

Amnesty International Newsletter October 1993  
News

BRAZIL

Seven "street children", and a young man who lived with them, were shot and killed -- allegedly by police -- in the centre of Rio de Janeiro on 23 July. At least 328 children and adolescents have been killed in Rio de Janeiro state in the first six months of this year alone.

Gunmen opened fire at dawn on a group of 50 children and adolescents sleeping rough near Candelária Church. Five were killed on the spot; another two were killed in the grounds of the Modern Art Museum. An eighth victim died of his wounds four days later.

After a national and international outcry over what has become known as the Candelária massacre, four men -- including three policemen -- have been indicted for the crime, and further suspects are being sought.

The dead have been identified as Paulo Roberto de Oliveira aged 11, Anderson Thome Pereira, 13, Marcelo Candido de Jesus and Valderino Miguel de Almeida both 14, two 17-year-olds known as Gambazinho and Nogento, Paulo José da Silva, 18 and Marcos Antonio Alves da Silva, 22.

Extrajudicial executions of adults as well as children are carried out in urban areas of Brazil by "death squads" -- who are often police officers in plain clothes. They are funded by local businessmen who want to "cleanse" their neighbourhoods of social undesirables, robbers and petty thieves, as well as street children who may themselves have been drawn into crime.

The Ministry of Justice has announced that federal police would be investigating the operation of "death squads" in Rio de Janeiro and other states. In most cases to date, the Brazilian authorities have failed to complete investigations or bring the perpetrators to justice.

Please send courteous appeals welcoming measures to investigate the Candelária killings, urging that all steps are taken to protect the child witnesses in the case, that all other such cases are investigated and those responsible brought to justice to: President Itamar Franco/  
Palácio do Planalto/ Brasilia D.F/ Brazil.

## MYANMAR

U Shwe Ohn, a 70-year-old lawyer and chairman of a political party banned by the military junta, was arrested in December 1992 for questioning the army's role in politics and calling for power to be handed over to the country's elected representatives.

He was reportedly sentenced to one year's imprisonment in February, but AI has no further details about his trial or the charges brought against him.

His criticism of military involvement in the state was contained in an essay to the National Convention, called earlier this year by the State Law and Order Restoration Council (SLORC), Myanmar's ruling military leaders. The convention was formed to establish guidelines for the drafting of a constitution. The SLORC had already laid down one guideline of its own, giving a leading role to the military in the future political life of Myanmar.

After reasserting military control over Myanmar in 1988, the SLORC abolished the constitution and continues to rule by martial law. Elections were held in May 1990, but the SLORC has refused to convene the elected parliament.

U Shwe Ohn is the Chairman of the Democratic League for the National Races of the Shan State (DLNRSS), which was banned as a legal political party by the SLORC in February 1992. He is a prisoner of conscience, arrested solely for the peaceful expression of his non-violent political views.

Please send courteous appeals for U Shwe Ohn's immediate and unconditional release to: Senior General Than Shwe/ Chairman, State Law and Order Restoration Council/ Ministry of Defence/ Signal Pagoda Road/ Yangon (Rangoon)/ Union of Myanmar (Burma).

EGYPT

Sa'al-Din al-Shazli, a 71-year-old former Ambassador and Commander of the Egyptian armed forces, was arrested on 14 March 1992 at Cairo Airport after 14 years of self-imposed exile in Libya and Algeria. His whereabouts remained unknown for several weeks after his arrest.

Sa'al-Din al-Shazli had been tried in absentia in 1983 and sentenced to three years' imprisonment for disclosing military secrets about the 1973 Arab-Israeli War in a book published in 1981.

In August 1992 the (Emergency) Supreme State Court ruled that the sentence imposed in 1983 should be suspended. However, within days of this decision the Supreme Military Court upheld the three-year prison sentence. The Higher Constitutional Court has been examining the two conflicting verdicts and has yet to give its own ruling. In the meantime Sa'al-Din al-Shazli remains in total isolation in the hospital of a military prison outside Cairo.

AI has serious concerns about the fairness of the 1983 trial. The procedures did not meet international standards for fair trial as set forth in Article 14 of the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights, which Egypt ratified in 1982. Sa'al-Din al-Shazli was tried in absentia and was reportedly denied the right to appeal. Moreover, the trial was held in camera and his lawyer was not allowed to enter the court room. The Egyptian authorities wrote to AI at the end of July 1992 stating that the 1983 trial was fair and that the defendant had appealed, but the appeal was turned down.

\* Please send appeals urging an immediate retrial of Sa'al-Din al-Shazli in accordance with international standards for fair trial or else that he be released, to: His Excellency  
Muhammad Hosni Mubarak/President of the Arab Republic of Egypt/'Abedine Palace/Cairo/Egypt.

## SENEGAL

Mody Sy, a recently elected opposition member of parliament, was arrested in May and held at the *Gendarmerie de Thiong* (paramilitary police station) in central Dakar. Officers reportedly forced him to confess to providing weapons used in the murder of a prominent lawyer and political opponent by suspending him between two tables and administering electric shocks to his fingers and genitals. When transferred to prison several days later, Mody Sy's feet were still numb and his wrists and legs were scarred as a result of his torture.

On 2 June Mody Sy's lawyer requested that his client be given a medical examination, which was only carried out nine days later. The lawyer has still not been granted access to the medical report and no official investigation is known to have been opened.

Later in the month the Procurator General told AI representatives that he had not opened an inquiry into these allegations because no complaint had been filed. When reminded that he had the power to open an inquiry, he stated he was awaiting the medical report.

In a further development in the case, Ramata Guèye, a 20-year-old mango seller, was arrested on 14 July and held for two days, apparently to force her to reveal the whereabouts of the murder weapon. A medical certificate issued soon after she was released without charge noted serious bruising on the buttocks and right hand, a sprained thumb and that some of her hair had been pulled out. Five days after her release, she was continuing to pass blood in her urine.

Torture appears to be routine practice in Senegal, despite the country's commitment at the 1991 session of the United Nations Commission on Human Rights to the "eradication of this odious and barbaric act".

The government's reluctance to open an inquiry into these allegations of torture and the apparent existence of specialized torture equipment at the *Gendarmerie de Thiong* lend credibility to persistent allegations that torture has also been used against suspected criminals.

## SIERRA LEONE

Eighty-six people held without charge or trial were released from the Central Prison in Pademba Road, Freetown, in July, shortly after AI had called for a review of the cases of 264 political detainees there (see *AI Newsletter* August 1993).

The government claimed that more than 150 of those still held had been involved with rebel forces fighting government troops in the south and east of the country.

As areas previously held by rebels are retaken, soldiers detained civilians, including women and children. There appears to be no proper investigation into whether they supported or collaborated with rebels.

Some detainees now in the Central Prison, including several boys aged between 14 and 17, are being held indefinitely in the absence of substantial evidence that they were involved in rebel activities. AI has urged a rapid review of these cases and the release of any detainees against whom there is no evidence.

## BURUNDI

More than 500 political prisoners are expected to be released following the announcement in June of a general amnesty by Burundi's new President, Melchior Ndadaye. After ratification by parliament, the amnesty is to be implemented over a six-month period.

Ndadaye is Burundi's first ethnic Hutu president. The majority Hutu population has suffered horrendous human rights violations at the hands of the security forces, who are predominantly from the ethnic Tutsi group.

The political prisoners expected to benefit from the amnesty include about 400 Hutu accused of involvement in a rebel attack at the end of 1991. About 80 of them were convicted in unfair trials in 1992, in which five people were sentenced to death.

However, there are also reports that the amnesty will block investigations into human rights abuses committed by security personnel and civilians. Since 1965 the security forces have carried out hundreds of thousands of extrajudicial executions.

## ZAIRE

Since August 1992 ethnic violence in Zaire, instigated or condoned by President Mobutu Sese Seko and his supporters, has claimed the lives of thousands of people and left hundreds of thousands displaced.

In Shaba region, more than 500 members of the migrant Luba ethnic group have been killed and more than 100,000 displaced during attacks by members of the native Lunda ethnic group. Former Prime Minister Nguz a Karl-i-Bond and regional governor Kyungu wa Kumwanza, both Lunda allies of President Mobutu, reportedly instigated the violence. The Lunda accused the Luba of supporting opposition Prime Minister Etienne Tshisekedi, exploiting Shaba's wealth and depriving Lunda of jobs.

In North-Kivu, attacks on Banyarwanda people by Hunde and Nyanga ethnic groups in March were reportedly encouraged by the regional governor. He suggested that the Banyarwanda were not Zairians and promised that the security forces would help in their "extermination". At least 3,000 people, mostly Banyarwanda, have been killed and about 200,000 displaced.

Although the governor and his deputy were suspended at the end of July, there was no official inquiry into the killings. Members of the security forces reportedly took part in attacks against Banyarwanda.

By August, no action had been taken against those responsible for the Shaba and North-Kivu attacks, apparently because the victims were supporters of political parties opposed to President Mobutu.

## PERU

Peru's Congress voted in August to extend the death penalty to crimes of terrorism -- a measure which would violate the American Convention on Human Rights and go against Latin America's strong abolitionist tradition.

The proposal, passed by 55 votes to 21, is included in Peru's new constitution, presently being debated by the Constituent Congress. The new constitution is expected to be put to a public referendum.

Under the new clause, "the death penalty can only be applied for the crimes of treason and terrorism in accordance with internal laws and the international treaties to which Peru is a party". However, by incorporating a broadened application of the death penalty into the constitution, Peru would be violating the American Convention on Human Rights, which was ratified by Peru in 1978. This Convention explicitly prohibits any extension of the death penalty and prohibits its application for political offences or related common crimes.

AI believes that by widening the scope of the death penalty the Government of Peru would be seriously undermining the spirit in which the American system for the protection of human rights has been strengthened over the past two decades.

## PERU

Four mass graves -- believed to contain the remains of nine students and a lecturer abducted by the army from La Cantuta University over a year ago -- were excavated by the Peruvian authorities in July, despite a plea by AI to postpone the investigation.\* An independent report suggests that substantial evidence may have been lost or destroyed due to inadequate procedures.

Charred human remains were unearthed from the shallow graves in July. Keys discovered at the site opened an office and lockers at La Cantuta University, and the door of one of the missing students' homes.

AI had written to Peru's Attorney General, urging that the excavation at a site on the outskirts of Lima be halted until experts in forensic anthropology could attend the investigation. The organization also recommended that the site be adequately secured.

Members of an AI fact-finding visit to Peru witnessed the investigation into the graves. Two forensic members of the Equipo Argentino de Antropología Forense (EAAF), Argentine Team of Forensic Anthropology, a non-governmental organization, arrived in Lima at the invitation of AI to join the delegation visiting the country and provide expert advice on the investigation.

The Public Ministry, however, did not give them permission to assist in the investigation of the graves. The two forensic experts analyzed information from witnesses present during the investigations.

Their report concludes that procedures used during the excavation of the graves and the retrieval of human remains were inadequate. In particular they criticised the lack of a proper crime scene investigation; that the area was not secured; that the excavation was hasty, and carried out without proper tools and methods; that remains were inadequately transferred and the preservation of evidence not ensured; and that all this was conducted without forensic expertise, including forensic anthropologists and archaeologists.

\*see Peru: "Disappearance" of a Lecturer and Nine Students, AI Index: AMR 46/45/92, 46/09/93; and Peru: Army Seeks Cover-up of Summary Killings, AI Index: AMR 46/12/93

## North Korea

This month, AI is publishin a report on human rights violations in North Korea, \* containing information about prisoners of conscience, "disappearances" and conditions in detention camps. The evidence is by no means complete, but it suggests that severe human rights violations are widespread.

Information about human rights concerns in the Democratic People's Republic of Korea (North Korea) is severely limited and difficult to verify. There are no independent media or human rights monitoring groups, and access to the country remains severely restricted.

The available information indicates that hundreds of thousands of people have been victims of "disappearances", torture and summary execution in the last decades. Tens of thousands of people, including prisoners of conscience, have been detained since the 1960s. Although the authorities deny this and accuse critics of the state of being politically motivated, an official told AI in 1991 that there were about 1,000 people held in three "re-education" camps nationwide, and that an unspecified number of others were detained in separate camps for "anti-state" activities. He supplied no other details. AI believes that many more are currently detained.

Shibata Kozo may still be one of the prisoners of conscience held in North Korea. If he is still alive, he is now 62 years' old and has been imprisoned since October 1964. He was reportedly held in a "re-education" camp in late 1990 but there has been no news about him since then. His wife and children have apparently been imprisoned.

Another man, Hong Man-pyo, was arrested in December 1982 with his wife and two children, apparently by officials of the Ministry of State Security. Unofficial sources say that they are still alive. But their relatives have not been able to see or correspond with them for the last 11 years.

Political prisoners appear to be held in detention camps in appalling conditions. Former prisoners say that many of the inmates died of cold, hunger or untreated illnesses.

The death penalty appears to be widely used. At least 100 prisoners are believed to be executed every years but the authorities have consistently refused to make official statistics available to AI. In some cases prisoners sentenced to death are displayed at public meetungs before the execution. In November 1992 a man reportedly accused of "hooliganism" and "ideological divergence" was publicly executed before a large crowd in the city of Hamhung.

The civilian population is under strict ideological control by the government and the ruling Workers' Party of Kore (WPK). Prisoners

accused of "ideological divergence" and other "counter-revolutionary crimes" are said to have been sentenced to death and executed. Witnesses reported such executions in November 1992; according to North Koreans they occur frequently.

AI has called on the North Korean authorities to release all POCs and account for the "disappeared" named in its reports.

\*Summary of AI's concerns in North Korea (AI Index:ASA 24/01/93)

#### Former USSR

Laws inherited from the former Soviet Union banning consensual sex between adult males have been taken off the statute books in Russia, Kazakhstan and Lithuania.

Russia has said that all those jailed under the law -- which carried up to five years imprisonment -- would be released. The Justice Ministry said 25 men had been jailed for consensual homosexual sex in Russia in 1992. There did not appear to be any prisoners in Lithuania or Kazakhstan serving sentences for this offence.

Under the former USSR, the absence of official statistics and the stigmatization of offenders made it difficult to assess the total number of prosecutions. Unofficial sources frequently reported that imprisoned homosexuals were ill-treated and sexually abused by other inmates, often with the complicity of the authorities.

In December 1991, Ukraine became the first of the new states to decriminalize consensual homosexual sex, followed by Latvia and Estonia in 1992.

## SYRIA

At least 34 political prisoners -- many of them prisoners of conscience -- have been jailed for up to 15 years by the Supreme State Security Court in Damascus.

After years of detention and hearings which failed to meet international standards for fair trial, the men were sentenced to between three and 15 years for being members of, or having links with, the unauthorized Party for Communist Action (PCA). They have also been deprived of their civil rights, which may mean they face difficulties such as finding jobs or leaving the country when they are finally released from prison.

Among those sentenced are prisoners of conscience Malik al-As'ad and Rustum Ahmad Rustum, aged 39 and 40, who were given 15 years imprisonment each. They have been held in detention since 1982.

Like the others, they were charged with forming associations and undertaking activities opposed to the state. These crimes carry severe penalties, including death. The 34 have no right of appeal to a higher tribunal and their sentences are only subject to review by the Minister of Interior. However, AI believes that such a review does not constitute an adequate form of appeal as required by international standards.

The 34 were among more than 500 political detainees, including prisoners of conscience, whose trials have been in progress since July 1992. All face the same charges in connection with membership of or links with various unauthorized political parties, such as the PCA, the Communist Party Political Bureau (CPPB), the Arab Socialist Democratic Ba'th Party, the Arab Socialist Union Party in Syria and the Nasserist Democratic Popular Organization. Some of the defendants have been held since 1980, under state of emergency legislation in force for over 30 years, and had no access to legal assistance or the outside world. Many were allegedly tortured.

AI sent trial observers to some of the hearings. The organization has appealed for the immediate and unconditional release of all the defendants being tried for the non-violent expression of their conscientiously held beliefs, and expressed concern to the government about the gross violation of the right to fair trial in the cases of all of the defendants.

Such violations included lengthy periods of detention without trial -- up to 13 years in some cases. In addition, defence lawyers were given limited access to the defendants' files and some were even denied the right to meet in private with their clients and to summon defence witnesses. The court failed to investigate torture allegations or order

medical examinations, and those sentenced had no right of appeal against their convictions and sentences, as the court verdicts are final.

Other prisoners of conscience on trial include Mufid Mi'mari of the CPPB and Usama 'Ashur al-'Askari of the PCA, who have been in detention since 1980 and 1982. Usama's sister, Doha 'Ashur al-'Askari, a 29-year-old former student, has also been referred for trial following her arrest in February this year. She had been in hiding since 1986, when the authorities began to seek her arrest in connection with PCA activities.

## TUNISIA

At least nine detainees have died in custody since April 1991, some reportedly tortured to death. The Tunisian Government has failed to investigate the cases and to bring to justice those responsible.

Mouldi Ben Omar died in custody on 17 January 1992. He had been arrested at the beginning of November 1991 and was held in illegally prolonged garde à vue detention for 25 days. At his first court hearing on 4 December 1991 he stated that he had been tortured, and his lawyer confirmed that he bore scars and walked with difficulty. The lawyer's request for a medical examination was granted by the court on 18 January 1992, but Mouldi Ben Omar was not present at the hearing on 22 January. The court recorded that he was absent because the prison services had failed to bring him to court.

However, on 21 January police officers had informed his wife that he had died the previous day. She was not informed of the cause of his death and when she was taken to the cemetery for the burial she was only allowed to see his face, which she says was bruised. She was later told by other detainees that her husband had died on 17 January. Repeated requests by the family and lawyer for an autopsy and an investigation remain unanswered.

AI has raised this case repeatedly with the Ministers of the Interior and Justice, the Presidential Counsellor for Human Rights, the President of the Higher Committee for the Defence of Human Rights and Fundamental Liberties, and other authorities. No reply has been received.

For over two years AI has also urged, to no avail, the authorities to investigate the deaths of Faisal Barakat, Rachid Chammakhi and other detainees who died after being tortured.

The absence of investigations into such serious human rights violations suggests that these are perpetrated with impunity and condoned at the highest levels of government.

## SYRIA: DEATH IN CUSTODY

Salah Jadid, a prisoner of conscience who was detained for nearly 23 years without charge or trial, died suddenly in custody on 19 August. His family was told that he died of septic shock and acute kidney failure.

### Licence to kill

Millions of men, women and children have been slaughtered or have "disappeared" without trace over the last 30 years. They were not the victims of war, but of their own governments, who singled them out because of their political views, ethnic origin, or simply because they were poor or lived in the "wrong" place.

In the 1980s alone, the Iraqi security forces killed hundreds of thousands of people; more than 100,000 were killed by Ugandan security forces in the Luwero Triangle area between 1981 and 1986. Tens of thousands were killed or "disappeared" in Sri Lanka and Sudan. Thousands more died in Burundi, Chad, El Salvador, Guatemala, Indonesia, Peru, and the Philippines. This list is not inclusive, and in many countries the killing has continued into the 1990s.

In the late 1980s, as democratically elected governments replaced military juntas and totalitarian regimes, a "new world order" was promised -- an era in which governments would be accountable to their people, abide by the law, and protect and promote human rights. But these turned out to be false promises. Government agents still murder or "disappear" tens of thousands of people each year.

In Rwanda, more than 3,000 people were massacred by government forces, civilian groups and rebels between late 1990 and early 1993, during armed conflict in the north of the country. Over the last 18 months, a civil war in Tadjikistan, largely ignored by the rest of the world, has left 20,000 dead; government and paramilitary forces have been responsible for hundreds of political killings and "disappearances". In spite of promises by the Turkish government of human rights reform, security forces have been clearly implicated in many of the hundreds of political killing which have taken place there since 1991.

In South Africa, horrific levels of bloodshed have accompanied the political reform process aimed at ending *apartheid*. Since 1990, when negotiations began, over 10,000 South Africans have been murdered in circumstances involving the security forces or, more often, by armed groups acting with tacit official support.

The proliferation of nationalist, secessionist and religious conflict threatens all regions of the world with violence and bloodshed. Just one gruesome example -- the hundreds of thousands of men, women and children murdered in the vicious and intractable war in Bosnia-Herzegovina's -- makes a mockery of the "new world order".

How do governments get away with murdering and kidnapping their own citizens? Some do not even bother to justify their actions, others attempt to conceal their crimes. In Afghanistan, Chad, Ethiopia, and Iraq, recently uncovered mass graves have revealed thousands of victims of previously undocumented political killings and "disappearances". Most governments simply lie or play down the facts. When the tanks of

the Chinese army moved against the pro-democracy protesters in Beijing in June 1989, the massacre that followed was recorded on television, and witnessed around the world. At least 1,000 people were killed; hundreds of their bodies were traced in morgues and hospitals. But the government initially said no one had been killed, and later claimed that only 200 civilians had died in the clashes between soldiers and demonstrators -- a gross underestimate.

Some governments try to stifle criticism by claiming that violence is endemic in their societies, or results from ethnic tensions. Violence, of course, will be endemic in any society where human rights are violated. And intercommunal violence often results from, or is exacerbated by, official policies.

In 1992 more than 700 people were killed in ethnic clashes in Kenya, clashes which appeared to have been politically engineered. Evidence indicated that one of the groups responsible was supported and financed by senior government officials. The group was nicknamed the "Kalenjin warriors", after the President's ethnic group.

More than 130 people were killed by the security forces in Bombay, capital of the Indian state of Maharashtra, during riots following the destruction of the Babri Masjid mosque in Ayodhya in December 1992. Most of those killed belonged to the Muslim community, and eye-witnesses said that the police sided with Hindu mobs attacking Muslims. Few governments openly order political killings and "disappearances", relying instead on covert operations and sophisticated cover-ups. The circumstances surrounding political killings are often unclear, and it is only the conduct of the state and a pattern of similar incidents that point to the probability that the killings were deliberate and unlawful.

In Northern Ireland (United Kingdom), the security forces have killed dozens of people in suspicious circumstances since 1982, leading to allegations that suspected members of armed opposition groups were being deliberately killed, rather than arrested. The government's consistent refusal to hold independent inquiries into the killings has strengthened these allegations. One detailed inquiry was led by a senior police officer from another force, but the findings were suppressed. Although the inquiry found evidence of police misconduct, the government declined to prosecute on the grounds of "national security" and "public interest".

In Colombia the security forces eliminate their opponents without recourse to law. The government has blamed many of the thousands of killings and "disappearances" on "death squads" over which it claims to have no control. Yet case after case shows that the "death squads" operate with the support of the Colombian armed forces and often form an integral part of the army's counter-insurgency strategy.

In South Africa, a growing body of evidence has linked "hit squads" responsible for political killings with covert police and military operations.

In many countries "death squad" links to the security forces have been

exposed. Yet governments persist with the myth that "death squads" are independent groups beyond government control. A former Salvadorian soldier explains how it works: "Early in 1980 I volunteered to join what is referred to in El Salvador as a death squad. However, in my experience the death squad has no independent existence outside the Salvadorian military and security forces. It is simply a form of duty which the military personnel are ordered to carry out while not in uniform."

Internal conflict is frequently the pretext, as well as the context, for killings. Hundreds of Palestinian civilians, including children, have been killed by Israeli forces since the Palestinian uprising known as the *intifada* began in 1987. The investigations into these killings have usually been inadequate and have rarely resulted in prosecutions. In just the first five months of 1993, about 30 children were shot and killed by Israeli forces in the Occupied Territories. Many of them appear to have been the victims of extrajudicial executions or other unjustifiable killings.

Allan Huglstad, a Danish Army Major who visited Gaza as a delegate for AI in May 1993, watched as Israeli soldiers fired on a group of boys in the street: "These young people were not doing anything other than watching, like me, a patrol of Israeli soldiers who were advancing towards us. When they were more than a hundred metres from us, the soldiers began firing in our direction. I heard no warning and the soldiers appeared to be in no danger."

#### IMPUNITY

Government involvement in political killings and "disappearances" goes beyond the death or abduction of the victim. An elaborate system exists to ensure that the truth does not emerge and that the guilty escape justice. Known as impunity, it exempts the perpetrators of human rights violations from investigation, prosecution or punishment.

Some governments obstruct justice by passing laws guaranteeing immunity from prosecution to members of the security forces who violate human rights. In November 1992, as political killings continued in South Africa, the government enacted the Further Indemnity Act, effectively granting impunity to human rights violators. In India, special legislation in states where the government faces armed insurgency permits the security forces to shoot to kill without any fear of "prosecution, suit or other legal proceeding".

Sometimes impunity is extended retrospectively. When periods of gross abuse come to an end the doors are closed on the past. The decision not to punish human rights violations is justified on grounds of "national reconciliation".

In March 1993 the UN-appointed Truth Commission published its report on past human rights abuses by government and opposition forces in El Salvador. The report found government forces responsible for massive human rights violations during the 12-year civil war. Less than a week

later, the government passed a sweeping amnesty law granting exemption from prosecution to those who committed human rights crimes before 1992. The law lays a dangerous foundation for the future, and some serious violations continue: the mutilated corpses that still appear in public streets suggest that "death-squads" remain in operation. In Cambodia, the 1991 peace settlement failed to provide for the prosecution of those responsible for the massive atrocities of the past. In May 1993 the Mauritanian parliament passed a bill granting total immunity from prosecution to members of the security forces for all offences committed between 1989 and 1992, a period in which more than 400 Mauritians were extrajudicially executed and dozens more "disappeared".

Where impunity prevails, when the security forces get away with political killings and "disappearances" on a daily basis, public confidence in the rule of law disintegrates, and no judicial system can operate effectively.

In some countries impunity has created an epidemic of casual murder and abduction, in which the urban poor, peasants, and others on the margins of society have been systematically eliminated. The authorities at national and local level have been accomplices to political killings and "disappearances" through informal partnerships with civilian vigilantes and hired gunmen.

In Brazil, hundreds of people -- peasant farmers, rural community and trade union leaders and Indians -- have been killed by hired gunmen in the pay of landowners, with the sanction or assistance of the authorities. In all but a handful of cases the killers have escaped justice. Impunity has likewise been extended to the "death squads" that have killed hundreds of street children in the last year alone, and to those uniformed police who have shot criminal suspects dead.

As an international phenomenon, impunity demands action on an international scale. The decision to establish an international war crimes tribunal in respect of the former Yugoslavia should be one step towards creating an international criminal court, with worldwide jurisdiction, able to bring to justice those responsible for violating human rights and humanitarian law.

"Human rights" has become a phrase that most governments pay lip service to, but all too few uphold. Governments around the world continue to order or condone political murder and "disappearances". These governments must take the decision to end the killing. A series of effective measures can be taken: pre-emptive measure to prevent these violations happening in the first place coupled, if they do occur, with proper investigation and a determination to bring the perpetrators to justice. The continuing nightmare of political killings and "disappearances" will only end if governments, both individually and collectively, have the political will to act.

AI in action

AI is on permanent alert for human rights emergencies. Cases of

"disappearance" are flashed around the world on the Urgent Action network. Some 50,000 people in 78 countries are mobilized to write, telex, fax and phone appeals for the victims' safety.

When political killings are reported it is too late for Urgent Actions to save lives. Instead AI demands prompt, impartial investigation of the killing, protection for witnesses and the victim's family, and that those responsible be brought to justice.

Urgent Actions are just the beginning of AI's work on behalf of the victims of political killings and "disappearances". Their cases are highlighted by Regional Action Networks; their fate becomes the focus of our country campaigns. The international community will be pressed to intercede. The UN will be alerted.

And at the same time hundreds of AI groups will start working on the victims' cases. Numbering more than a million, these volunteer activists are the backbone of AI campaigns. They mobilize their communities, put pressure on governments, support the victims' families, lobby for legal reform and raise public awareness through the press and human rights education work. This month, AI is launching an international campaign to stop political killings and "disappearances". In this campaign, for the first time, AI is demanding that armed political groups worldwide take the minimum steps to fulfil their obligation to respect basic human rights. AI is calling on them to stop torture and deliberate and arbitrary killings, including killings of civilians and prisoners, and to observe international humanitarian standards.

But the main focus of the campaign falls on governments. We are demanding that they implement our 14-point programs to prevent extrajudicial executions and "disappearances".

When governments across the world trample on the fundamental rights of their citizens and ignore abuses abroad, it is up to ordinary people to act. Concerted public pressure can make a difference, even to the most repressive regimes; they may have the heavy artillery, but we have the numbers. We must take action. Join our campaign today!