

China fails its workers

Workers' rights eroded as widespread labour unrest is repressed

Workers' rights are being undermined as China shifts towards a free market economy. Economic reforms have caused widespread closures of state-owned enterprises and a huge increase in unemployment. According to official statistics, more than five million workers were laid off from state-owned operations during 2001. Unemployed workers are often promised redundancy money that never appears.

Workers habitually face extremely poor conditions including filthy and poorly ventilated workplaces. Overtime, often unpaid, is frequently compulsory. Factory employees may be forbidden from getting married or having children. Workers are often exposed to dangerous chemicals without the necessary safeguards. When there are accidents, medical expenses are often deducted from pay. It has been reported that in the south of China, an average of 13 factory workers a day lose a finger or an arm, and one dies every four and a half days.

Labour unrest in China is widespread. In March and April 2002, protests, strikes, demonstrations and factory occupations by angry workers have been reported nearly every day. Workers are demonstrating against low pay, illegal working conditions, lay-offs, redundancy terms, management corruption and delayed welfare payments.

Independent trade unions are not permitted in China. Such protests by workers are therefore generally illegal and have often been dispersed with excessive force by police. Many peaceful protests by workers over pay and benefits have turned into pitched battles between the workers and armed police, resulting in casualties and arrests. Workers and activists have been harassed or imprisoned for taking part in such protests or publicizing them. The rights to freedom of expression and association are routinely denied to those seen as a threat by the authorities.

Workers from the Daqing Oilfield, one of

China's largest state-owned oil fields, have staged massive demonstrations since 1 March to protest against inadequate welfare benefits, redundancy pay and the increased costs of pensions. Up to 50,000 workers joined the protests and several injuries were reported on 19 March when paramilitary police clashed with the demonstrators. The workers' demands included the setting-up of an independent trade union. It is reported that the Daqing Laid-Off Workers Trade Union Committee was set up during the protests and is operating underground.

In the city of Liaoyang, huge demonstrations against lay-offs, insufficient severance pay and management corruption have taken place. Some 5,000 laid-off workers from several state-owned factories gathered outside government offices on 11 March. The workers accused their management of colluding with government officials to secure assets from dismantled enterprises, while failing to compensate the workers, some of whom had not been paid for more than 18 months.

The protests escalated on 18 March when 30,000 workers from around 20 Liaoyang factories gathered in front of the city government offices, demanding the release of Yao Fuxin, a workers' leader from the Ferroalloy factory detained the day before by the police. On 20 March a large contingent of armed police was reportedly deployed to crack down on the protesters and three more workers' leaders – Xiao Yunliang, Pang Qingxiang and Wang Zhaoming – were apprehended. The four labour leaders have been charged with "illegal assembly and demonstrations" and several hundred workers have been demonstrating almost every day demanding their release.

On 28 February 2001, the Chinese government ratified the International Covenant of Economic, Social and Cultural Rights. However, the government entered a reservation on its obligations under Article 8 of the Covenant, which guarantees trade union rights. While the right to strike is not expressly forbidden in China, neither the right to strike nor the right of freedom of association is respected.

AI calls upon the Chinese authorities to allow workers in China full and free exercise of their right to freedom of expression and association, including the right to form independent trade unions and to hold peaceful protests, without fear of detention or torture.

See China: Detained and imprisoned labour rights activists (AI Index: ASA 17/014/2002) and China: Labour unrest and the suppression of the rights to freedom of association and expression (AI Index: ASA 17/015/2002)

Colombian human rights crisis deepens

Fears of massive human rights abuses in Colombia have surged as presidential elections take place after the collapse of the peace process between the government and the armed opposition group, the FARC.

In late February, President Andrés Pastrana broke off peace talks, sent thousands of heavily armed troops to reoccupy the demilitarized zone that had been ceded to the rebels in 1998, and bombarded the region from the air. Army-backed paramilitary forces around the zone have threatened to move in behind the army to eliminate suspected FARC sympathizers.

AI has called on both sides in the conflict to refrain from indiscriminate attacks which may endanger civilian safety. Incidents resulting in civilian casualties should be fully investigated by civilian institutions of justice, given that military courts and prosecutors have helped perpetuate impunity for human rights violations in the past.

Large parts of the country are cut off from the outside world. Some have been cordoned off by paramilitary groups working in collusion with the army. Other areas have been closed to outsiders under new security legislation, recently declared unconstitutional and illegal by the Colombian Constitutional Court.

Human rights defenders are working in extremely difficult conditions, with Colombian officials questioning the legitimacy of both human rights and humanitarian agencies. One crucial step which could help protect civilians in the area would be grant access to international and national human rights monitors.

AI has urged the international community to support increased human rights monitoring. President Pastrana has called on his armed forces to respect civilian lives; international observers should be allowed to monitor the armed forces' compliance with this call and the government's implementation of UN recommendations, including the dismantling of paramilitary forces.

AI has also called on all armed opposition groups, including the FARC, to respect international humanitarian law and to refrain from further kidnappings, indiscriminate attacks which affect the civilian population and killings of those accused of siding with their enemies.

The governments of Ecuador, Venezuela, Panama and Peru are reported to be reinforcing their frontiers with Colombia in order to prevent FARC forces from crossing the borders, raising fears about possible infringement of the right to seek asylum.

All candidates in the May presidential elections should declare their commitment to the protection of human rights. To take just one example, they should promise to implement the Constitutional Court ruling on the new security legislation. To avert the risk of massive human rights abuses before the new government takes office in August, both sides in the conflict must reach a humanitarian accord to protect the civilian population from being caught in the crossfire.

Racist torture and abuse by Spanish police and officials

A family of Roma, including children, are humiliated and tortured in a Madrid police station, where they are illegally detained. A Senegalese street vendor is seized from a beach in Galicia and beaten by police in a remote area of town. A Moroccan worker attacked by an armed mob flees from his home while police do nothing to protect him or to stop his home being looted and burned.

These are just a few of the many cases documented in a new AI report, Spain: Crisis of identity – Race-related torture and ill-treatment by state agents. (AI Index: EUR 41/001/2002).

Spain is one of the key entry points in the European Union for immigrants and the immigrant population has grown sharply in recent years. At the same time there has been a sharp rise in reports of law enforcement officers torturing and ill-treating foreign nationals and members of ethnic minorities.

Racism and xenophobia in Spain have erupted in racist attacks on immigrant communities led by skinhead and neo-fascist groups. Mainstream politicians have pandered to racist sentiment, attributing rising levels of reported crimes to the rise in the number of immigrants.

In this climate, many police officers appear to see race and ethnicity as an indicator of criminality.

Black people and other members of ethnic minorities are routinely detained on suspicion of offences such as drug dealing and not having proper identity documents. Allegations of race-related ill-treatment are rarely investigated effectively by the authorities.

“Racial profiling” – unfair treatment by law enforcement officers, including stops and searches, on the basis of race – is common. The discriminatory use of identity checks has recently been permitted by a Constitutional Court ruling.

A number of people have been arbitrarily detained and abused on the basis of their ethnic identity.

People intercepted or arrested are often not given any explanation, while any challenge is interpreted as resistance to the police and penalized.

Women immigrants who do not have proper documentation are particularly vulnerable to torture in the form of rape or sexual assault while held in custody.

The problem is compounded by the effective impunity frequently enjoyed by public officials.

Undocumented immigrants are often afraid to lodge complaints with the police or courts and in the handful of cases that come to court, the courts may fail to punish illegal detention and ill-treatment.

AI is calling on the Spanish authorities to adopt a national strategy and plan of action to combat racism, with specific measures to prevent torture and ill-treatment in the administration of justice.

Picture captions:

Rodney Mack, an African American and principal trumpet player for the Barcelona Symphony Orchestra, was allegedly beaten so badly by police that he could not appear at a scheduled concert in the USA. He said he was attacked in January 2002 by four police officers who mistook him for a car thief. He intends to press charges, saying: “It seemed they wanted me just to take the beating and then go home. I just want to prevent that from happening to someone else.”

Rita Margarete Rogerio, a Brazilian national, was raped by a uniformed police officer in a cell in the main police station in Bilbao in 1995. Despite medical evidence, the public prosecutor refused to bring a case against the officer. When she brought a private prosecution, the court found that she had been beaten and raped, but felt obliged to acquit the three officers on duty at the time because they refused to testify against each other. The Supreme Court expressed dismay at having to uphold the acquittal verdict, in view of the refusal of the witnesses to testify.

Guatemala: union leaders at risk

Rural trade unionists and their supporters face death threats as land disputes proliferate

Three rural workers’ leaders – Luis Chávez, Gilmar Vallejos Velásquez and Eleodoro Chums – have recently received death threats. They believe the threats come from ranchers who have the support of powerful figures within Guatemala’s political elite.

Luis Chávez of the National Trade Union and Popular Movement Coordinating Body (CNSP) and the other two rural trade unionists work with rural peasant farmers trying to gain or retain access to cultivable land. Luis Chávez and Eleodoro Chums have been involved with about 350 peasant families who occupied a disputed estate in San Marcos Department in the northwestern highlands on 26

February 2002. The peasant farmers believe they have rightful ownership of the San Luis estate under titles granted in a 1944 agrarian reform, but the local authorities insist that the land is private property.

Gilmar Vallejos Velásquez is involved in similar work in a neighbouring department.

Guatemala has been increasingly wracked by land disputes in recent months, as peasants have lost confidence in the promises of the 1996 Peace Accords which brought to an end Guatemala's long civil war. Under the Accords, the government was to develop a strategy to give peasant farmers access to land and resolve disputes. Faced with official inaction and increasingly desperate, groups of peasant farmers in several Guatemalan departments have occupied lands or have refused to vacate plots they believe they have the right to cultivate.

Death threats in Guatemala have to be taken seriously: on 8 March land activist José Benjamín Pérez González was killed in Morales, Izabal Department. According to other peasant farmers who witnessed his death, about 70 farmers walking together for safety because of tension in the area, were surrounded and attacked by armed ranchers and police. José Benjamín Pérez was first shot in the back by a police officer as he fled, then shot again as he lay wounded on the ground by a local rancher, known to be a paramilitary leader. However, the police arrested and charged another local peasant farmer who, like the victim, claims the right to farm land which local cattle ranchers are reportedly being encouraged to take over by BANDEGUA, the local subsidiary of Del Monte Fresh Produce.

As well as rural union leaders, San Marcos church figures who have attempted to mediate and assist the peasant farmers from the San Luis estate there have also been threatened. On 3 March an unidentified man phoned a church radio station and threatened Bishop Alvaro Ramazinni and other San Marcos clergy. On 17 March burglars broke into three church offices in the San Marcos Diocese. The following day, several church offices received anonymous threatening phone calls.

Workers' rights are fundamental

Workers have always had to organize and struggle for their rights. Recently, globalization and trade liberalization have threatened hard-won rights and social progress in many countries. In response, the International Labour Organisation (ILO) – the UN agency which promotes labour rights – has adopted a Declaration on Fundamental Principles and Rights at Work. This aims to ensure that social progress goes hand in hand with economic development.

These principles are enshrined in eight international treaties known as ILO Fundamental Conventions. Together they form a framework to protect workers and to provide a decent environment for both employers and workers.

The fundamental principles are:

- a. freedom of association and the effective recognition of the right to collective bargaining;
- b. the elimination of all forms of forced or compulsory labour;
- c. the effective abolition of child labour; and
- d. the elimination of discrimination in respect of employment and occupation.

AI calls on all states to ratify and implement the eight Fundamental Conventions.

Voice at work

The Freedom of Association and Protection of the Right to Organise Convention, 1948 (No.87) establishes the right of all workers and employers to join organizations.

The Right to Organise and Collective Bargaining Convention 1949 (No.98) protects against anti-union discrimination and encourages collective bargaining.

Forced labour

The Forced Labour Convention, 1930 (No.29) requires the suppression of forced or compulsory labour in all its forms.

The Abolition of Forced Labour Convention, 1957 (No. 105) prohibits the use of forced or compulsory labour as a means of political coercion or education; mobilization of work force for the purposes of economic development; labour discipline; punishment for participation in strikes; and racial, social, national or religious discrimination.

Child labour

The Minimum Age Convention, 1973 (No.138) requires states to legislate to abolish child labour and to raise the minimum age for admission to employment to a level consistent with the fullest physical and mental development of young people.

The Worst Forms of Child Labour Convention, 1999 (No. 182) applies to everyone under the age of 18 and calls for urgent action to eliminate the worst forms of child labour, defined as slavery and practices similar to slavery such as trafficking in children and debt bondage; the forced or compulsory recruitment of children for use in armed conflict and for prostitution and in any work which is likely to harm their health, safety or morals.

Discrimination

The Equal Remuneration Convention, 1951 (No. 100) calls for equal pay for men and women for work of equal value.

The Discrimination (Employment and Occupation) Convention, 1958 (No.111) calls for a national policy to eliminate discrimination in access to employment, training and work conditions and to promote equality of opportunity and treatment.

ILO Conference

In June 2002 the ILO holds its 90th International Labour Conference.

AI will seize the opportunity to bring to the attention of the international community its concerns about violations of workers' human rights in several countries: China, where there are widespread violations of the right to form and join a trade union of one's choice; Colombia and Guatemala, where trade unionists have suffered serious human rights abuses; and Mauritania and Myanmar, where forced labour persists.

Syria

Forcibly returned asylum-seeker detained as prisoner of conscience

Hussain Daoud, a Syrian Kurd born in 1971 and an asylum-seeker in Germany, was forcibly returned to Syria in December 2000. On his arrival in Damascus he was arrested by Syrian security forces and held incommunicado for many months. During this time he was reportedly tortured. On 20 March 2002 he was sentenced by the Supreme State Security Court to two years in prison following an unfair trial. Taking into account his pre-trial detention, he is expected to be released at the end of the year.

AI considers him to be a prisoner of conscience.

He was charged with "involvement in an attempt to sever part of the Syrian territory" and "opposing the objectives of the revolution through taking part in demonstrations". These charges are apparently related to his involvement with Kurdish opposition groups abroad, which the Syrian authorities consider to be separatist organizations intent on dividing the country. The Syrian authorities said that Hussain Daoud was involved with the Kurdish People's Union Party which is prohibited in Syria.

On his return from Germany he was initially taken to the Palestine Branch Detention Centre in Damascus, where he was interrogated about his and other Kurdish activists' activities in Germany and reportedly tortured. He was then held at various detention centres in Damascus and al-Qamishli in northern Syria. He is currently held at the Sednaya Prison on the outskirts of Damascus.

Please write, calling for the immediate and unconditional release of prisoner of conscience Hussain Daoud and for an independent

investigation into the allegations of torture. Send appeals to: His Excellency, President Bashar al-Assad, Presidential Palace, Damascus, Syrian Arab Republic.

USA

Governor reviews death sentences

Aaron Patterson has been on death row in Illinois since 1989 for a crime he says he did not commit. He has consistently claimed he was tortured into making the "confession" the state used to convict him – one of over 60 people to have made such allegations against a Chicago police station whose commander was fired in 1993 for torture.

If Aaron Patterson is innocent, it would come as no surprise. Since 1973, 100 people have been released from death rows in the USA after evidence of their innocence emerged, 13 of them in Illinois. On 31 January 2000, Governor George Ryan declared a moratorium on executions in Illinois because of its “shameful record of convicting innocent people and putting them on death row”. On 15 April 2002, the commission set up by Governor Ryan to review the state’s capital justice system, released its report. While admitting that a majority of its members supported abolition, the commission made wide-ranging recommendations for reform of the system. But the death penalty is a policy that is too flawed to fix. The risk of irrevocable error can never be eradicated. Nor can the inherent cruelty of this brutalizing punishment, or its tendency to be applied in an arbitrary and discriminatory manner. Over 60 per cent of the 161 people on death row in Illinois are, like Aaron Patterson, African American; yet blacks account for only 15 per cent of the state’s population. Of the 13 men found to have been wrongfully convicted, eight were black and two Latino. Of the 12 people executed before the moratorium, 11 were convicted of crimes involving white victims. Governor Ryan has said he will review all death penalty cases before he leaves office in January 2003. His decision on a moratorium has had a profound national impact. If he were to follow it up with the commutation of all death sentences in Illinois, he would be providing the type of principled leadership desperately needed in the USA on this basic human rights issue.

Please write, urging Governor Ryan to commute all death sentences in Illinois. Send appeals to: Office of the Governor, 207 Statehouse, Springfield, IL 62706, USA. Fax: +1 217 524 4049. e-mail: governor@state.il.us

Republic of Korea (South Korea)

Trade union leader detained

Dan Byung-ho, President of the Korean Confederation of Trade Unions (KCTU), was sentenced in March to two years in prison. The charges against him include the “obstruction to business” clause which is routinely used by the South Korean government against striking workers. The government has been attempting to halt trade union resistance to economic policies that have led to mass redundancies and growing unrest.

Dan Byung-ho was first incarcerated in November 1995 for supporting trade union rights but was granted presidential amnesty and released in 1999 with over two months of his sentence remaining. In August 2001 he returned to jail following a promise from the government to ease up on arrests of KCTU activists if he agreed to finish his sentence on 3 October. Dan Byung-ho hoped this would bring a resolution to months of hostilities between the KCTU and the government following recent strikes and demonstrations.

However, he remains in jail and the government denies knowledge of any such promise. Instead, on 28 September, fresh charges were brought against him. The prosecution demanded that he sign a “statement of repentance” and repent his “illegal” activities and undertake not to participate in or organize strikes. He refused and is now held directly responsible for events at numerous rallies including traffic violations and violence. He is accused of inciting trade unionists to strike in protest at mass redundancies.

Over the last seven years, hundreds of trade union members and leaders in South Korea have been denied the right to organize, conduct collective bargaining and other trade union activities, including strikes to protest against mass redundancies.

Please write, protesting at the continued imprisonment of Dan Byung-ho, and the denial of basic trade union rights in South Korea. Send appeals for his release to: President Kim Dae-jung, The Blue House, 1 Sejong-no, Chongno-gu, Seoul, Republic of Korea. Fax: +82 2 770 0253/0344.

Libya

Two academics sentenced to death

In February ‘Abdullah Ahmed ‘Izzedin (left) and Salem Abu Hanak (right) were sentenced to death in Libya. Scores of others received sentences ranging from 10 years’ to life imprisonment after an unfair trial.

Salem Abu Hanak, head of the Chemistry Department of the University of Qar Younes in Benghazi, and ‘Abdullah Ahmed ‘Izzedin, a lecturer in the Engineering Faculty of Tripoli, were arrested in June 1998. They were among 152 professionals and students arrested on suspicion of supporting or sympathizing with the banned Libyan Islamic Group, al-Jama’a al-Islamiya al-Libiya, which is not known to have used or advocated violence. This case came to be known as the Muslim Brothers case.

All the defendants were kept incommunicado following their arrests and their whereabouts remained unknown until the opening of their trial in March 2001. For more than two years they were deprived of legal counsel and visits from their relatives. No investigation is known to have been carried out into allegations of torture raised by some of the defendants.

Their trial failed to conform to international standards for fair trial, including the right to choose a lawyer. All the hearings were held behind closed doors in a military compound in the suburbs of Tripoli. Lawyers appointed by the families were neither allowed to study the files nor were they allowed to meet their clients. Defendants first met their relatives briefly in April 2001 during the trial’s second session. Afterwards they were denied visits in Abu Salim prison in Tripoli until at least December 2001. AI has twice asked the Libyan authorities for permission to observe this trial but this was denied on both occasions.

Please write, calling for the Libyan authorities to withdraw the death sentences, to review the trial of all the defendants in accordance with international standards for fair trial and to release immediately and unconditionally all those punished solely for the exercise of their non-violent conscientiously held beliefs.

Send appeals to: Colonel Mu‘ammar al-Gaddafi, Leader of the Revolution, Office of the Leader of the Revolution, Tripoli, Socialist People’s Libyan Arab Jamahiriya. Telex: 70 0901 20162 ALKHASU LY.

Updates

Released in Belarus

“If it were not for these people, for the representatives of international organizations, and for the opposition movement in Belarus, I would not have been released even in a hundred years.”

The six-year prison sentence of Andrey Klimov came to an unexpected but welcome end on 25 March when he was released from the UZ 15/1 labour colony in Minsk after serving four years of his sentence. AI adopted the high-profile member of the dissolved Belarusian parliament as a prisoner of conscience after he was arrested for his opposition activities in February 1998. According to the news agency INTERFAX, he emerged from the labour colony carrying a bagful of letters of support which he had received from people abroad. See Worldwide Appeal November 2000.

Opposition leader freed in Togo

“My release is thanks to you. You have done good work. I had given up hope when they announced my release. What kept me going was the support of the international community.”

Opposition leader Yawovi Agboyibo was freed after a six-month jail sentence in a move that could end the political deadlock in Togo. President Eyadéma said he was releasing Yawovi Agboyibo as a “gesture of appeasement”.

The opposition leader, jailed for six months in August for libelling the Prime Minister, was kept in prison as new accusations of criminal conspiracy were brought against him. Opposition parties refused dialogue with the government until he was freed. The deadlock helped lead to a postponement of a parliamentary election due in March. See the Wire September 2001.

Angola

A cease-fire signed in April could end Angola's 27-year civil war, presenting a new opportunity to build respect for human rights. AI urged the authorities, all political parties and civil society to develop a strategy to end impunity and protect human rights, and called on the international community to provide support.

Executions increase

During 2001 over 3,048 people were executed in 31 countries, more than twice the total recorded in 2000. AI also recorded more than 5,265 death sentences in 68 countries. These figures only include cases known to AI; the true figures are far higher. Executions in China, Iran, Saudi Arabia and the USA accounted for 90 per cent of all known executions in 2001.

New European treaty

Protocol 13 to the European Convention on Human Rights, which abolishes the death penalty in all circumstances (including in times of war), is to be opened for signature on 3 May 2002. This marks another step forward in the abolition of the death penalty in the countries of the Council of Europe.

UN Commission on Human Rights

A key theme of AI interventions at the 2002 session of the UN Commission on Human Rights was the need to ensure that the drive for security in the aftermath of 11 September does not compromise basic human rights standards. AI held a public event with Secretary General Irene Khan, issued a joint open statement with other human rights NGOs, and lobbied Commission members on the issue of human rights and "terrorism". AI also called for action on torture, "disappearances" and the death penalty and intervened on countries including Colombia, Indonesia, Israel/Occupied Territories, Russia, Saudi Arabia and Zimbabwe.

International justice is now a step closer

The International Criminal Court is about to become a reality. It will have jurisdiction over genocide, crimes against humanity and war crimes, and will try cases when national courts are unable or unwilling to do so. This marks a historic step forward in the struggle against impunity.

More than 60 countries have now ratified the Rome Statute of the International Criminal Court, triggering the Statute's entry into force on 1 July 2002. The Court could be inaugurated as early as February 2003.

A special event was held at UN headquarters in New York on 11 April to receive the 60th ratification. Ten countries ratified during the special event bringing the total number of ratifications to 66: Bosnia-Herzegovina, Bulgaria, Cambodia, Democratic Republic of the Congo, Ireland, Jordan, Mongolia, Niger, Romania and Slovakia.

During the 20th century, millions of people were victims of genocide, crimes against humanity and war crimes. Shamefully, despite the extent and horrific nature of these crimes, only a handful of those responsible have ever been brought to justice. In most cases, perpetrators planned and committed their crimes knowing that they were extremely unlikely ever to be held accountable. Victims have been denied justice and reparations.

AI's members all over the world continue to campaign for their governments to ratify the Rome Statute. The campaign involves virtually all our sections and structures, generally working in close coordination with 1,000-plus members of the Coalition for an International Criminal Court. AI's work does not stop with the 60th ratification: for the Court to have the broadest jurisdiction we will strive to ensure that all states ratify the Rome Statute.

Only one state, the USA, has actively opposed the establishment of the International Criminal Court, stating that it could be used for politically motivated prosecutions against US nationals. AI believes that the fair trial guarantees and other checks and balances in the Rome Statute preclude such an outcome. AI's US section is working hard to address these concerns.

When it is established, the International Criminal Court will be the foundation of a system to bring to justice those accused of the worst crimes and the worst human rights violations. These crimes are so serious that they affect the whole of humanity. AI will continue working for a system of justice that sends a strong message around the world that these crimes will no longer be tolerated and that ensures dignity, respect and reparation for victims.

For more information about the International Criminal Court and the worldwide campaign to make international justice a reality, please see the International Justice section of our website: <www.amnesty.org>

The heavy price of Israeli incursions

The Israeli Defence Forces (IDF) have shown widespread disregard for life, law and property in their incursions into towns and villages in the West Bank and Gaza. AI has condemned the horrific human rights abuses committed in Israel and the Occupied Territories and has renewed its call on the international community to take immediate action.

AI delegates who visited five refugee camps in March saw a trail of destruction: homes, shops and infrastructure demolished or damaged; apartments trashed and looted; cars crushed and lamp-posts, walls and shopfronts smashed. Actions taken by the IDF often had no clear or obvious military necessity; many of these, such as unlawful killings, destruction of property and arbitrary detention, torture and ill-treatment, violated international human rights and humanitarian law.

Jenin

In mid-April, AI delegates managed to reach Jenin. They interviewed scores of refugees who described massive bombardments with missiles from Apache helicopters, houses crumbling or being bulldozed with people still inside, and mass arrests accompanied by inhuman and degrading treatment as detainees had to squat handcuffed and blindfold for hours without food or water. On 16 April AI called on the UN Security Council to immediately deploy an independent investigation into human rights abuses in Jenin.

Since 27 February 2002 the IDF have launched two waves of incursions into the Palestinian areas occupied by Israel in 1967, using tanks, armoured personnel carriers and Apache helicopters. The first incursions were ended by a partial Israeli pull back after the arrival of US envoy Anthony Zinni on 14 March.

Closures

However, a second wave started on 29 March 2002 with an attack on President Yasser Arafat's headquarters in Ramallah. The IDF spread through West Bank towns and villages, declaring them closed military areas. People from outside the invaded areas, including journalists, UN agencies, other humanitarian workers and diplomats, were prevented from gaining access to offer aid or report on what was going on.

In the six weeks to 11 April 2002, hundreds of Palestinians were killed, many unlawfully, and thousands injured. More than 4,000 were in detention, including hundreds in administrative detention. Reports of unlawful killings by the IDF, especially from Jenin and Nablus, continue at the time of writing.

The declared aim of the incursions was to "destroy the terrorist infrastructure" and the IDF have killed and wounded armed Palestinians. But they have also killed and targeted medical personnel and journalists, and have fired randomly at houses and people in the streets. Mass arbitrary arrests have been carried out in a manner designed to degrade those detained. Ambulances have been prevented from reaching the injured and AI has received many eyewitness reports of people being left to bleed to death.

AI unreservedly condemns the deliberate targeting of civilians by Palestinian armed groups, but no abuses can justify Israel's gross violations of human rights and humanitarian law.

Peace

There is no hope of a durable peace in the region unless it is based on the human rights of all. As a first sign of concrete commitment, international observers must be deployed in the region.

Moreover, all transfers of the arms used to abuse human rights should be immediately suspended and Israeli military units implicated in human rights abuses should be barred from receiving military assistance or training from other countries, including the USA, Israel's main supplier of military aid. The international community cannot turn its back on the suffering of thousands of men, women and children both on the Palestinian and the Israeli side. Human rights observers may be a means to save the lives of both Palestinians and Israelis.

For further information, see: Israel and the Occupied Territories: The heavy price of Israeli incursions (AI Index: MDE 15/042/2002).

Sierra Leone holds elections in May

On 14 May 2002, Sierra Leone will hold presidential and parliamentary elections for the first time since 1996. In a country devastated by over 10 years of internal armed conflict, free and fair elections would be a major step towards building a future based on respect for human rights and the rule of law. In recent years there has been massive investment in Sierra Leone by the international community, including a UN peacekeeping force of almost 17,000 troops. The conflict was officially declared over in January 2002 and significant progress has been made in ending human rights abuses and providing protection and assistance to the victims. These include women, children and former child combatants, as well as internally displaced people and refugees.

Previous elections in Sierra Leone have been marred by widespread human rights abuses, but the presence of UN peace-keeping troops, newly trained Sierra Leonean security forces and international observers should ensure protection of civilians from violence during these elections.

Regardless of the outcome or circumstances of the elections, the international community must not lose interest in Sierra Leone; significant long-term commitment and investment is essential.

National institutions must be rebuilt and strengthened to consolidate progress already made. For example, the domestic court system, police and prison services still face severe resource shortages. Although the establishment of the Special Court for Sierra Leone and the Truth and Reconciliation Commission are important steps, both institutions have only a limited role to play and will only address certain human rights abuses committed during the conflict.

Potential sources of tension must also be effectively addressed. For example, the mining and trade in diamonds must be controlled and monitored to prevent the profits being used to fuel further armed conflict and abuses.

In neighbouring Liberia, the human rights situation continues to deteriorate, with a potentially destabilizing effect on Sierra Leone. The Liberian government has for many years supported the armed opposition Revolutionary United Front (RUF). Even now, RUF combatants are fighting in Liberia alongside Liberian government forces.

Until long-term needs and potential sources of tension are addressed, Sierra Leone's future will remain uncertain.

Women's action network (caption to picture)

Women activists from more than 60 countries who were attending the Amnesty International Intersectional Women's Network meeting in London (3-7 April) demonstrate to show solidarity with women facing human rights violations in Israel and the Occupied Territories.

Reports and Briefings

Ecuador: Pride and Prejudice – Time to break the vicious circle of impunity for abuses against lesbian, gay, bisexual and trans-gendered people (AI Index: AMR 28/001/2002)

Brazil: "Subhuman" – Torture, overcrowding and brutalization in Minas Gerais police stations (AI Index: AMR 19/003/2002)

Bulgaria: Sanadinovo – "This is a truly ghastly place" (AI Index: EUR 15/002/2002)

United States of America: Memorandum to the US Government on the rights of people in US custody in Afghanistan and Guantanamo Bay (AI Index: AMR 51/053/2002)