

The Wire

September 2005 Vol. 35. No. 08

AI Index: NWS 21/008/2005

Will China's government uphold the Olympic ideal?

On 8 August 2008 – just three years from now – China will host the Olympics. “By allowing Beijing to host the Games,” said Liu Jing Min, Vice President of the Beijing 2008 Olympic Games Bid Committee in April 2001, “you will help the development of human rights.” When China revised its constitution in March 2004 to include the clause, “the state respects and safeguards human rights”, it looked like the government was serious about improving its human rights record. But such promises fall flat in the face of continued human rights abuses in China.

Ironically, some of these abuses are linked to the government's preparation for the Olympics. According to the Geneva-based Centre on Housing Rights and Evictions, 300,000 people have to date been evicted from their homes in Beijing in preparation for the Games. Many of them have been evicted without due process and without adequate compensation. Individuals have been arrested and imprisoned simply for peacefully objecting to the evictions from their homes. Some of those detained have “disappeared” – their relatives do not even know where they are being held.

Ye Guozhu was detained in 2004 and sentenced to four years' imprisonment for protesting against the razing of his home and two of his restaurants. Ye Guozhu had sought permission to organize a demonstration with other petitioners against the forced evictions, action that was labelled “disturbing social order”.

Executions continue

China's continued use of the death penalty negates the spirit of the Olympic Charter which calls on participants to uphold human dignity. Prisoners have frequently been paraded in sports grounds immediately before their execution, and the government has recently decided to put an execution chamber out to open tender under the banner: “New Beijing, New Olympics: The Opportunity for China and the World”.

The extensive use of the death penalty is particularly disturbing in light of systemic flaws in China's judicial system, including the absence of an independent and impartial judiciary, widespread use of torture to force confessions, severe problems with access to justice particularly in rural areas, and extensive corruption among judges and other legal personnel. Such widespread potential for error underscores the urgent need for a moratorium on all executions.

Freedom not a temporary option

Wang Wei, Secretary General of the Beijing 2008 Olympic Games Bid Committee, promised full freedom to the media to report on the Olympics if China won the bid. The government currently exerts tight control over the media. Its sophisticated methods of censoring the Internet include blocking sites that focus on democracy and human rights. Some individuals who have tried to express their opinions through the media have ended up in prison. Writer and journalist Huang Jinqiu was detained in 2003 for contributing essays to Boxun.com and announcing online his plans to establish a China Patriotic Democracy Party. He was sentenced to 12 years' imprisonment on charges of “subversion”.

Freedom of expression cannot be a temporary option. As host of the Olympic Games, Beijing should not only allow freedom of the press during the Games but must make this a permanent freedom for everyone in China.

Uzbek refugees under threat in Kyrgyzstan

Having spent more than 10 weeks in tents close to the Uzbekistan border, 439 refugees from Uzbekistan were airlifted out of Kyrgyzstan on 29 July to a holding centre in Romania. Over the next six months they will be dispersed among countries that have offered them permanent homes.

The refugees had fled the eastern city of Andizhan on 13 May after government forces reportedly shot and killed hundreds of mostly unarmed demonstrators. AI is calling for an international independent and thorough inquiry into what happened that day, in order to examine the disputed accounts of the events, and to bring those responsible for human rights abuses to justice.

Since the refugees fled, the Uzbekistani authorities have pursued them by various means on Kyrgyz territory. Warrants were issued for the arrest of more than 350 men – the entire male population of the camp – on suspicion of committing criminal acts or as witnesses to alleged crimes in Andizhan. The fate of four asylum-seekers held on these warrants in a prison in Osh is unclear.

Since the Andizhan violence, officers from the Uzbekistani state security service (MNB) have been operating freely in southern Kyrgyzstan, an AI researcher learned on a visit there in late July. They have carried out house-to-house questioning, and even made on-the-spot arrests, without warrants and with no Kyrgyzstani law enforcement officers in attendance. Their chief targets have been refugees from Andizhan who fled to Kyrgyzstan by other routes since 13 May, and Kyrgyzstani citizens who were visiting Andizhan on that day.

Bakhodir Saibzhonovich Sadikov was one of two asylum-seekers who fled south across the border in May and hid in Osh, two hours' drive from the refugee camp. At the end of June a local human rights activist helped the men register as refugees at the Osh office of the UN High Commissioner for Refugees. Shortly after they left the building they were seized, and are now believed to be in detention in Uzbekistan – grounds for serious concern. Of four refugees returned in early June, one was reportedly in intensive care; another was believed to have died as a result of his treatment in prison.

The regional Ombudsman's office in Osh has monitored the plight of Kyrgyzstanis who were in Andizhan. On 13 June they found two Kyrgyzstani detainees in the Kenesh detention centre outside Osh, arrested on the authority of the procuracy of Uzbekistan. One of them showed signs of severe beating, which he said had been administered by an Uzbekistani MNB officer in the basement of the Kyrgyz prison, after he had asked for a lawyer. The men were released two days after the ombudsman intervened, but a third Kyrgyzstani was later discovered detained on the sanction of the Uzbekistani procuracy.

On 13 July the Governor of Osh told journalists he knew of no Uzbekistani MNB activity in his region. But AI was told by reliable sources that the MNB reportedly has premises within the Osh regional procuracy and enjoys access to confidential information on refugees, provided by the Kyrgyzstani Migration Service.

Israel leaves a trail of destruction as it withdraws from Gaza

Israel's decision to remove Israeli settlers from the Gaza Strip – also known as the “disengagement plan” – has been the focus of international attention in recent months. Israeli settlers have been living in Gaza in violation of international law, which prohibits an occupying power from settling its population in occupied territories.

While some 8,000 Israeli settlers have had exclusive use of about one-third of Gaza, one and a half million Palestinians have been confined to one of the most densely populated areas on earth.

The presence of Israeli settlements has caused mass violations of human rights in the Palestinian population. Since 2000, Israeli forces have destroyed thousands of Palestinian

homes and large parts of Gaza's agricultural land and infrastructure, to create buffer zones around Israeli settlements and along roads built especially for Israeli settlers.

It will take years of work and large amounts of international aid to rebuild Gaza and improve the lives of the Palestinian population, most of whom live below the poverty line. The Palestinian Authority (PA) and civil society also face the challenging task of putting in place accountable institutions and effective mechanisms to establish the rule of law and ensure respect for human rights and the administration of justice.

The PA must take concrete measures to put an end to an entrenched culture of impunity and increasing lawlessness and violent confrontations between rival political factions and armed groups, which jeopardize the safety of Palestinian civilians. The international community must ensure that the PA fulfils these obligations.

The international community must also ensure that the Gaza "disengagement plan" does not divert attention from Israel's action in the occupied West Bank, notably the continuing expansion of Israeli settlements, where some 400,000 Israeli settlers live in violation of international law, as well as the building of the fence/wall and the destruction of Palestinian homes and farmland.

Israel has stepped up construction of the fence/wall through the West Bank, disregarding the July 2004 Advisory Opinion of the International Court of Justice. The barrier encircles Palestinian towns and villages to segregate them from Israeli settlements. In the process, large areas of fertile land continue to be destroyed or made inaccessible to Palestinian farmers, and access for Palestinians to their workplace and to health and education facilities is further hindered.

Destruction of Palestinian homes by Israeli forces in the West Bank is continuing as Israel seeks to strengthen its hold on more Palestinian land. The destruction of the Zaatreh family home last April, to make way for the fence/wall in the East Jerusalem suburb of 'Izarieh, left 29 people, including 16 children, homeless.

In July the Israeli army destroyed the entire hamlet of Khirbet Tana, in an area of the Jordan Valley surrounded by Israeli settlements. Some 20 homes and animal sheds and a school built for the village's young children six years ago were reduced to rubble, leaving more than 150 villagers homeless.

Sudan's political prisoners face an uncertain future

Adib Abdel Rahman Yusuf spent four months in a secret detention centre – called "Abu Ghraib" by detainees – in the capital, Khartoum. Systematically beaten and tied up, he was sometimes tied to windows or doors and not allowed to sleep. Part of the time he was held in solitary confinement. He later spent two months in the mosquito-ridden Debek Prison, north of Khartoum, renowned for its extremely poor conditions. He was never brought before a prosecutor or judge, and had no contact with his family. He was released in April.

Most political detainees in Sudan have no access to their families or a lawyer. Sometimes families are unable to find where their relative is being held, raising concerns that they may have "disappeared" or been secretly executed. Many, who have no lawyer and do not know the system, suffer months of anguish, not knowing whether their detained relative is alive or dead.

President Omar Hassan al-Bashir promised in June that all political prisoners would be released and the six-year state of emergency lifted, once the Interim Constitution is adopted. However, this would not apply to Darfur and Eastern Sudan where tensions are escalating.

In June, AI published a list of 355 political detainees known to the organization, *Sudan: List of political detainees* (AFR 54/062/2005). At least a third of the detainees were arrested in Darfur, most of them held arbitrarily in connection with the internal conflict. Many are still detained in Darfur while others have been transferred to Khartoum. They include community leaders, critics of government policy and people, including members of Arab groups, seeking to engage in reconciliation. Most have been arrested on suspicion of sympathizing with armed groups, however only about a quarter of them have been charged or brought to trial.

The National Security Forces Act allows people to be held in detention for up to nine months – in violation of international treaties that Sudan has signed and ratified. However, some 30 detainees on AI's list have been held for longer than this with no charge or trial – illegal even under Sudanese law.

Some high profile political prisoners were released in June, including Shaikh Hassan al-Turabi, leader of the opposition Popular Congress Party, and other members of his party. The ban on his party's activities has also been lifted. Other detainees released included all of the Beja Congress party members and some senior members of other political parties.

Despite the removal of the state of emergency in a large part of the country, it remains in force in Darfur and Eastern Sudan where there are many political detainees and the National Security Forces still have the power to detain anyone incommunicado for up to nine months.

In July, following ratification of the Interim Constitution, at least 40 members of the Popular Congress Party (mostly from Darfur) began a hunger strike in protest at their continued detention despite the lifting of the state of emergency. They are demanding to be tried or released. At the time of writing, it is thought that at least seven of those on hunger strike have been taken to hospital.

AI is calling for an end to all emergency measures which contravene international human rights standards. Measures that allow the security forces to detain people indefinitely without charge, and which limit freedom of expression, must be lifted in the whole of Sudan, including Darfur and Eastern Sudan.

Armed groups in Iraq disregard basic principles of humanity

Mohammad Ahmad Salama and Fayez al-'Adwan were forced into a car at gunpoint by five masked men on 25 July 2004. They were transporting wood for a Jordanian company that delivers goods to US forces in Iraq. The two men were tortured with electric shocks to their feet through two wires tied to their toes. Threatened with execution, they were forced to call on their employer to stop all commercial operations in Iraq. The two hostages were held for 16 days in different locations and with different armed groups guarding them. They were finally released after a ransom was negotiated reportedly through a Sunni cleric.

During the past two years armed groups in Iraq have indiscriminately attacked civilians with the intention of causing the greatest possible loss of life – acts amounting to war crimes and crimes against humanity. Children and the elderly are among the thousands who have died as a result of these attacks.

Armed groups have targeted humanitarian organizations, including the UN and the International Committee of the Red Cross. They have tortured and killed hostages, and captured and killed scores of police and military personnel. Attacks on women

and girls, including indiscriminate or direct attacks on women activists, are also widespread.

Many of the armed groups currently committing abuses in Iraq appear to be composed of Iraqis, including former soldiers and Ba'athists who supported Saddam Hussain. Some groups include Muslim militants from other countries in the Middle East and beyond, seemingly drawn to Iraq by their opposition to the USA, its policies and its military presence in Iraq. The Jordanian-born militant Abu Mus'ab al-Zarqawi is the most notorious of these. Some prominent Muslim scholars and religious institutions outside Iraq have issued *fatwas* and statements which have encouraged many, from inside and outside the country, to join groups fighting against the US-led Multinational Force (MNF). However, others have denounced the kidnapping and killing of civilians, including the killing of US civilian nationals in Iraq.

One Iraqi government minister estimated that some 6,000 civilians have been killed and another 16,000 wounded in attacks by armed groups in the 24 months up to March 2005. But the attacks are so frequent and the security situation so grave, it is impossible to calculate with any confidence the true number of civilian lives lost or the numbers maimed, let alone the long-term consequences that so many Iraqis will inevitably suffer.

In its report, *Iraq: In cold blood: Abuses by armed groups* (MDE 14/009/2005), AI recognizes that many Iraqis oppose the continuing presence of the MNF in their country, and that these forces have themselves committed grave violations, including killings of civilians and torture of prisoners. But abuses committed by one side do not justify abuses by another.

In Iraq, the main victims are ordinary civilians – men, women and children – peacefully going about their daily lives. All sides to the ongoing conflict have a fundamental obligation to respect the rights of civilians. Those who breach this obligation must be stopped and they must be held to account.

Worldwide Appeals

Indonesia

Two men jailed for raising a flag

Filep Karma, a former civil servant, and Yusak Pakage, a student, have been sentenced to lengthy jail terms for participating in a peaceful flag-raising ceremony in Abepura, Papua province, Indonesia. In May, Filep Karma and Yusak Pakage received jail sentences of 15 and 10 years respectively, on charges of treason and expressing hostility towards the state.

On 1 December 2004, the two men joined a crowd of around 200 people in a field outside Abepura to watch as the Morning Star flag, a symbol of Papuan independence, was raised in commemoration of the declaration of Papuan independence in 1962.

Police officers fired warning shots in the direction of participants and beat demonstrators with batons. Police also beat a human rights monitor from the Institute for Human Rights Study and Advocacy who was trying to photograph the attacks. The ceremony was forced to an end and Filep Karma was arrested. He was reportedly beaten during transportation to the police station.

Yusak Pakage was later arrested at the police station alongside a group of 20 others while protesting against Filep Karma's arrest. Although the rest of the group was later released, Yusak Pakage was not.

The trial of Filep Karma and Yusak Pakage provoked riots outside the courthouse on 10 May 2005, as police forces clashed with crowds protesting the men's arrest. Police used excessive force against the demonstrators, and many people were injured. Although a senior police officer was dismissed from his post as a result of the incident, he has not faced any criminal charges. No formal inquiry into the incident has taken place.

Please write, calling for the immediate and unconditional release of Filep Karma and Yusak Pakage, and all other prisoners of conscience in Indonesia. Urge the authorities to investigate all allegations of human rights violations perpetrated by the security forces on 1 December 2004 and on 10 May 2005, and to prosecute those found responsible.

Send appeals to: President Susilo Bambang Yudhoyono, President of the Republic of Indonesia, Istana Merdeka, Jakarta 10110, Indonesia. Fax: + 62 21 345 2685 (via State Secretariat) /+ 62 21 526 8726. (Fax numbers may be difficult to get through to; please keep trying.)

AI takes no position on the political status of Papua, neither supporting Indonesia's claims on the territory nor claims for independence by Papuans.

Syria and Lebanon

Lebanese priests 'disappeared'

Suleiman Abu Khalil and Albert Sherfan, Christian priests from the Deir al-Qal'ah Monastery in Beit Meri, Lebanon, "disappeared" on 13 October 1990 during the Lebanese civil war (1975 - 1990). They "disappeared" with over 20 Lebanese soldiers who had apparently taken refuge in the monastery.

At least 646 Lebanese nationals have "disappeared" during and since the war. Arrested or abducted by Syrian military forces or by Lebanese and Palestinian militias in Lebanon, hundreds were transferred to Syria and detained without due legal process. Others were arrested in Syria. Conflicting statements by the Syrian authorities suggest there are between none and hundreds of Lebanese still detained. AI receives occasional reports about Lebanese still detained in Syria.

At least two commissions have been set up in Lebanon to investigate the fate of the "disappeared" but the findings were not made public and there have been no criminal investigations.

A new joint Syrian-Lebanese committee was set up in May to investigate the fate of the "disappeared". The Lebanese component of the committee is neither fully independent nor sufficiently empowered. However, it does offer potential for progress, particularly since the Syrian withdrawal of its troops from Lebanon in April. There is still no information about the Syrian component of the joint committee, despite the UN Human Rights Committee's repeated recommendation that the Syrian authorities establish an independent and credible commission of inquiry into all "disappearances".

Please write to the Syrian President and the Lebanese Minister of Justice welcoming the creation of this new committee and urging them to ensure that: it is as independent and credible as possible; its findings are made public; details of the whereabouts of Fathers Suleiman Abu Khalil and Albert Sherfan and the hundreds of others who are

missing be promptly provided; and that anyone found to be responsible for the “disappearances” be brought to justice.

Send appeals to: President Bashar al-Assad, Presidential Palace, Abu Rummaneh, al-Rashid Street, Damascus, Syria. Fax: + 963 11 332 3410; and to: Charles Rizk, Minister of Justice, Ministry of Justice, Rue Sami Solh, Beirut, Lebanon. Fax: +961 1 427 975.

United Kingdom

Internment of Iraqi-UK citizen

Hilal Abdul-Razzaq Ali Al-Jedda has been in detention without charge or trial or access to a court in Iraq since 10 October 2004. A citizen of both the UK and Iraq, he was seized by US troops while in Baghdad, Iraq, and immediately handed over to UK armed forces personnel. Since then, he has been detained by the UK armed forces at the Shu’aiba Divisional Temporary Detention Facility, a centre near Basra.

He has not been granted the right to appeal the decision to detain him. AI is concerned that his detention, while being reviewed periodically, could be extended indefinitely.

Hilal Abdul-Razzaq Ali Al-Jedda is suspected of conduct which would amount to a crime under UK legislation. However, the UK authorities have reportedly stated that the material on which their suspicions are based is not sufficient to substantiate bringing criminal charges against him and cannot be used in court. Moreover, much of this information has been kept secret from him and his lawyer.

AI is concerned that the UK authorities are yet again circumventing their obligations under human rights law in respect of the conduct of their armed forces in Iraq. This case concerns one of the most fundamental rights, the right not to be detained arbitrarily. AI considers that human rights obligations guaranteeing this right remain fully applicable to all persons held by the UK armed forces in Iraq. Indefinite detention without charge or trial violates a number of human rights and it may also amount to a violation of the right to be free from torture or other ill-treatment.

About 15,000 people reportedly remain detained without charge or trial by the Multinational Force in Iraq.

Please write, urging the UK authorities to immediately release Hilal Abdul-Razzaq Ali Al-Jedda unless they charge him with a recognizably criminal offence and bring him promptly to trial in proceedings which fully meet internationally-recognized fair trial standards.

Send letters to: Dr John Reid MP, Secretary of State for Defence, Ministry of Defence, The Ministerial Correspondence Unit, Floor 5, Zone A, Main Building, Whitehall, London SW1A 2HB, UK. Fax: +44 207 218 7140.

‘Containment’ on Greek island puts people at risk

Asylum-seekers and migrants in Greece continue to be detained in deplorable conditions. In April, a group of human rights activists protested against the detention of a number of people who arrived by boat on the island of Chios and were detained in a metal container near the harbour. Detention in containers amounts to cruel, inhuman and degrading treatment and such treatment is in contravention of the

country's obligations under international law, including the European Convention on Human Rights. AI has sought assurances from the Greek authorities that the practice be terminated immediately. In late June, however, reports indicated that the container was still being used to detain people.

Greece's geographical location on the southeastern border of the European Union (EU) has made it, over the past two decades, a first-stop destination for migrants and for refugees who are fleeing persecution and seeking protection in the EU. However, many are detained without having access to basic procedural safeguards. People have been forcibly returned without being given the opportunity to seek asylum in Greece. Preventing access to asylum in this way, or returning people to a situation where they may face serious human rights abuses, violates the principle of non-refoulement which Greece should respect according to its obligations under international law. The principle prohibits the forcible return of anyone to a country or territory where they would be at risk of serious human rights abuses.

As reports of the detentions in Chios arrived in April, fears were expressed that 106 individuals, some of whom may have been refugees, were being denied the right to seek asylum. They were all forcibly returned to Egypt 12 days after arriving on the southern island of Crete.

ACT NOW!

Please write, calling on the Greek authorities to ensure that no asylum-seeker or migrant is arbitrarily detained and that detention policies and practices are in full accordance with Greece's international obligations. Urge the authorities to cease using containers to detain people and to launch an independent investigation to ensure that similar conditions of detention do not exist anywhere in the country, and remind them of their obligation to respect the principle of non-refoulement.

Send letters to: Kostas Karamanlis, Prime Minister of the Hellenic Republic, Megaron Maximou, 19 Herodou Atticou Avenue, 106 74 Athens, Greece. Fax: +30 210 671 5799.

E-mail: info@primeminister.gr

Worldwide Appeal Updates

Saudi Arabia

Dr Sa'id Bin Zu'air was released from prison in August after being granted a royal pardon by the new King Abdullah. He had been detained since April 2004 after he criticized the government in a televised debate. Two of his sons were imprisoned when they campaigned for his release. They were both released earlier this year.

Dr Sa'id Bin Zu'air was previously imprisoned without charge or trial for eight years for his criticism of the government. He was released in 2003. See *Worldwide Appeals* June 2001 and October 2004.

Four other men, detained because of their criticism of the government, were also given royal pardons and released in August. See *Urgent Action* (MDE 23/012/2005).

Maldives

Fathimath Nisreen was released from detention on 9 May when she was granted a presidential amnesty. She had to sign a letter thanking the president for her release and promising to abide by the Maldivian constitution and Islamic law.

On her release she said: “I am really grateful. International pressure was the main reason for my release and I know that Amnesty played a huge role. I know that Amnesty groups and other well-wishers have been sending a lot of letters about me, apparently thousands of letters. I want to say thank you to you and everyone else at Amnesty who helped me.”

She was arrested in 2002, along with Ahmed Ibrahim Didi, Mohamed Zaki and Ibrahim Moosa Luthfee because of their alleged involvement with an Internet publication called *Sandhaanu*, which published articles critical of the government. Ibrahim Moosa Luthfee escaped from custody in late May 2003. Ahmed Ibrahim Didi and Mohamed Zaki have been transferred to house arrest for medical reasons.

Please continue to send appeals for Ahmed Ibrahim Didi and Mohamed Zaki, who AI considers to be prisoners of conscience.

See *Worldwide Appeal* January 2003.

Myanmar

Khin Maung Win was among those released from prison in Myanmar in July. He was arrested, with fellow law student Thet Naung Soe, for holding a peaceful demonstration in the capital of Myanmar in August 2002. Students were demonstrating outside Yangon City Hall where, on 8 August 1988, soldiers shot and killed hundreds of students, monks and other protesters peacefully demonstrating against one-party rule.

Please continue to send appeals for Thet Naung Soe who remains in detention and is said to be suffering from serious health problems.

See *Worldwide Appeals* July 2003.

Growing intolerance? Freedom of religious belief at risk in Malaysia

Public debate over restrictions on the right to freedom of conscience and religious belief in Malaysia intensified in July when a mob of unidentified men carrying machetes set fire to the commune of the Sky Kingdom religious sect in Terengganu state.

The sect, headed by Arrifin Mohamad (“Ayah Pin”), a 65-year-old ethnic Malay who claims to be a divine spiritual leader, calls for a peaceful synthesis of all faiths, and includes Muslim, Christian, Hindu, Buddhist and other followers.

Following the attack, 58 sect members, including women and children, were arrested and detained. Forty-five people were subsequently charged for offences under *Sharia* law, including practising “deviant” or heretical Islamic beliefs. Only two arrests of those suspected of attacking the commune were reported.

Islam is the official religion of multi-ethnic Malaysia where ethnic Malays, who by definition must be Muslim, form the majority. Faiths of other ethnic groups are protected through constitutional provisions which guarantee that every person has the right to practise their religion “in peace and harmony”.

Sharia law, enacted and enforced at the state rather than the federal level, applies only to Muslims. However, apparent conflicts between certain *Sharia* law provisions and human rights principles, enshrined in international law and the federal constitution, remain the subject of controversy.

Under *Sharia* law, Malaysians wishing to renounce Islam (apostasy) to profess other faiths or beliefs are subject to criminal sanctions, as are those Muslims found to hold beliefs that “deviate” from Sunni Islam.

Two of those arrested after the attack on the Sky Kingdom commune, Kamariah Ali, a 54-year-old Malay woman, and 74-year-old Malay Daud Mamat, filed a habeas corpus petition to test the lawfulness of their detention. They were released on bail before their petition was heard.

Thirteen years previously, they and two other sect members were arrested and sentenced to imprisonment for “deviant” Islamic practices. The sentence was commuted on appeal, but they were ordered to report regularly to the religious authorities to “repent”. Failing to do so, they were sentenced in 2000 to three years in jail and were charged with apostasy. The four prisoners appealed to Malaysia’s highest civil court, the Federal Court, asserting their right under constitutional guarantees of freedom of religion to leave Islam. However in 2002 the Court chose not to rule on this central question, stating that jurisdiction of the *Sharia* court was legitimate because the case predated the four individuals’ declaration of apostasy in 1998.

The Malaysian government regards the maintenance of ethnic and religious stability as critical to Malaysia’s continued peaceful development. Trying to convert Muslims is prohibited, and officials have labelled 22 religious sects as “deviant”, threatening either prosecution under *Sharia* or detention without trial under the Internal Security Act.

Under Article 18 of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, everyone has the right to freedom of thought, conscience and religion, and this right includes freedom to change their religion or belief. Freedom to manifest religion can be limited only if it is necessary to protect public order, health or morals, or the rights of others.

By destroying religious structures, or by imprisoning and labelling “deviant” Muslims who seek to profess another faith or peacefully practise a different form of Islam, the principles of tolerance, respect and non-discrimination are seriously undermined.

2005 World Summit: a chance for UN to put human rights first

From 14 to 16 September, heads of state and government will gather in New York for the 2005 World Summit, a high-level meeting at the 60th session of the UN General Assembly. The Summit will review progress made towards implementing the 2000 Millennium Declaration and will address some of the most important issues before the international community. These include reducing poverty, strengthening collective security, and enhancing the protection of human rights. Underpinning the discussions will be UN Secretary-General Kofi Annan’s bold proposals to restructure the UN, including the recommendation, welcomed by AI, to replace the Commission on Human Rights with a Human Rights Council.

The aim of the Summit is the adoption of a document in which governments are expected to reiterate their pledge to implement the 2000 Millennium Declaration and to commit to specific actions to meet these goals.

The latest draft of the document, expected to be adopted at the Summit, was published in August. AI welcomed its commitment to establishing the proposed Human Rights Council within a strictly limited timescale. In the months leading up to the Summit, AI has continued to work toward the overall strengthening of the human rights aspects of the document. It is lobbying government representatives to, among other things:

establish a strong Human Rights Council as a principal organ of the UN within a specified timeframe

immediately treble the resources of the Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights from the UN regular budget and double the Office’s overall resources within the next five years

adopt the strongest possible text on human rights, including reaffirming the centrality of gender equality to human rights

agree to develop an Arms Trade Treaty, consistent with international human rights and humanitarian law obligations.

The September Summit presents governments with a unique opportunity. AI urges them to seize it to – as Kofi Annan wrote in March – “raise human rights to the priority accorded to it in the Charter of the United Nations”. (A/59/2005/Add.1).

For more information see *Amnesty International welcomes strengthened human rights provisions...* (IOR 41/053/2005); *2005 World Summit: Unique opportunity to strengthen...* (IOR 41/050/2005); and *the Wire* May 2005.

Latvian politicians try to halt Gay Pride march

Latvia’s first ever Gay Pride march was held in the capital, Riga, on 23 July. Up to 300 people took part, despite opposition by senior politicians – including Prime Minister Aigars Kalvitis – and religious leaders. Riga’s City Council originally banned the event but its decision was overturned by a local administrative court.

However, Pride marchers were outnumbered by over a thousand people who staged a protest against the event. Some protesters tried to block the march, while others used tear gas and hurled eggs at individuals. The police had to escort marchers for the duration of the event. In total, six protesters were arrested, including two wearing Nazi symbols on their clothing.

Attempts by the authorities to ban the march breach Latvia’s obligations under international human rights law and standards, including Articles 2, 19 and 21 of the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights. These set out the rights to freedom from discrimination, freedom of expression and freedom of association respectively. AI has urged the Latvian prime minister to ensure that the government actively promotes these rights and works to build a society where they can be enjoyed by all.

On 25 July, AI issued a public statement expressing concern that homophobic remarks made by the Latvian prime minister and other senior figures might encourage a climate of intolerance and hatred, and incite further verbal and physical attacks against gay and lesbian people.

On 1 August, AI Sweden, together with Stockholm Pride organisers, held a meeting with the Latvian embassy in Stockholm to express concern at the events in Riga and at the statements by senior Latvian politicians. The International Lesbian and Gay Association has also vocally denounced the events surrounding Gay Pride in Latvia.

Good news for human rights defenders in Mauritania

Several Mauritanian non-governmental organizations (NGOs), including SOS Esclaves, and Association Mauritanienne des Droits de l’Homme (AMDH), were officially legalized by the authorities in June. Although recognized by international human rights bodies, including the African Commission on Human and Peoples’ Rights, these and several other organizations remained illegal for years according to Mauritanian law and have operated with great difficulty in Mauritania. This lack of official recognition has been a constant threat to the survival of these organizations as well as to the personal safety of their representatives. In 1998 the President of SOS Esclaves, and the President and Vice-President of the AMDH, were imprisoned for “running unauthorized organizations”. Debate on the measures necessary for eradicating slavery, the main issue they were engaged with, was effectively stifled.

The recent legalization of these NGOs comes after months of pressure as part of AI’s global campaign, *Human rights defenders at risk* (ACT 30/020/2004). Fatimata Mbaye, Chair of AMDH, who has received hundreds of letters from AI members since the campaign began, said: “On behalf of all AMDH activists and human rights defenders in Mauritania, we thank

you for your support throughout the years, for the recognition of our organizations, for the defence of human rights, in particular the AMDH. The Mauritanian authorities would probably not have given us official recognition without your campaign... Thanks again to all those who have sent letters to the Mauritanian authorities requesting the respect of freedom of association”.

This recognition lifts the threat of sanctions that these NGOs operated under as Mauritanian law provides for criminal sanctions of one to three years’ imprisonment and a fine for “those who, in any capacity, run or continue to run associations operating without authorization”. AI hopes that these organizations will now be able to act more freely.

[Original quote from Fatimata Mbaye for French translators:

“Au nom de tous les militants de l’ AMDH et de tous les défenseurs de droits de l’Homme en Mauritanie, nous vous remercions de votre soutien qui nous ont accompagnés tout au long des ces longues années de lutte pour la reconnaissance de nos organisations de Défense des Droits de l’Homme en particulier l’association mauritanienne des droits de l’homme et de sos-esclave. Sans votre campagne, les autorités mauritaniennes n’auraient certainement pas décidé de nous attribuer le récépissé de reconnaissance... Merci encore à tous et toutes celles et ceux qui ont écrits aux autorités mauritaniennes leur demandant de respecter le droit à l’association.”]

[Long picture caption:]

AI Slovenia held a candlelit vigil on 10 July to mark the 10th anniversary of the massacre at Srebrenica. Many AI sections worldwide joined in activities to commemorate the event and to remember those who died.

Ten years ago, around 8,000 Bosniaks (Bosnian Muslims) were massacred after the UN “safe area” of Srebrenica fell to the Bosnian Serb Army. Crimes committed in Srebrenica have been recognized as amounting to genocide by the International Criminal Tribunal for the former Yugoslavia.

Ten years after their husbands and sons were massacred, the women of Srebrenica are still waiting for the perpetrators to be brought to justice. The Bosnian Serb authorities in the Republika Srpska have yet to tell them exactly what happened to their family members.