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2009 International Day of the Disappeared – a new Convention could make a difference to those searching for their loved ones

Amnesty International calls on all governments to ratify the treaty and take a crucial step towards ending enforced disappearances worldwide

Imagine waiting for your loved ones to come home one day, and imagine that day turning into the rest of your life. Imagine waiting for them without knowing where they are, or even whether they are still alive. Imagine having knocked on every door to find out where they might be and not knowing what else to do. This is the life of family members of the disappeared in all regions of the world.

The International Day of the Disappeared, on Sunday 30 August, is a time to remember their struggle and demand justice.

Hundreds of thousands of cases of enforced disappearance remain unresolved while new cases are reported every year. Enforced disappearance continues to be used by governments to silence dissent and eliminate political opponents, to persecute ethnic, religious and political groups, and as a tool of repression. Enforced disappearance is a crime that thrives on secrecy; it is designed to put its victims beyond the protection of the law, and to hide the identity of the perpetrators and the fate of the victims -- many of whom are tortured or killed.

The international community has a new tool to combat this scourge. The International Convention for the Protection of All Persons from Enforced Disappearance -- adopted in 2006, but not yet in force -- could make a difference. It obliges states to ensure that enforced disappearances are a criminal offence under their laws, to protect witnesses and to hold any person involved in an enforced disappearance criminally responsible. It recognizes the families' right to know the truth and to obtain reparations. It requires states to prevent enforced disappearances by instituting stringent safeguards for people deprived of their liberty; to search for the disappeared person and, if they have died, to locate and return the remains. The Convention also requires states to prosecute alleged offenders present in their territory, regardless of where the crime was committed, or to extradite them to another state or surrender them to an international criminal court.

Only seven more ratifications are needed for this treaty to come into force, and give those searching for their loved ones a much needed lifeline. Amnesty International calls on all governments to mark this year's International Day of the Disappeared by making ratification of this treaty a priority and announcing when they will ratify. The 64th session of the UN General Assembly, due to open on 15 September 2009 in New York, and its annual treaty event will provide all governments with an opportunity to ratify or announce a commitment to ratify the Convention.

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