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Report 2006: World's poor and disadvantaged pay price of war on terror

(London) 2005 was a year of contradictions in which signs of hope for human rights were undermined through the deception and failed promises of powerful governments, said Amnesty International today as it published its annual report.

Speaking at the launch of *Amnesty International Report 2006*, the organization's Secretary General Irene Khan said that the security agenda of the powerful and privileged had hijacked the energy and attention of the world from serious human rights crises elsewhere.

"Governments collectively and individually paralyzed international institutions and squandered public resources in pursuit of narrow security interests, sacrificed principles in the name of the "war on terror" and turned a blind eye to massive human rights violations. As a result, the world has paid a heavy price, in terms of erosion of fundamental principles and in the enormous damage done to the lives and livelihoods of ordinary people," said Ms Khan.

"Intermittent attention and feeble action by the United Nations and the African Union fell pathetically short of what was needed in Darfur," said Ms Khan, referring to a conflict that claimed thousands of lives, displaced millions, and in which war crimes and crimes against humanity continue to be committed by all sides.

Iraq sank into a vortex of sectarian violence in 2005. Ms Khan warned: "When the powerful are too arrogant to review and reassess their strategies, the heaviest price is paid by the poor and powerless -- in this case, ordinary Iraqi women, men and children."

Israel and the Occupied Territories slipped off the international agenda in 2005, deepening the distress and despair of Palestinians and the fears of the Israeli population.

The brutality and intensity of attacks by armed groups in 2005 reached new levels, taking a heavy toll on human lives.

"Terrorism by armed groups is inexcusable and unacceptable. The perpetrators must be brought to justice -- but through fair trial, not torture or secret detention. Sadly, the increasing brutality of such incidents throughout the world last year is a further bitter reminder that the 'war on terror' is failing and will continue to fail until human rights and human security are given precedence over narrow national security interests," said Ms Khan.

"But clear signs of hope wrestled with despair in 2005."

The past year saw one of the greatest mobilizations of civil society in the fight against poverty and the struggle for economic and social rights. The UN Summit, which reviewed progress on

implementation of the Millennium Development Goals, showed the dismal failure of governments to match performance to promise. For instance, governments paid lip service to women's human rights but failed to fulfill international targets for equal access to education by girls.

In 2005, the call for justice scored another hit as the International Criminal Court issued its first indictments for crimes against humanity and war crimes in Uganda. The immunity of past Heads of State was dented in Latin America as Augusto Pinochet was placed under house arrest and an international arrest warrant was enforced against Alberto Fujimori.

Powerful governments were called to account by their courts and public institutions. The highest court in the United Kingdom rejected the government's plan to use evidence extracted under torture. The Council of Europe and the European Parliament opened investigations into European involvement in US-led 'renditions', or the unlawful transfer of prisoners to countries where they would be at risk of torture or other abuses.

Revelation after revelation exposed the extent to which European governments have been partners in crime with the United States, defying the absolute ban on torture and ill-treatment and by outsourcing torture through the transfer of prisoners to states such as Egypt, Jordan, Morocco, Saudi Arabia and Syria, which are known to practise torture.

"Sadly, instead of accepting and welcoming the efforts of courts and legislatures to reinstate respect for fundamental human rights principles, some governments attempted to find new ways to dodge obligations," stated Ms Khan.

The United Kingdom pursued "diplomatic assurances" -- or paper guarantees -- so as to be able to return people to countries where they could face torture.

Legislation in the USA reaffirmed the ban on torture and other ill-treatment in the face of opposition from President Bush, but then went on to severely restrict the right of Guantánamo detainees to have their treatment reviewed in the federal courts.

"Just as we must condemn terrorist attacks on civilians in the strongest possible terms, we must resist claims by governments that terror can be fought with torture. Such claims are misleading, dangerous and wrong -- you cannot extinguish a fire with petrol," said Ms Khan.

"Double speak and double standards by powerful governments are dangerous because they weaken the ability of the international community to address human rights problems such as those in Darfur, Chechnya, Colombia, Afghanistan, Iran, Uzbekistan and North Korea. They allow perpetrators in these and other countries to operate with impunity.

"When the UK government remains muted on arbitrary detention and ill-treatment in Guantánamo, when the United States ignores the absolute prohibition on torture, when European governments are mute about their record on renditions, racism or refugees, they undermine their own moral authority to champion human rights elsewhere in the world.

"In a year in which the UN spent much time discussing reform and membership of its key institutions, it failed to give attention to the performance of two key members -- China and Russia -- who have consistently allowed their narrow political and economic interests to prevail over human rights concerns domestically or internationally.

"Those who bear the greatest responsibility for safeguarding global security in the UN Security Council proved in 2005 to be the most willing to paralyze the Council and prevent it from taking effective action on human rights.

"Powerful governments are playing a dangerous game with human rights. The score card of prolonged conflicts and mounting human rights abuses is there for all to see."

The year 2005 saw the beginning of the change in public mood. "Pressure that is emerging must be used effectively to turn international irresponsibility into action," Ms Khan urged.

Key demands of Amnesty International in 2006 are:

- o To the United Nations and African Union to address the conflict and end human rights abuses in Darfur;
- o To the United Nations to negotiate for an Arms Trade Treaty to govern the trade of small arms so that they cannot be used to commit human rights abuses;
- o To the US Administration to close Guantánamo Bay detention camp, and disclose the names and locations of all 'war on terror' prisoners elsewhere;
- o To the new UN Human Rights Council, to insist on equal standards of respect of human rights from all governments, whether in Darfur or Guantánamo, Chechnya or China.

"The political and moral authority of governments will be increasingly judged on their stand on human rights at home and abroad. More than ever the world needs those countries with power and international influence -- the permanent members of the UN Security Council as well as those who aspire to such membership -- to behave with responsibility and respect for human rights. Governments must stop playing games with human rights," declared Ms Khan.

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For more information please call Amnesty International's press office in London, UK, on +44 20 7413 5566

Amnesty International, 1 Easton St., London WC1X 0DW. web: <http://www.amnesty.org>

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