss what makes a trial fair or the rights of refugees. Cases are selected to reflect a range of issues – refugees, “disappearances”, unfair trials, unlawful detention, violence against women – from week to week. As Paul McDermott notes, this is “not merely to add the diversity necessary to retain the interest of young people but to broaden their awareness of what their own civil and human rights are.”

The group also works on at least one major petition per year targeting members of the general public who attend the school's annual International Day. And once a year, some group members retreat to a coastal hotel for a weekend of research, presentations, appeals and feature films on related themes.

In six years, the group has grown from under a handful of students to more than 20 times that. To Paul McDermott, its success relies on a simple, concise approach: “We try to keep it brief, keep it relevant, keep it real and engage their emotions. We show them that what they do matters.”

To find out more about the school's AI activities, visit [www.nist.ac.th](http://www.nist.ac.th)

## **Control Arms campaign gathers momentum**

*“Having seen the cost in human suffering of innocent men, women and children, in conflict in Africa and around the world, I believe that it is time the global community establish an international framework on arms control. This will help limit the number of arms sold and used in wars and conflict and assist in mopping up the arms that are already in the community. We all need to support Amnesty International, IANSA and Oxfam in their Control Arms Campaign and help make the world safe from conflicts and armed violence.”* – Archbishop Desmond Tutu

The Control Arms Campaign coalition (AI, Oxfam and IANSA) is calling for a legally binding international Arms Trade Treaty (ATT). An ATT would prevent

weapons being sent to destinations where they undermine human rights, fuel crime and gender-based violence, or exacerbate poverty.

One year after the launch of the campaign, over 200,000 people in more than 90 countries have joined the Million Faces Petition calling for tough arms controls.

Governments around the world, including Finland, Mali and Cambodia, and some significant arms exporters like the UK, have indicated their support for an ATT to control international arms transfers.

UK Foreign Secretary Jack Straw recently announced the UK's support saying, "We will start to work soon with international partners, drawing on experience from the EU, to build support for an international Arms Trade Treaty, further to extend the international rule of law". The UK is the fourth largest exporter of weapons in the world, and this statement signals a huge success for the campaign.

Other successes of the campaign so far include:

- police firearms control is now on the agenda of the UN's human rights sub-commission
- regional bodies, such as the EU and the Organization of American States, are considering international human rights and humanitarian law standards to control arms supplies
- growing pressure in many countries to strengthen the UN's 2001 programme of action on small arms and light weapons, especially to make UN embargoes effective, to mark and trace illegal weapons, to curb illicit arms brokering and to encourage national arms control action plans.

To join the campaign and take action go to [www.controlarms.org](http://www.controlarms.org)

## **Women denied right to vote in Saudi Arabia**

In October Prince Mut'ab bin Abdul Aziz, head of the election committee, ruled out women's right to vote and stand as candidates in the first nationwide municipal elections in Saudi Arabia, planned for the beginning of 2005.

This is contrary to the election law, which does not explicitly ban women from taking part. It also undermines recent positive developments in the country, such as the much publicized "National Dialogue", which included a focus on women's rights. The future election participation of women, however, does not appear to have been ruled out.

The exclusion is based on gender and is a violation of the UN Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women (CEDAW). CEDAW requires that women be given the right to vote in elections and be eligible for election. Saudi Arabia accepted this provision when it signed up to CEDAW.

Half of the members of the 178 municipal councils will be elected during the campaign, with voter registration beginning in November 2004. The other half will be appointed by the government.

Women in Saudi Arabia are challenging many severe forms of discrimination in public life, including in employment. Their freedom of movement is also widely restricted.

The Saudi Arabian government should ensure and encourage the full, equal and unhindered participation of women in future elections, both as voters and as candidates. It should also ensure gender balance in the appointed half of the councils.

## **Highlighting violence against women**

*“Women will not tell you easily if they have been raped. In our culture, it is a source of shame. Women hide this in their hearts so that men don’t hear about it.”*

A Sudanese woman talking in November 2003 about systematic rape in Darfur region, western Sudan.

In war, women and girls are more likely to be the target of sexual violence, especially rape. Women face extra, sometimes insurmountable, obstacles to obtaining justice, because of the stigma attached to survivors of sexual violence, and women’s disadvantaged position in society. Whether civilians or combatants, refugees or displaced people, the impact of war weighs particularly heavily on women.

AI is campaigning to stop violence against women and girls. This December the organization is launching a report on violence against women in war. Women’s needs are frequently overlooked and women’s activism is often ignored. Urgent action is needed to tackle the global outrage of crimes against women in armed conflict.

To join AI’s campaign to Stop Violence against Women, see the briefing document *Casualties of war: women’s bodies, women’s lives* (ACT 77/072/2004) and *Lives blown apart: Crimes against women in times of conflict* (ACT 77/075/2004) to be issued on 8 December. See also [www.amnesty.org/actforwomen](http://www.amnesty.org/actforwomen)

## **Jewellers keep consumers in the dark about trade in conflict diamonds**

Almost two years ago the diamond industry committed itself to a system of self-regulation to prevent the trade in diamonds from conflict regions which is helping to fuel human rights violations. A recent survey conducted by AI in the UK and the USA shows that retailers in the USA and UK are still failing to live up to their promises. The industry pledged to issue written warranties and implement a code of conduct to support the international Kimberley Process Certification Scheme preventing the trade in conflict diamonds.

AI activists visited 579 jewellery stores at random, 333 across the UK and 246 in 50 cities throughout the USA. They asked retailers about self-regulation and their policies on conflict diamonds, evaluating the level of awareness of salespeople and seeing what assurances consumers are being given that the diamonds they are buying are conflict-free.

The survey found that fewer than one in five companies that responded in writing provided a meaningful account of their policy, and less than half of diamond jewellery retailers visited were able to give consumers meaningful assurances that diamonds are conflict free. The results of the survey are very disappointing and show that a significant majority of diamond jewellery retailers are failing to deliver on repeated promises made to stem the trade in conflict diamonds.

The UK and USA results are part of a wider ongoing survey in which more than 800 retailers and suppliers have been contacted in Australia, Belgium, France, Germany, Italy, the Netherlands and Switzerland.

To learn more about the results see *Déjà Vu – The diamond industry still failing to deliver on promises* (POL 34/008/2004) and [www.amnesty.org/pages/ec-dejavu-diamonds-eng](http://www.amnesty.org/pages/ec-dejavu-diamonds-eng)

## **New look planned for the Wire 2005**

We are reviewing *the Wire* to make it more reflective of our readers' needs. We need your feedback to help us do this. Please don't forget to fill out the enclosed questionnaire and return it to the address provided. You can also download a copy from [www.amnesty.org/wire](http://www.amnesty.org/wire) and send it by email to: [newslett@amnesty.org](mailto:newslett@amnesty.org)

Thank you!