



## Hmong refugees facing removal from Thailand

The Thai government has been threatening to deport 153 refugees from the Hmong minority to Laos. On 30 January, immigration officials dragged women and girls crying and screaming out of their cell in the Nong Khai immigration detention centre in north-east Thailand. They used tear gas on the men and boys who barricaded themselves in the men's cell for hours.

All 153 have been recognized as refugees by the UN High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) and will be at risk of serious human rights abuses if they are returned to Laos. The group were arrested in November 2006 and held in Bangkok, the Thai capital, before being transferred to the Nong Khai centre a month later.

Fears that the government intended to return the group to Laos prompted protests by several human rights bodies, including AI and the UNHCR. In response, the Thai authorities stated in late 2006 that, for humanitarian reasons, the 153 would not be deported. However, the attempted deportation at the beginning of this year suggests that they still may not be safe.

On 30 January, the women and girls among the 153 were loaded onto buses and driven to the Thai-Lao border. Two of the women were eight months pregnant and one had a baby only weeks old. Two men were also put onto the buses, having been taken from their hospital beds where they had been receiving care for a serious liver condition and a bullet wound to the face.

Immigration officials meanwhile called on the police to force the men and boys out of their barricaded cell. The police used tear gas and tried to saw through the bars, but were unable to gain access. Witnesses reported that police used tear gas three times, despite the fact that 20 boys were in the cell.

The deportation attempt was halted for undisclosed reasons, and the women and girls were returned to the Nong Khai centre.

On 26 January, a group of 16 Lao Hmong asylum-seekers were returned to Laos. Reportedly held in a detention facility in Paksan, central Laos, they are believed to be in danger of serious human rights violations. No international human rights organization has access to them, and there has been no further information about the group since. In December 2005, Thailand forcibly returned 27 Hmong refugees, 22 of them children separated from their parents, to Laos. They have been held incommunicado since, and have reportedly been ill-treated – possibly tortured. Their return breached international refugee law, the UN Convention against Torture and the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child.

The UNHCR has warned that it will not have access to the group of 153 if they are returned to Laos. It further stated that “there have been no guarantees that they will be properly treated on their return to Laos.”

Under international law, the Thai authorities must not return anyone to a country where they would be at risk of torture, ill-treatment or other serious human rights abuses. Thailand must respect its international obligations and not hamper efforts underway to resettle all 153 Hmong refugees in third countries.



Some of the refugees loaded onto buses and driven to the Thai border with Laos, January 2007. They were then returned to a detention centre in Thailand.



A wounded woman in a hospital in Duékoué, Côte d'Ivoire, 2005. Thousands of women and girls have suffered rape and other sexual violence committed by combatant forces or their civilian allies. Many of them have difficulty accessing health care.

## Sexual violence ignored in Côte d'Ivoire

*“On the first day, 40 men had sex with me.”*

Delphine, abducted in late 2002 by an armed opposition group and gang-raped for several weeks.

In an effort to overcome the current political stalemate, in January government representatives and members of the armed opposition group, the New Forces, agreed to resume direct talks. However, impunity for rape and sexual violence committed by all parties to the ongoing armed conflict remained firmly off the agenda.

Since the conflict in Côte d'Ivoire began in 2002, thousands of women and girls have become victims of widespread – sometimes systematic – rape and sexual assault committed by combatant forces or their civilian allies. Many women have been sexually tortured, gang-raped or abducted and reduced to sexual slavery by combatants. Many have been raped in public, in front of children or next to the corpses of family members. Yet no one has been held accountable for these acts – acts which, perpetrated in the context of an armed conflict, amount to war crimes and crimes against humanity.

AI spoke to numerous survivors of rape and sexual violence during its latest visits to the country in 2005 and 2006. Their accounts reveal how women were abducted and kept as “property” and specifically targeted for abuse as a result of their ethnic or political affiliations.

Fatou, a Malian woman, told AI how she was detained by a government soldier at a checkpoint in May 2005. “When he discovered I was Malian, he began assaulting me,” she said. The soldier took her

somewhere else and “threw me on the floor and raped me... Then he told me to get in the car and, while we were driving, he told me to fellate him and hit me until I did. Then he pulled me out of the car, stripped me and sodomized me.” The soldier later let her go. Fatou registered a complaint at a police station. To AI's knowledge, no investigation into this complaint has been carried out.

Once raped, most women have little recourse to health care or counselling support services. Many continue to suffer acute physical and mental distress. One 35-year-old woman, who had been raped by members of an armed opposition group in 2002, told AI: “I'm sore all over, particularly the womb and vagina. My periods last two weeks. I suffer a lot from memory loss.” Many women have also been infected with HIV/AIDS as a result of being raped by combatant forces. Some have died.

In 2004, the UN Operation in Côte d'Ivoire (UNOCI) was deployed with a mandate to protect human rights in the country “with special attention to violence committed against women and girls.” However, despite the presence of UNOCI, a climate of impunity has prevailed.

AI calls on the Ivorian government, currently controlling the south of Côte d'Ivoire, and on the New Forces which are controlling the north, to prevent, punish and eradicate sexual violence committed by their forces and supporters. Impunity for these crimes has flourished for more than six years while the world has looked the other way. It is time for everyone, including the international community, to open their eyes and ensure that justice is finally done.

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## AI at work on the world stage

### World Economic Forum

World leaders – from governments, businesses and civil society – gathered for the World Economic Forum (WEF) in January, in Davos, Switzerland. AI's Secretary General, Irene Khan, called on delegates to put the human rights of the millions of people affected by their decisions firmly at the centre of all their discussions.

She urged business leaders to respect human rights in their operations and not to encourage or be complicit in human rights abuses committed by governments and others.

#### Human rights and justice undermined

The discussion on security and terrorism, Irene Khan said, was a deeply dispiriting event and a missed opportunity. She said that in seeking to fight terrorism, the USA, the UK, Pakistan and European Union states – among many others – have undermined fundamental principles of human rights and justice. They have promoted

the use of torture, created a shameful network of secret detention centres and resorted to indefinite detention without charge or trial.

Following AI's recent visit to the Middle East, the Secretary General was encouraged by the optimism of the Israeli and Palestinian delegates at the WEF that the political process might move forward. She reiterated AI's call to all leaders to take bold and decisive action to address the long-standing crisis in Israel and the Occupied Palestinian Territories, by putting human rights concerns at the centre of any initiatives they take.

A discussion entitled "Delivering on the Promise of Africa", which included pop stars and politicians, agreed that the promise was being marred by crippling debt, rampant corruption and lack of commitment. However, Sadako Ogata, former UN High Commissioner for Refugees, reminded delegates that Africa must be made refugee-free and that the carnage in Darfur must be stopped.



### World Social Forum

AI Kenya runs a stall promoting the Stop Violence against Women campaign (top left) at the seventh World Social Forum (WSF). Held in January in Nairobi, Kenya, activists, social movements, networks, coalitions and other progressive forces came together to exchange experiences and strengthen alliances among civil society organizations, peoples and movements. Former UN Human Rights Commissioner Mary Robinson addressed the conference (below left).

Nearly 40 member organizations of the Control Arms campaign came to the WSF from all continents. They organized a march on the WSF site (below), calling on governments to urgently establish an Arms Trade Treaty.



## News in brief

### Iran

Mansour Ossanlu, head of the Union of Workers of Tehran and Suburbs Bus Company, was released on 19 December 2006, on bail. It is not clear when his trial will begin.

Mansour Ossanlu was detained without a warrant in November 2006 outside his home by men in plain clothes, thought to be members of the security forces, and taken to Evin prison. He reportedly had no access to his lawyer. When his wife visited him a week later he complained about the vision in one of his eyes, which had been operated on a few days before his arrest. He said he was not receiving any medical treatment.

It is not clear what specific charges have been brought against him. AI believes that Mansour Ossanlu was a prisoner of conscience, detained solely for his peaceful trade union activities as well as his contacts with international labour organizations and the UN.

See also *the Wire* August 2006.

### Chile

The death of Augusto Pinochet must not be used to undermine legal proceedings against others suspected of torture, "disappearances" and killings under his rule. More than 3,000 people were killed or "disappeared" during the former military government's 17-year tenure.

AI calls for the immediate repeal of the Amnesty Law (Decree No. 2,191), enacted during Augusto Pinochet's government and used all too frequently to protect human rights violators from prosecution. It has published the names of 20 high-ranking officers, all of whom stand accused of grave human rights violations, whose trials have still not been concluded after several years.

Augusto Pinochet died on Human Rights Day, 10 December 2006.

## AI urges states to ratify Convention against Enforced Disappearance

Hundreds of thousands of people in almost half the countries in the world have been the victims of enforced disappearance in the decades since the crime was devised by Adolf Hitler in 1941.

On 6 February 2007, the new International Convention for the Protection of All Persons from Enforced Disappearance, which was adopted by the UN General Assembly by consensus in December 2006, was opened for signature at a ceremony hosted by the French Government in Paris, France. In the presence of the UN High Commissioner for Human Rights and the President of the International Committee of the Red Cross, 57 states signed the Convention on the opening day, getting the process off to a promising start. They included 18 African states, 19 European states, 11 Latin American states and six states in Asia and the Pacific. The Convention will enter into force when 20 states have ratified it.

AI has been lobbying states for many years to adopt a Convention to help prevent enforced disappearances, punish the perpetrators and provide reparations to the victims and their families. As the practice of enforced disappearance continues in every region of the world, the prompt signature, ratification and implementation of the Convention is imperative.

#### ACT NOW!

Urge your Minister of Foreign Affairs to ratify and implement the Convention without delay.

The Convention includes requirements for states to:

- submit cases of persons suspected of carrying out enforced disappearances to its prosecutors, or extradite the suspect to another state, or surrender him or her to an international criminal court;
- ensure that the victims of enforced disappearance have the right to obtain reparations;
- institute stringent safeguards for the protection of persons deprived of their liberty, including an absolute ban on secret detention;
- provide for tracing the whereabouts of those who have "disappeared" and address the problems faced by their children and families; and
- establish an expert committee empowered to monitor the implementation of the Convention and to take action in individual cases.



French Minister of Foreign Affairs Philippe Douste-Blazy signs the Convention, Paris, France, February 2007.

### CHINA

## Unfair trial

Mao Hengfeng was sentenced, in December 2006, to two and a half years in prison for breaking two table lamps. She was arrested on 30 June 2006 and charged with "intentionally destroying property".

Initially, she was detained by police in May 2006 and charged with "violating the terms of residential surveillance". Mao Hengfeng was then placed under "soft detention" in a guesthouse in Shanghai's Yangpu District, where she was beaten by police and forced to share cramped quarters with six other men and women sent to monitor her. Mao Hengfeng broke the lamps in the guesthouse while protesting against her treatment.

Mao Hengfeng's trial lasted just 30 minutes and the court only considered submissions by the police. Her lawyers reported being harassed and threatened during the investigation to prevent them from carrying out their work.

Mao Hengfeng was held incommunicado for over eight months but following her lawyer's intervention her family have now learned of the ill-treatment she has suffered but have still not been allowed to visit her.

Since 1988 Mao Hengfeng has petitioned the authorities on family planning and housing issues. She has been detained many times in the past and has reported torture and other abusive treatment. She has been sentenced to various terms of re-education through labour and has, on several occasions, been forcibly admitted for psychiatric treatment. See *Worldwide Appeal* March 2005.

AI believes that Mao Hengfeng is a prisoner of conscience and that the current charges against her have been used as a pretext to punish her for her ongoing petitioning activities. Her trial was evidently unfair and her sentence disproportionate to the crime of which she was convicted.



➔ Please write, calling for the immediate and unconditional release of prisoner of conscience Mao Hengfeng. Send appeals to: Prime Minister, Wen Jiabao Zongli, Guowuyuan, 9 Xihuangchenggenbeijie, Beijingshi 100032, China. Fax: +86 10 65292345 (c/o Ministry of Communication). Email: gazette@mail.gov.cn Salutation: Dear Prime Minister

### USA

## Cuban wives denied visiting visas

Adriana Pérez and Olga Salanueva – both Cuban nationals – have been refused temporary visas which would allow them to visit their husbands in prison. Gerardo Hernández (husband of Adriana Pérez) and René González (husband of Olga Salanueva) are serving long federal prison sentences in the USA, having been convicted in 2001 of acting as unregistered agents of the Cuban government.

AI believes that denying the women visas to visit their husbands is unnecessarily punitive and contrary to international standards for humane treatment of prisoners and states' obligations to protect family life.

Between 2002 and 2005, the government denied the wives' applications for temporary visas for various reasons relating to terrorism, espionage and issues of national security. Neither woman has faced charges in connection with such claims, nor have their husbands been charged with, or convicted of, terrorism. Both men are currently being held in the "general population" within their

prisons, which suggests that the authorities do not consider them to represent a security risk.

Adriana Pérez has not been permitted to visit her husband since his arrest in 1998. Her most recent application for a temporary visa in October 2005 was denied on the grounds that she may seek to remain in the USA at the end of her authorized stay.

Olga Salanueva has not seen her husband since the eve of his trial in 2000. She lived legally in the USA for nearly two years during the trial proceedings but was deported when her husband refused to enter a plea arrangement in return for his family being allowed to remain in the USA. Her most recent application for a visa was denied on the grounds that she is ineligible to enter the USA for having previously been deported.

➔ Please write, calling on the US government to grant temporary visas to the wives of René González and Gerardo Hernández and, in the absence of any reasonable evidence for denying visas, to allow them to visit their husbands in the USA. Send appeals to: Director Stephen G. McFarland, Office of Cuban Affairs, US Department of State, 2201 C Street NW, Washington, DC 20520, USA. Salutation: Dear Mr McFarland

## Death penalty news update

### Death penalty experts meet in Paris

The Third World Congress against the Death Penalty took place in Paris, France, from 1-3 February. "Paris 2007" brought together over 600 abolitionists and decision-makers from all over the world.

AI's delegation included experts from the International Secretariat, as well as death penalty coordinators from around the world – from Canada to Germany, Japan to Tunisia.

Delegates focused on the prospects for abolition in North Africa, the Asia Pacific region and the Middle East, including reforms of the political and legal process in those regions. Major debates included "Islam and the death penalty" and "China, the death penalty and the Olympic Games".

The Congress heard from those profoundly affected by the death penalty, including exonerated former death row inmates, the families of condemned prisoners and relatives of murder victims who campaign against the death penalty.

The event ended on Saturday with a march of hundreds of people through the streets of Paris, entitled "Say No to the death penalty".

For more information, see [www.abolition.fr/ecpm/english/congres.php](http://www.abolition.fr/ecpm/english/congres.php)

The Congress was organized by Together Against the Death Penalty which acts as the Secretariat for the World Coalition Against the Death Penalty and numerous other partners including AI.



### Former death row inmate describes ordeal to AI

Juan Meléndez (right) spent 17 years on Florida's death row in the USA for a crime he did not commit. Exonerated in 2002, he has since campaigned widely for the abolition of the death penalty. "I think it is my duty to fight against the death penalty," he told AI. "To me it is very personal."

Juan Meléndez was arrested in 1984 on charges of murder and armed robbery. He was convicted within a matter of days. "The trial started on Monday," he recalled. "Wednesday, the evidence came in... Thursday they found me guilty. Friday they sentenced me to death. This is all in the same week."

The conviction came despite the prosecution's lack of physical evidence in the case and several witnesses testifying to Juan Meléndez' innocence. "I had alibi witnesses," he said. "I had witnesses corroborating the testimony..."

I had witnesses saying the police informant had a grudge against me."

He continued: "All my witnesses were from the African-American race – black men and black ladies. I guess that played an important part. They didn't believe them."

In December 2001, his conviction was overturned after a judge ruled that the prosecution had withheld critical evidence.

This year marks the 30th anniversary of the resumption of executions in the USA following a 10-year hiatus. In those 30 years, more than 1,000 prisoners have been executed and over 100 prisoners have been freed from death row after being found innocent.

For Juan Meléndez, the abolition of the death penalty is a goal he will not relinquish. "I will not stop talking until it's abolished," he said. "The death penalty is cruel, it's racist, it's unnecessary. We can have justice without it. I believe it's our duty as human beings to not only say, I don't believe in the death penalty, but to act against it."

### Child offender's death sentence quashed in Iran

Mahabad Fatehi, known as Nazanin, no longer faces execution following a retrial of her case. The 19-year-old was cleared of pre-meditated murder by a Tehran criminal court on 14 January, but was ordered to pay *diyeh* (blood money) to the family of the man she killed in self-defence in March 2005. Aged 17 at the time of the crime, she was nevertheless sentenced to death in January 2006 and remained at risk of execution. However, international protests led to her death sentence being quashed in May 2006 and her case was sent for retrial (see *the Wire* October 2006).

The outcome of Nazanin's case highlights the urgent need for legal reform in Iran to stop executing child offenders – those who are aged below 18 at the time of the crime.

For several years now, the Iranian authorities have been considering passing legislation banning the use of the death penalty for child offenders. A bill establishing special courts for children and adolescents was reportedly passed in summer 2006, but has yet to be approved by the Council of Guardians, which is charged with ensuring that Iran's legislation conforms with Islamic principles.

As a state party to the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights and the Convention on the Rights of the Child, Iran is prohibited from executing anyone for an offence committed when they were under the age of 18. However, AI has recorded 22 executions of child offenders in Iran since 1990. Currently, at least 24 child offenders reportedly remain on death row in Iran.

To take action, see *Worldwide Appeal* below.



**ACT NOW!**

Go to: [www.amnesty.org/deathpenalty](http://www.amnesty.org/deathpenalty)

See also USA: *The experiment that failed – a reflection on 30 years of executions* (AMR 51/011/2007).

### News in brief

#### Asia Pacific launches a regional anti-death penalty network

Activists, non-governmental organizations, civil society groups and lawyers across the Asia-Pacific region joined together to launch the Anti-Death Penalty Asia Network (ADPAN) – on the fourth World Day against the Death Penalty, 10 October 2006.

ADPAN works across the region to raise public awareness about the inequalities and unfairness of the death penalty.

The network was established at an AI Consultative Meeting in Hong Kong in July 2006 and includes members from India, Indonesia, Mongolia, Pakistan, Philippines, Singapore, South Korea, Thailand and other countries in the region.

Go to: [www.asiapacific.amnesty.org](http://www.asiapacific.amnesty.org)

#### Executions continue in Japan

Four men – one aged 77 – were executed on 25 December 2006.

These executions send a discouraging signal to countries in the region at a time when others – South Korea and Taiwan for example – are considering the abolition of the death penalty. The death penalty has already been abolished in Cambodia, Nepal, Timor-Leste and recently in the Philippines.

See *'Will this day be my last?' The death penalty in Japan* (ASA 22/006/2006).

#### Four executed in Saudi Arabia

Four Sri Lankan men were executed on 19 February, bringing the total number of those executed so far this year to at least 17 people.

According to an official statement by the Ministry of Interior, all four men were beheaded, for their part in a series of violent armed robberies. The death sentences had reportedly been upheld on appeal.

AI fears that other executions may be imminent and urges King Abdullah to commute all death sentences.

See *Worldwide Appeal* April 2006.

### ZIMBABWE

#### Women's group suffer frequent arrests

Since February 2003 activists from the women's group Women of Zimbabwe Arise (WOZA) (right) have been repeatedly arrested by the Zimbabwean police while peacefully demonstrating against the worsening social, economic and human rights situation in the country.

In May 2006, following a peaceful demonstration in the town of Bulawayo to protest against increases in school fees, more than 100 members of WOZA and approximately 70 schoolchildren were arrested. The group was charged with "conduct likely to cause a breach of the peace." Two WOZA leaders were allegedly threatened by a senior police officer.

The treatment of WOZA illustrates the authorities' increasing intolerance of peaceful public demonstrations criticizing government policies. It also highlights the malicious use of the law, particularly the combination of the Public Order and Security Act (POSA) and Miscellaneous Offences Act (MOA), to allow arbitrary arrests and detentions and to facilitate a range of other human rights violations by the police.

On 31 March 2005, parliamentary elections day, police arrested about 260 women, some carrying babies, when WOZA attempted to hold a peaceful post-election prayer vigil in the capital, Harare. See *the Wire* May 2005.

The activists including mothers with babies were detained overnight in an open-air courtyard. Police reportedly told the women that if they pleaded guilty to minor offences under the MOA, they could pay a fine and would be released. If they refused they would be kept over the weekend and face charges under the POSA. All of the women – several of whom were elderly, injured or with their babies – agreed to pay the fines. Once again the MOA was used to elicit "admissions" of guilt and to regularize arbitrary arrests and detentions.



➔ Please write, calling on the authorities to respect the right of WOZA members to exercise their right to freedom of expression, association and assembly. Call for an end to arbitrary detention and intimidation of human rights defenders.

Send appeals to: Police Commissioner Augustine Chihuri, Zimbabwe Republic Police, Police Headquarters, PO Box 8807, Causeway, Harare, Zimbabwe. Fax +263 4 253 212. Salutation: Dear Police Commissioner

### IRAN

#### Child offender at risk of execution

Delara Darabi, aged 20, is at risk of imminent execution for a murder which took place when she was 17 years old. She has reportedly been sentenced to death for a second time after her case was retried. She reportedly attempted to commit suicide in prison in January 2007.

Delara Darabi was initially sentenced to death by Branch 10 of the General Court in the northern city of Rasht. The Supreme Court later found "deficiencies" in her case and ordered a retrial. However, following two trial sessions in January and June 2006, Delara Darabi was sentenced to

death for a second time by Branch 107 of the General Court in Rasht. Her death sentence was reportedly confirmed by the Supreme Court in February 2007 and so she could be executed at any time.

According to reports, Delara Darabi and a 19-year-old man named Amir Hossein broke into the house of Delara Darabi's elderly female relative to commit a burglary. Amir Hossein allegedly killed the woman during the burglary. Delara Darabi initially confessed to the murder, but subsequently retracted her confession. She claims that Amir Hossein asked her to admit responsibility for the murder to protect him from execution, believing that as she was under the age of 18, she could not be sentenced to death.

To find out more about the death penalty in Iran see article above.

➔ Please write, urging the authorities to commute the death sentence imposed on Delara Darabi immediately. Remind the authorities of their commitment to the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights, which states that "sentence of death shall not be imposed for crimes committed by persons below eighteen years of age."

Send appeals to: Ayatollah Sayed 'Ali Khamenei, The Office of the Supreme Leader, Shoahada Street, Qom, Iran. Email: [info@leader.ir](mailto:info@leader.ir) and [istiftaa@wilayah.org](mailto:istiftaa@wilayah.org) Salutation: Your Excellency



## Women worldwide still vulnerable to rape

One in five women will be a victim of rape or attempted rape in her lifetime according to a 1997 World Health Organization study. A separate 2003 report has shown that 147 women are raped every day in South Africa. But such incidents are not just a scourge on countries in the Global South; reportedly, a woman is raped every 90 seconds in the USA.

Across the world, women and girls are being raped and sexually violated, whether in the context of war or peace, the home or a public place. The trauma of such violence is devastating. Yet even after an incident is reported, survivors can face almost insurmountable barriers to justice. They may even be expelled

from their homes, families or villages for bringing "shame" upon their communities.

Governments must make sure that survivors of rape and sexual violence receive the medical and psychological support they need. Moreover, they must take immediate steps to end impunity for such acts, sending out a clear message that rape and other sexual violence is unacceptable and will be punished with the full force of the law.

**Act now** for justice in the cases of Bitondo Nyumba of the Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC), and Inés Fernández Ortega and Valentina Rosendo Cantú of Mexico (*see below*).

**Inés Fernández Ortega and Valentina Rosendo Cantú** were raped by members of the Mexican army in February and March 2002 respectively in the state of Guerrero, Mexico. To date, no one has been punished for the rapes. The cases are currently under military jurisdiction, and procedures require that both women go to the barracks to ratify their complaints before the military prosecutor. There, they may face intimidation.

*Please write*, calling on the authorities to take immediate steps to transfer the cases to the appropriate civilian authorities. Call on them to ensure that the perpetrators are brought to justice and that the victims are given appropriate reparations. Send letters to: Felipe de Jesús Calderón Hinojosa, Presidente de los Estados Unidos Mexicanos, Residencia Oficial de 'Los Pinos', Casa Miguel Alemán, Col. San Miguel Chapultepec, México DF, CP 11850, Mexico.

**Bitondo Nyumba**, aged 56, died as result of injuries she suffered when she was beaten and raped by government soldiers in May 2005 in DRC. Although two soldiers were arrested in August 2005 in connection with the rape, they were later released without explanation. Her family filed a legal complaint and were subsequently threatened by soldiers from the same brigade as the alleged perpetrators. The family was forced to move to another village as a result.

*Please write*, calling on the authorities to conduct a prompt, independent and thorough investigation into the case of Bitondo Nyumba, and bring the perpetrators to justice. Send letters to: S E Joseph Kabila, Président de la République, Présidence de la République, Kinshasa-Ngaliema, Democratic Republic of Congo.

To find out more about both cases see [www.amnesty.org/actforwomen](http://www.amnesty.org/actforwomen)

## Women sign up for equal rights in Iran

*"While the brothers enjoyed happy lives... attending social events and parties, the sisters were each imprisoned by men who demanded cooking, cleaning and childbearing. When my father passed away, the brothers took the majority of the inheritance... Now, it is too late for me, I am pleased to know that my signature may pave the future for younger women so they do not have to suffer as I did."*

— A 76-year-old signatory



A woman signs the petition demanding changes to laws discriminating against women in Iran.

Iranian women's rights activists have launched a courageous campaign demanding an end to legal discrimination against women. In a country where women are considered second class citizens, they are pressing for reform of laws where they face widespread discrimination, including in marriage, divorce, child custody, and inheritance.

Iranian laws are weighted heavily against women. Criminal harm suffered by a woman is less severely punished than that suffered by a man. Evidence given by women in court has half the value of that of a man. Although the legal age for marriage is 13, fathers can apply for permission to arrange that their daughters are married earlier – for example, to men much older than their daughters. Men are allowed to practice polygamy and have an incontestable right in law to divorce their wives.

On 12 June 2006 a coalition of hundreds of women and men gathered peacefully in the capital, Tehran, to protest

against such discriminatory laws. The demonstrators were violently dispersed by security forces, who arrested around 70 of them.

Just two months later, Iranian women's groups launched a campaign to gather one million signatures to a petition calling for an end to discriminatory legislation.

The launch of the campaign at a public rally in August was blocked by the authorities. Nevertheless, their website

(currently: [www.we4change.org](http://www.we4change.org)) went live that day, with the petition "One million signatures demanding changes to discriminatory laws" open for signature by Iranians.

The petition is only one aspect of the campaign which is committed to creating change through grassroots and civil society initiatives. Volunteers receive basic legal training and then travel to the provinces to promote the campaign and to collect signatures. Talking with women in their homes, as well as in public places such as parks, universities, health centres and religious gatherings, they learn about their problems and tell them about their rights and the need for legal reform.

The Government of Iran is a party to several international human rights treaties that call for the elimination of discrimination based on gender.

These women are a vital voice in reminding their government to take these responsibilities seriously.

## Protect the women and girls of Darfur now!



AI members around the world took part in a global day of action calling for greater protection for women in Darfur, Sudan, 10 December 2006. *Left:* AI Morocco stage a protest in Rabat. *Right:* demonstrators gathered at the Sudanese embassy in London where several prominent women, including survivors of the atrocities in Darfur, addressed the crowd.

It is impossible to know how many women have been raped since the armed conflict began in Darfur, Sudan, in 2003. There have certainly been thousands.

Speaking to AI in 2006, one woman who has been displaced by the conflict, described how she was attacked by uniformed men near Goz Beida in Chad: "They beat us and told us that you blacks are not going to stay here, we will finish you all. They then grabbed my half-sister who was only 10 years old... I saw two of them lie with my half-sister and then they went away. When we got there she was very hurt and bleeding. She continued to bleed for the following two days and then died."

AI reiterates its call for the immediate deployment of an effective peace-keeping force to protect the women and girls of Darfur from sexual violence.

Join us on our global day for Darfur on 29 April 2007

For more information on events, please go to: [www.globefordarfur.org/](http://www.globefordarfur.org/)  
To find out more about the situation of women and girls in Darfur and eastern Chad please go to:  
[www.amnesty.org/resources/pdf/sudan\\_crisis\\_2006/svaw\\_case-sheet-eng.pdf](http://www.amnesty.org/resources/pdf/sudan_crisis_2006/svaw_case-sheet-eng.pdf)



## Global vigil action

AI is calling on people worldwide to mark 8 March International Women's Day, by lighting candles in public places. This year they will also be celebrating two key anniversaries in the development of International Women's Day.

On 8 March 1857 – 150 years ago – women working in clothing and textile factories in New York City, USA, staged a protest against low wages and inhumane working conditions. It was one of the first recorded workers' protests by women anywhere in the world.

In December 1977, the UN Day for Women's Rights and International Peace was founded. Countries around the world eventually chose to observe this day on 8 March. Since its inception 30 years ago, International Women's Day has assumed global importance. It has given millions worldwide a day of action in which to focus on the current status of women, demanding gender equality under the law, safe and equitable working conditions, and the right of all women to a life free from violence of any kind.

Marking these two anniversaries, AI members around the world will light 180 candles in their town, capital or village, demanding governments to take urgent steps to banish rape and sexual violence from our homes, schools, workplaces and streets.

See [www.amnesty.org/actforwomen](http://www.amnesty.org/actforwomen)

## Chocolate chain supports women in Belarus



A Belarusian mother and child receive chocolate and good wishes from AI members.

AI members are forming an international chocolate chain as part of the campaign against domestic violence in Belarus. Non-governmental organizations (NGOs) in Belarus sometimes face obstructive legislation which can impede their work and access to foreign funding. In addition to lobbying the government, AI wanted to demonstrate solidarity, in a creative way, with local women's NGOs. So, the organization has created a direct chain of support, using chocolate.

The chain starts with AI members sending chocolate and messages of solidarity to women's organizations in Belarus. The organizations then pass on the chocolate and the good wishes to women and children suffering as a consequence of domestic violence.

AI sections and groups, as well as the women's organizations and those they support, have welcomed the initiative. AI Belgium (Flemish) announced the action on its website and other AI groups from Netherlands, UK, Austria, Switzerland and elsewhere, have also joined in sending solidarity messages and chocolate to Belarus.

One Belarusian NGO told AI: "It is so nice and very inspiring to know that women, sisters in other countries support us and pay attention to what we are doing. This solidarity means a lot and for us, it means networking in action, without loud resolutions and public statements!"

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