

# AMNESTY INTERNATIONAL

## Media Briefing

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### **Report 2006: Address by Irene Khan, Secretary General, Press conference, Foreign Press Association, London**

#### **[Check against delivery]**

Covering 150 countries from Afghanistan to Zimbabwe, Amnesty International Report 2006 is a commentary on the state of the world's human rights. It covers a range of issues and the responsibilities of governments - big and small - armed groups and business. But the overarching message that comes through is that:

#### **Powerful governments are playing a dangerous game with human rights.**

Those with power and influence – the US, European Union members, China and Russia – have been either complicit or compromised by human rights violations in 2005 at home and abroad.

#### **Governments continued to sacrifice principles in the name of “the war on terror”.**

A year ago, almost to the day, here in this room, on behalf of Amnesty International (AI), I called for Guantánamo prison camp to be closed. What was then AI's lone voice has now become a large and influential chorus, including opinion leaders in the US, religious figures, key governments and UN entities, including the UN Committee against Torture. The US Administration reacted strongly to our call, but in a recent interview on German TV, even President Bush said that he “would very much like to close Guantánamo and put the prisoners on trial”. We in AI strongly urge him to do that or to release them immediately.

A year is a long time in politics – but it is an even longer time if you happen to be a prisoner without charge, trial, or prospect of release in Guantánamo. Some 460 people of around 40 different nationalities remain in Guantánamo. Their desperation is evident in the large numbers of suicide attempts, in one case more than 12 times, and hunger strikes. Last Friday's incident of the attack on prison guards was yet another sign of the desperate situation. Guantánamo is a pressure cooker waiting to explode.

Guantánamo is only the tip of the iceberg of a large network of detention centres in Iraq, Afghanistan and secret locations around the world where the US and its allies are holding thousands of prisoners without charge or trial. Last week the UN Committee against Torture asked the US delegation whether the US maintains secret detention centres, the delegate responded: “No comment”.

#### **Duplicity and double speak have become the hallmark of the war on terror.**

Senior US officials – including Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice and President George Bush – gave assurances that the US does not practice torture. Yet, our research over the past year has

shown evidence of widespread torture and ill treatment in the US-controlled detention centres. Our research also shows that the CIA has forcibly transferred prisoners to countries where they have been tortured. The IT industry outsources software development to India – the US outsources torture to countries like Morocco, Egypt, Jordan and Syria.

A new aspect of the “war on terror” in 2005 was the concrete evidence that European governments are partners in crime of the US in rendering or transferring prisoners forcibly to countries where they have been tortured. At least seven European countries have been implicated in the rendition of fourteen individuals – but so far only one country (Italy) has opened criminal prosecution against the CIA.

Public outrage has forced accountability, with investigations by the European Parliament, the Council of Europe and some national institutions, into renditions and US-run secret prisons.

Public institutions refused to undermine the prohibition on torture. The UK House of Lords rejected the argument of the government that it is lawful to introduce evidence in court proceedings that has been extracted as a result of torture by foreign agents abroad.

The US Senate adopted a law prohibiting the torture and ill treatment of prisoners in US custody anywhere in the world.

**Sadly, instead of accepting and welcoming the efforts of courts and legislatures to reinstate respect for human rights, some governments found new ways to deny or dodge their international obligations**

Bending to Republican pressure President Bush signed the bill prohibiting torture, but attached a statement effectively reserving the right of the executive to bypass the provision on national security grounds.

The UK professed to uphold the prohibition against torture but then, negotiated diplomatic assurances from countries that have a record of torture so that it could freely return people, including persons who had been tortured there previously. Lebanon, Jordan, Libya, Egypt, Algeria are all countries with which the UK has obtained or is in the process of obtaining such guarantees.

The position in international law is clear. Nothing can justify torture and ill treatment. **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 simply wrong – you cannot extinguish a fire with petrol.**

**When the US government ignores the absolute prohibition on torture and fails to investigate abuses by its soldiers, when the European governments bury their collective heads in the sand and refuse to question their own record on renditions, racism or refugees, they damage their ability to champion human rights elsewhere in the world.**

**Not every human rights abuse can be attributed to the war on terror but there is no doubt that it has given a new lease of life to old fashioned repression in some parts of the world.**

In 2005 it provided an effective smoke screen for governments in the Middle East and North Africa to carry on with arbitrary detention, torture, unfair trial, suppression of political dissent, ethnic persecution, for instance of Kurds and religious minorities. These governments today do with greater confidence what they did in the past with fear of criticism. The war on terror has seen the rehabilitation of Libya, formerly considered a terrorist state, with the US re-establishing diplomatic ties, and the UK negotiating diplomatic assurances. On Sunday a Swiss Amnesty member in Tunisia was expelled, and yesterday a Tunisian member was arrested and then released – just two cases among many of harassment of human rights defenders.

**But the real cost of the war on terror has not only been in the curtailment of civil liberties but in the lives and livelihoods of the poor.**

2005 saw the biggest ever mobilization of civil society and public support to eradicate poverty. But in response, the UN Summit showed governments miserably failing to match promise to performance on

the Millennium Development Goals. In the aftermath of Hurricane Katrina and riots in France, 2005 was also a year which showed the glaring disparity, discrimination and alienation in the heart of richest countries of the world.

Women's human rights have been another hidden casualty of the war on terror. March 2005 marked the 10th anniversary of the Beijing Platform of Action for Women – but rather than building on the progress, it was spent resisting the backlash from conservative forces who have gained new lease of life in the current security environment. War on terror gets attention – the war on women goes unnoticed, with hundreds of women, for instance, in Mexico and Guatemala being killed with impunity; or 25% of women globally facing sexual abuse at the hands of their partner.

At a time of unprecedented globalization, with barriers to goods and capital being dismantled, 2005 saw the building of borders against refugees and migrants. Ignoring the economic exploitation of illegal migrants, governments focussed instead on building borders – whether against Burmese workers in Thailand, or African migrants in the Spanish enclaves of Ceuta and Melilla, and now in the US.

**The security agenda of the powerful and privileged hijacked the energy and attention of the world from serious human rights crises.**

Social development was not the only casualty. The forgotten conflicts in Africa, Asia and the Middle East took their toll. Israel and the Occupied Territories also slipped off the international agenda in 2005, deepening the distress and despair of Palestinians and the fear of Israelis.

**Powerful governments squandered their resources and spend their capacity in pursuit of military and security strategies that reaped a bloody harvest.**

The score card of continued conflict and mounting human rights abuses are there for all to see in Afghanistan and Iraq.

The failure to investigate or prosecute abuses committed by their own soldiers or private security contractors undermined the claims by the Multi National Forces (MNF) that they were restoring the rule of law in the country. The current strategies of the Iraqi government and the MNF are clearly not working. When the powerful are too arrogant to review and reassess their strategies the heaviest price is paid by the poor and the powerless: in this case ordinary Iraqi women, men and children.

**Governments, collectively and individually, paralysed international institutions and squandered resources and capacity in misguided military and security strategies.**

Darfur was the saddest case in point in 2005. Two million people have been displaced, over 200,000 have died, thousands have been raped and the atrocities continue unabated. Intermittent attention and feeble action by the United Nations and the African Union fell pathetically short of what was needed in Darfur. China and Russia paralysed the UN Security Council to protect their oil interests and arms trade with Khartoum. The US was keen but its capacity was sapped by Iraq, and its moral authority tarnished by the war on terror.

**In a year in which the UN spent much of its time discussing reform and membership of the UN Security Council, 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 and responsibilities domestically and internationally.**

Russia's behaviour sent a strong message on human rights to its close neighbours. Its hostility to its own human rights defenders did not go unnoticed by other states with similar desires to clamp down on civil society. Russia supported Uzbekistan when it refused to allow an independent investigation into the Andizhan killings. Russia's own approach to Chechnya was based on impunity for the abuses committed by its own security forces.

China's rise as a global economic power places upon it greater responsibility in international relations. But China continued to show little concern for human rights at home or abroad, entering into

economic partnerships with some of the most repressive regimes around the world, and continuing to restrict human rights at home.

**2005 has been a year of contradictions – with signs of hope wrestling against failed promises and failures of leadership.**

The overall number of conflicts worldwide has been decreasing, thanks to international conflict management, prevention and peace-building initiatives, giving hope to millions of people in countries like Angola, Liberia and Sierra Leone.

In Nepal, resistance by human rights defenders, journalists and political leaders, on the one hand, and firm pressure from allies abroad on the other, forced the King to hand power back to Parliament.

Despite the shortcomings of national judicial systems, the fight against impunity continues to gain new strength with steps being taken to bring Augusto Pinochet, Alberto Fujimori and Charles Taylor to justice. The International Criminal Court (ICC) issued its first indictments against leaders of armed groups in northern Uganda and the Democratic Republic of Congo.

The much discredited UN human rights machinery was overhauled and a new Human Rights Council has been established.

And in 2005 we saw an extraordinary display of solidarity and resistance across borders of human rights activists and ordinary people. From indigenous groups rallying in Latin America, to women asserting their rights in Asia, to mass demonstrations of migrants in US cities, the human rights *idea* – and the world-wide movement of people that drives it forward – is more powerful and stronger than ever.

More and more, governments are being called to account: before legislatures, in courts and other public forums. Lines, however fragile, are being drawn. Voices are being raised. This offers hope for a more principled approach to human rights and security in the future. In the long-term, this growth of civil society and mass action bodes well for the protection of human rights. There is real potential here for change.

**As we look forward to 2006 it is clear that there are both opportunities and risks** – through our campaigns we are putting four challenges.

First, Guantánamo must close. President Bush should keep his word. His credibility will be held hostage until he ends this shameful symbol of US abuse of power. The US and its allies must disclose the names and locations of all others held in secret detention – the detainees should be prosecuted or released.

Second, small arms are the real weapons of mass destruction. They fuel conflict, poverty and human rights abuses worldwide. The UN Review Conference this June is an opportunity for governments to agree to an Arms Trade Treaty. We call on all governments to support it.

Third, the new UN Human Rights Council machinery will meet for the first time next month. It must not be tainted with old power games. It must insist on equal standards by all governments, whether in Darfur or Guantánamo, Chechnya or China.

Finally, the killings, rape and displacement in Darfur must stop. The Darfour Peace Agreement contains strong human rights provisions that offer a way ahead, if properly implemented. But for it to work, the UN Security Council must urgently deploy UN peacekeepers, and must not allow itself to be manipulated by the government of Sudan. Pending their deployment, the African Union monitors must be supported by the international community to carry out their work. There is a particular responsibility

on the Arab states to encourage Sudan to concede to the UN operation. Arab leaders do a disservice to themselves and their people when they use solidarity as a shield to avoid their human rights responsibilities.

More than ever the world needs countries with power and influence to behave with responsibility and respect for human rights. Governments must stop playing games with human rights.

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