

AI Index: PRE 01/173/2010
27 May 2010

REPORT 2010: GLOBAL JUSTICE GAP CONDEMNS MILLIONS TO ABUSE

A global justice gap is being made worse by power politics despite a landmark year for international justice, said Amnesty International today in its annual assessment of human rights worldwide.

Launching Amnesty International Report 2010: State of the World's Human Rights, which documents abuses in 159 countries, the organization said that powerful governments are blocking advances in international justice by standing above the law on human rights, shielding allies from criticism and acting only when politically convenient.

“Repression and injustice are flourishing in the global justice gap, condemning millions of people to abuse, oppression and poverty,” said Claudio Cordone, interim Secretary General of Amnesty International.

“Governments must ensure that no one is above the law, and that everyone has access to justice for all human rights violations. Until governments stop subordinating justice to political self-interest, freedom from fear and freedom from want will remain elusive for most of humanity.”

Amnesty International called on governments to ensure accountability for their own actions, fully sign up to the International Criminal Court (ICC) and ensure that crimes under international law can be prosecuted anywhere in the world. It said that states claiming global leadership, including the G20, have a particular responsibility to set an example.

The International Criminal Court's 2009 arrest warrant for Sudanese President Omar Hassan Al Bashir, for crimes against humanity and war crimes, was a landmark event demonstrating that even sitting heads of state are not above the law. However, the African Union's refusal to cooperate, despite the nightmare of violence that has affected hundreds of thousands of people in Darfur, was a stark example of governmental failure to put justice before politics.

The UN Human Rights Council's paralysis over Sri Lanka, despite serious abuses including possible war crimes carried out by both government forces and the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam, also stood as a testament to the international community's failure to act when needed. Meanwhile, the recommendations of the Human Rights Council's Goldstone report calling for accountability for the conflict in Gaza still need to be heeded by Israel and Hamas.

Worldwide, the justice gap sustained a pernicious web of repression. Amnesty International's research records torture or other ill-treatment in at least 111 countries, unfair trials in at least 55 countries, restrictions on free speech in at least 96 countries and prisoners of conscience imprisoned in at least 48 countries.

Human rights organizations and human rights defenders came under attack in many countries, with governments preventing their work or failing to protect them.

In the Middle East and North Africa, there were patterns of governmental intolerance of criticism in Saudi Arabia, Syria and Tunisia, and mounting repression in Iran. In Asia, the Chinese government increased pressure on challenges to its authority, detaining and harassing human rights defenders, while thousands fled severe repression and economic hardship in North Korea and Myanmar.

Space for independent voices and civil society shrank in parts of Europe and Central Asia, and there were unfair restrictions on freedom of expression in Russia, Turkey, Turkmenistan, Azerbaijan, Belarus and Uzbekistan. The

Americas were plagued by hundreds of unlawful killings by security forces, including in Brazil, Jamaica, Colombia and Mexico, while impunity for US violations related to counter-terrorism persisted. Governments in Africa such as Guinea and Madagascar met dissent with excessive use of force and unlawful killings, while Ethiopia and Uganda among others repressed criticism.

Callous disregard for civilians marked conflicts. Armed groups and government forces breached international law in the Democratic Republic of Congo, Sri Lanka and Yemen. In the conflict in Gaza and southern Israel, Israeli forces and Palestinian armed groups unlawfully killed and injured civilians. Thousands of civilians suffered abuses in escalating violence by the Taliban in Afghanistan and Pakistan, or bore the brunt of the conflicts in Iraq and Somalia. Women and girls suffered rape and other violence carried out by government forces and armed groups in most conflicts.

Other trends included:

- § Mass forced evictions of people from their homes in Africa, for example in Angola, Ghana, Kenya and Nigeria, often driving people deeper into poverty.
- § Increased reports of domestic violence against women, rape, sexual abuse, and murder and mutilation after rape, in Mexico, Guatemala, El Salvador, Honduras, and Jamaica.
- § Millions of migrants in Asia-Pacific countries including South Korea, Japan and Malaysia faced exploitation, violence and abuse.
- § A sharp rise in racism, xenophobia and intolerance in Europe and Central Asia.
- § In the Middle East and North Africa, attacks by armed groups – some apparently aligned to al-Qa’ida – in states such as Iraq and Yemen, heightened insecurity.

Globally, with millions of people pushed into poverty by the food, energy and financial crises, events showed the urgent need to tackle the abuses that affect poverty.

“Governments should be held accountable for the human rights abuses that drive and deepen poverty. The UN review meeting on the Millennium Development Goals in New York, USA, this September is an opportunity for world leaders to move from promises to legally enforceable commitments,” said Claudio Cordone.

Women, especially the poor, bore the brunt of the failure to deliver on these goals. Pregnancy-related complications claimed the lives of an estimated 350,000 women, with maternal mortality often directly caused by gender discrimination, violations of sexual and reproductive rights, and denial of access to health care.

“Governments must promote women’s equality and address discrimination against women if they are going to make progress on the Millennium Development Goals, ” said Claudio Cordone.

Amnesty International also called on G20 states that have failed to fully sign up to the International Criminal Court – USA, China, Russia, Turkey, India, Indonesia, and Saudi Arabia – to do so. The international review meeting on the court, beginning in Kampala, Uganda on 31 May, is a chance for governments to show their commitment to the court.

Despite serious failures in ensuring justice last year, many events revealed progress. In Latin America, investigations into crimes shielded by amnesty laws were reopened, with landmark judgments involving former leaders including the convictions of former President Alberto Fujimori of Peru for crimes against humanity and Argentina’s last military president, Reynaldo Bignone for kidnapping and torture. All trials in the Special Court for Sierra Leone were concluded apart from the on-going trial of former President of Liberia Charles Taylor.

“The need for effective global justice is a key lesson from the past year. Justice provides fairness and truth to those who suffer violations, deters human rights abuses, and ultimately delivers a more stable and secure world,” said Claudio Cordone.

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NOTES TO EDITORS

1. *Amnesty International Report 2010: State of the World’s Human Rights* covers the period January – December 2009.

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