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HUMAN RIGHTS MUST TOP THE AGENDA: AMNESTY INTERNATIONAL'S APPEAL TO THE AUSTRIAN PRESIDENCY OF THE EU

EMBARGO: 09.01 GMT (11.01 BRUSSELS TIME) ON FRIDAY 13 JANUARY 2006

(Brussels/Vienna, 13 January 2006) One of the main challenges for the Austrian Presidency is to reaffirm the primacy of human rights inside and outside EU borders, said Amnesty International in its recommendations to the Austrian Presidency at today's press conference in Vienna.

In light of alleged EU Member States' involvement in unlawful activities by the US in its counter-terrorism strategies, Amnesty International requested that at the end of the six-month term there must be no doubt left that arbitrary arrests, secret detentions, torture and "disappearances" will not be tolerated.

"If the EU wants to retain the credibility of its human rights policy, it must be fully accountable for its own record", said Dick Oosting, Amnesty International EU Office Director. "While the recent period shows a number of positive developments in the field of external relations, there is still a taboo on human rights compliance by EU Member States".

Fighting terrorism and irregular migration have become the dominant priorities for the EU, but they have been addressed in ways that show serious human rights shortcomings. "When confronted with the human rights deficit of its counter-terrorism effort and with refoulement or other unlawful actions by Member States, the EU's response has been to put its head in the sand", said Dick Oosting. Amnesty International believes it is time for the EU to engage in a comprehensive review of its human rights policy and presents its ten proposals for the Austrian Presidency of the EU:

- Enable the EU Fundamental Rights Agency to address human rights compliance by Member States.

- Reaffirm the primacy of human rights principles by ensuring full human rights observance in the EU's counter-terrorism effort and see to it that by the end of 2006 all EU Member States have ratified the Optional Protocol to the Convention against Torture.

- Develop a comprehensive policy addressing the situation of the Roma in the EU.

- Strengthen protection of the rights of asylum-seekers and migrants.

- Ensure that the development of Regional Protection Programmes is never a substitute for refugee protection obligations.

- Assert a strong human rights dimension in the EU's enlargement and neighbourhood policies.

- Press for more active implementation of the EU human rights guidelines.

- Make control of small arms a key theme for 2006 and complete the work to strengthen the EU Code of Conduct on arms exports.

- Lead the EU to help ensure that the UN Human Rights Council is established as an effective body during the first half of 2006.

- Initiate a comprehensive review of the overall EU human rights policy and ensure effective Council working groups to deal with human rights within and outside the EU.

"Reaffirming the primacy of human rights - Amnesty International's ten-point programme for the Austrian Presidency of the European Union" can be downloaded from <http://www.amnesty-eu.org> from 09.01 GMT Friday 13 January.

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