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Pakistan: Anniversary of Bhutto's Assassination Marks Failure of Pakistani Government's Response to Attacks

The first anniversary of the assassination of Benazir Bhutto on 27 December marks a year of failure by Pakistan's leaders to investigate and bring to justice those responsible for this and other political and civilian killings, said Amnesty International today.

The organization repeated its condemnation of those who murdered Benazir Bhutto and other Pakistan People's Party workers a year ago.

"The Pakistani people have suffered greatly from attacks by armed groups," said Sam Zarifi, Director of Amnesty International's Asia Pacific Programme. "A fitting legacy for Benazir Bhutto and others who have suffered as a result of these attacks would be proper investigations and fair trials of those responsible, in line with international standards. Providing accountability for her assassination is necessary to help the Pakistani people come to terms with this national trauma."

Hundreds of thousands of people are expected to pay their respects to Ms Bhutto on the anniversary. The day has been declared a national holiday.

Her widower, President Asif Ali Zardari, has said that consolidating and strengthening the rule of law will be a lasting legacy in memory of his wife. However, he has done little to reverse the failed counter-terrorism practices of his predecessor, General Pervez Musharraf. Pakistan's counter-terrorism strategy is still grounded in unlawful practices such as arbitrary and secret detentions, enforced disappearances and renditions of Pakistani and foreign nationals to third countries.

"By resorting to such human rights violations, Pakistani authorities, including the intelligence agencies, have failed in their duty to protect people inside and outside the country from attacks by groups operating out of Pakistan's territory," said Sam Zarifi

Amnesty International is keenly aware of the security threats facing the Pakistani people and fully recognises the right and duty of the Pakistani authorities to prevent and punish crimes, including violent crimes such as acts of terrorism. However, the organization believes that upholding the rule of law and emphasizing respect for human rights will only strengthen the government's ability to protect the Pakistani people.

The organization called on all institutions of Pakistan's government, including the elected branches, the military, and the powerful Inter Services Intelligence agency (ISI) to cooperate with efforts to end attacks on civilians inside and outside the country. Amnesty International urged President Zardari to:

- conduct full, transparent, and independent investigations into political assassinations, including that of Benazir Bhutto, and other unlawful killings and suicide attacks;
- end the practice of enforced disappearances and either charge all those in detention with a recognizable criminal charge, or release them;
- bring Pakistan's intelligence agencies under adequate oversight and provide accountability for state officials who are suspected of being responsible for ordering or carrying out human rights violations.

“Pakistan's policy has vacillated. At times they have appeased insurgent groups, which has given these groups de facto control over large segments of the country's population and territory. On other occasions Pakistan's leaders have engaged in abusive practices such as enforced disappearances and heavy-handed military operations against armed insurgents that have resulted in high numbers of civilian casualties,” said Sam Zarifi.

“In 2009 the Pakistani government and its international supporters need to focus on strengthening the rule of law and reinforcing an independent judiciary, establishing accountability for the military and intelligence agencies, and cooperating with neighbours and the international community in curbing the activity of groups operating out of Pakistani territory.”