



## A community living in terror

The shooting of an environmentalist in Honduras provokes fear of more attacks

Carlos Roberto Flores, an environmentalist and community leader of the municipality of Gualaco, Honduras, was shot dead outside his home on 30 June. He had led protests against the construction of a hydroelectric dam on the Babilonia river in Gualaco, which locals believe will seriously damage the environment and ruin their livelihood, possibly forcing them off their land. Eyewitnesses say the 10 gunmen who shot Carlos Flores were security guards working for Energisa, the private company building the dam. Arrest warrants have been issued against five of those alleged to be involved in the shooting but no arrests have been made.

Other leaders of the communities protesting at the dam, including the mayor and all seven municipal councillors of Gualaco, reported receiving death threats. They stopped attending public events for fear of being attacked. Rosa Elvira Flores, Carlos Flores' mother, told AI that private security guards aim their guns at her house whenever they drive by.

The Gualaco school closed in April after the sole teacher refused to go to the community for fear of violence. When he returned in June, security guards reportedly shot at the classroom forcing the teacher and children to throw themselves to the floor. The school was once again closed. There is an overwhelming feeling of insecurity among the local people, who fear that someone else may be killed at any moment.

On 4 July a group of people from Gualaco began a vigil outside the National Congress building in the capital Tegucigalpa to protest against Carlos Flores' killing and the activities of Energisa. On 18 July they were violently dispersed by the police. Dlicia, a four-year-old girl, was in tears as she told a witness that she had been hit in the abdomen by a policeman. Carlos Flores' wife, Tereza Martinez Avila, who was seven months pregnant, was pushed about in the disturbance and had to be hospitalized, as she appeared to be going into premature labour. Later in the day the police made a further attempt to disperse the demonstrators using tear gas, water-cannons and batons. The skirmish left around 30 demonstrators injured. Many of them were taken into custody but later released.

AI has documented a number of cases in Honduras in recent years where local communities, many of them indigenous, have been threatened and their leaders killed in apparent reprisal for highlighting environmental damage and campaigning in favour of community rights. The gunmen responsible often have links to powerful local landowners. Environmental activists Carlos Escaleras and Carlos Antonio Luna were murdered in 1997 and 1998. As long as the authorities take no action to bring those responsible to justice, AI fears the violence will continue.



A group of people from Gualaco meeting AI delegates in July



A Palestinian boy plays by a wall sprayed with graffiti in Khan Yunis, Gaza Strip, April 2001

## One year of *intifada*

Calls for international action to protect human rights in Israel and the Occupied Territories ignored despite widespread abuses

A day after the *intifada* (uprising) began on 29 September 2000, a 12-year-old Palestinian boy, Muhammad Jamal al-Dura, was shot dead by Israeli soldiers while covering in his father's arms. The world saw pictures of Muhammad's last terrified moments, yet did little to protect others like him. One year later, 150 Palestinian and 30 Israeli children had been killed by Israeli security forces, Palestinian armed groups and individuals – and the international community had still failed to act.

More than 570 Palestinians were killed by Israeli security forces in the year, the vast majority killed unlawfully when no lives were in danger. More than 150 Israelis, including 115 civilians, were killed by Palestinian armed groups and individuals. Thousands of other people were wounded, many maimed for life.

Israeli forces killed Palestinians at demonstrations, checkpoints and borders, and shelled Palestinian police stations and residential areas, leaving thousands of homes uninhabitable. At least 1,500 Palestinians were arrested; many were held in prolonged incommunicado detention and tortured.

Almost every Palestinian town and village has been cut off from the outside world by Israeli army checkpoints or physical barriers of earth, concrete blocks or metal walls. Most inhabitants of the Gaza Strip are enclosed, as they have been for years, as though in a prison. Curfews on Palestinian areas have trapped residents in their homes for days, weeks or even months. In the name of security,

hundreds of Palestinian homes have been demolished and Palestinians barred from travelling along certain roads.

Palestinians subject to these collective punishments are increasingly impoverished by the closures and traumatized by the killings and destruction.

Violence has become a part of daily life. Israeli settlers have killed Palestinians with almost complete impunity. Palestinians have shot at cars with Israeli number-plates and set off bombs in shopping malls and restaurants. Israelis have become fearful in crowded streets and cafés and on the roads of the Occupied Territories. Palestinians have become fearful in their homes and when walking or driving, especially at checkpoints where for no apparent reason they may be killed by nervous, reckless or negligent soldiers. No killing in the Occupied Territories is properly investigated.

AI has repeatedly called on the Israeli authorities to abide by international human rights standards that Israel has promised to uphold, and has urged the Palestinian Authority and armed groups to act in accordance with humanitarian law.

The international community has made increasingly strong statements, but has failed to take the action necessary to ensure respect for human rights standards and international humanitarian law. Human rights appear to be low on the international agenda.

AI has repeatedly called for the deployment of international observers with a human rights monitoring and investigative role. Such observers

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## Worldwide Appeals

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# 'They treat us like animals': torture and ill-treatment in Brazil



Robbery and Theft police station, Paraná state. Extreme overcrowding is commonplace in Brazil's police stations and prisons. Frequently, prisoners do not leave their cells for months at a time.

Alexandre de Oliveira was arrested on 12 January 2001 in the Município de Bom Jardim, in the state of Minas Gerais, and taken to the police station. He was charged with the rape of his one-year-old daughter who had been hospitalized, reportedly suffering from bleeding in her genital area. Members of the civil police reportedly handcuffed him, beat the soles of his feet with a stick wrapped in sticky tape, and gave him electric shocks on the nape of his neck. They allegedly told him that the torture would not stop until he signed a confession. He signed a confession which he says he never even read.

Five days later Alexandre de Oliveira was released after it emerged that his daughter had a tumour which was causing her bleeding and swelling. The police internal investigations office of Minas Gerais has opened an investigation and six civil police officers have been named as suspects. However, few people in Brazil are ever prosecuted for torture, and even fewer convicted.

Brazil's criminal justice system is in crisis. Police officers and prison guards, under pressure to deal with mounting crime rates, have neither the training nor the resources to deal with the situation. As a result, torture and ill-treatment have effectively taken the place of scientific and professional investigation techniques in all but a few cases. They have

also become the everyday tools used to control a growing and increasingly desperate prison population. The vast majority of victims are poor, under-educated, criminal suspects and many are of Afro-Brazilian or indigenous descent, a sector of society whose rights have consistently been ignored in Brazil.

Torture and ill-treatment are widely and systematically used in police stations, prisons and youth detention centres throughout Brazil to extract confessions from suspects; to dominate, humiliate and control detainees; or, increasingly, to extort money or serve the criminal interests of corrupt police officials.

*"I have three hernias. I got them from them stamping on me. This is the way it is, the living dead. The prisoners themselves help put the guys, all wet, into the electric chair and then they give him electric shocks. This is a place which only God can save us from... When you want to go to the infirmary the guards won't let you go. They tell you there is no medicine and people end up dying here."*

Testimony of an inmate in Serrotao prison in Campina Grande, Paraíba state, in October 2000. Investigations have reportedly been opened into conditions in the prison and a new director has apparently been appointed.

Despite widespread reports of torture, for many Brazilians torture is an abuse of the past, associated with the military regime which ended in 1985. Few equate the treatment suffered by criminal suspects with "torture". In reality, many of the torture methods used in the past are still in use today – for example the infamous "parrot's perch", where the victim's hands are bound beneath their feet and they are hung upside down from a bar and beaten or given electric shocks.

The Brazilian government has announced a number of measures to tackle torture, perhaps the most important of which is the 1997 Torture Law. These initiatives are welcome. However, in the past there has been a lack of political will to ensure that essential reforms and legislation are implemented effectively. As a result they have not brought about significant improvements for victims of human rights violations, especially torture victims.

AI has published a report, 'People end up dying here' - torture and ill-treatment in Brazil (AI Index: AMR 19/027/2001) at a time of intense debate on torture within Brazil. This is a critical time to revitalize the campaign against torture and step up support for all those working to combat torture in Brazil today.

## Opinion

### AI's position on the current military operations in Afghanistan

AI does not judge whether recourse to force by anyone is justified and therefore takes no position on the legal or moral basis for the military action undertaken by the USA and its allies in Afghanistan. However, AI calls on all parties to a conflict to respect fully the rules and principles of international humanitarian law (the laws of war).

The rules that apply to the conflict currently involving forces from the USA and the UK against targets in Afghanistan said to belong to the Taliban are those regulating international armed conflicts. While the Taliban are recognized internationally only by Pakistan, they control about 90 per cent of Afghanistan and are the *de facto* government of the country. As such, they should be treated as a government for the purpose of applying the relevant laws of war, specifically those regulating international armed conflict.

There is also an internal armed conflict between the Taliban and the Northern Alliance. The relevant international humanitarian law standard for this type of conflict is Article 3 common to the four Geneva Conventions. Article 3 requires all parties to treat humanely those taking no active part, or no longer taking active part, in a conflict. It prohibits murder, cruel and degrading treatment, torture, and hostage-taking.

However, AI holds all combatants to the highest standards of international humanitarian law regarding the protection of civilians and applies the specific rules on conduct of hostilities (codified in Protocol I Additional to the Geneva Conventions) in all situations of armed conflict.

Other relevant rules are those contained in the Third Geneva Convention and relate to the treatment of prisoners of war.

Any Taliban fighter, or any member of Osama bin Laden's *al-qa'ida* organization, captured by US or UK forces must be protected as a prisoner of war. Similarly, any US or UK soldier captured by the Taliban or their allies must be treated as a prisoner of war. In particular, they should be treated humanely, they should not be forced to disclose information beyond what is provided for by the Third Geneva Convention (name, military rank, date of birth and serial number only), and should be given access to the International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC).

If any suspect of the crimes of 11 September or other similar crimes is captured in the course of military action, they should be brought to trial fairly and without recourse to the death penalty. Osama bin Laden has been publicly identified by the USA as the prime suspect for the attacks of 11 September and has been indicted in the USA in 1999 for the 1998 attacks on two US embassies in Africa, which AI has condemned as attacks against civilians. As such, he is a criminal suspect and AI calls for him to be brought to justice in accordance with international standards for fair trial, without recourse to the death penalty.

However, in addition to being a criminal suspect, Osama bin Laden is also the leader of an armed political group, *al-qa'ida*, which is believed to have been fighting on the side of the Taliban. As such, both the Taliban and members of *al-qa'ida* can be considered as belonging to the same military force. According to the rules of international humanitarian law, they are military objectives. It is not prohibited to target them, as combatants may lawfully attack enemy combatants, as long as they respect the rules on the conduct of hostilities. If captured, they would all be entitled to the status of prisoners of war. Such status would not prevent them being brought to justice for alleged war crimes, human rights violations or other offences committed before their capture.

## Australia prevents refugees from seeking asylum



Australian soldiers ride their boat past the Tampa off Christmas Island

International attention was drawn to Australia's refugee policies by the plight of 433 asylum-seekers, the majority from Afghanistan, who spent eight days in appalling conditions on a Norwegian cargo ship after being rescued in the Indian Ocean. They were the first of almost 1,000 people who were intercepted by the Australian Navy in August and September and then refused the right to claim asylum in Australia. The majority, including scores of children, were initially held on warships for several weeks, facing indefinite detention without a review by a court or any legal justification for their detention, in contravention of international law.

On 11 September, the Federal Court of Australia ruled that the 433 asylum-seekers had been illegally detained and should be allowed to claim asylum in Australia, but six days later the government won an appeal against this ruling. The asylum-seekers were finally taken to Nauru, a small and largely desolate Pacific island about 4,000 kilometres from Sydney,

or to New Zealand, for their applications to be processed. The future of those in Nauru remains uncertain, as Nauru expects them to leave after their claims are decided.

The Australian government has hastily passed new legislation aimed at preventing anyone without valid travel papers from entering Australia in order to seek asylum. The laws widen the government's powers to arbitrarily detain asylum-seekers and to take them to another country for the determination of their refugee status.

Australia's new policy towards asylum-seekers fits a pattern of continued abuse of its international obligations. Over the past 10 years, Australia has operated a draconian policy of detaining all asylum-seekers who arrive without valid travel documents until their claims are determined, a process which can take years. Australian courts are not allowed to order their release from detention or to review the merits of their claims.

REMEMBER...AI members should not take up cases from their own countries

# worldwide appeals

## UZBEKISTAN

### Risk of execution



Nikolay Ganiyev

Three men — Nikolay Ganiyev (22), Maksim Strakhov (24) and Nigmatullo Fayzullayev (26) — are in danger of execution. After international appeals on their behalf, their executions have been put on hold, so further pressure may save their lives.

Nikolay Ganiyev was sentenced to death on 29 March by Tashkent City Court for premeditated aggravated murder. He was apparently severely beaten in custody. His mother said, "I saw him handcuffed and he was hardly able to walk. It was obvious that they had beaten him." The Appeals Board rejected his appeal on 1 June, but on 1 August his mother was told that the case had been referred to the Supreme Court for reconsideration.

Maksim Strakhov and Nigmatullo Fayzullayev were sentenced to death by Tashkent City Court on 18 April for premeditated aggravated murder. The sentences were upheld on appeal in May. Maksim Strakhov was reportedly beaten by law enforcement officers for more than three days after his arrest in October 2000. Maksim Strakhov wrote in a letter to his mother: "I am a murderer, but I didn't want to kill anyone. I lost my mind." He had previously received psychiatric treatment for post-traumatic stress after military service

in Chechnya, but the court and the Appeals Board failed to take this into account. His execution was put on hold for three months by the Supreme Court, pending psychiatric tests.

*"Bullet, I pray to you not to rush  
I know that you are coming to pierce the back of my head  
and turn me into lifeless flesh.  
Rest at the end of the barrel  
you will have enough time to get drunk on my blood.  
I lived today until noon  
a couple more days will be a victory.  
So young we are, and so much evil we have done  
what a waste of a life that disappeared in the fog.  
Impatiently I wait for sleep to come,  
the chance to dream of our house,  
the flowers on the windowsill.  
Mother, you will stay in sorrow  
and pray to the angels for help."*

Poem written by Nikolay Ganiyev on death row and smuggled out

➔ Please appeal for clemency for these three men and for a moratorium on executions, to: President I. A. Karimov, President of the Republic of Uzbekistan, 700163 g. Tashkent; ul. Uzbekistanskaya, 43; Uzbekistan. Fax: +998-71-1391517.

## INDONESIA

### Torture and unlawful killing of children

Four high-school students — Frans Yanguup (15), Daud Diwitauw (16), Domi Kum (17) and Yosias Beanal (15) — were reportedly tortured by police in Papua in June 2001. They were detained after a fight during a football match in Timika town, Mimika District, Papua Province, on 16 June. According to reports, they were beaten with rattan sticks and rifle butts in a police vehicle, thrown from the top of the vehicle, forced to crawl on the ground and kicked and punched by police officers at the local police station, Mimika Baru Police Resort (Polres). They

were then taken to another police station, Mimika Police Resort (Polres), where they were reportedly beaten and forced to mimic the police by beating each other. They were released without charge on 17 June.

One day later, in Aceh Province, three captive students — Lukman (18), Azhari Iskandar (18) and Tarmizi (16) — were shot dead by police. The Police Mobile Brigade (Brimob) raided a school in Caleng, West Aceh, during a graduation ceremony, after a Brimob member was killed in an armed clash with the armed opposition group, the Free

Aceh Movement, *Gerakan Aceh Merdeka*, (GAM). Brimob took 16 students and two teachers to Krueang Sabee Police Sector (Polsek), where they were interrogated and beaten and three students were shot dead. Brimob refused to release their bodies without payment from their families.

➔ Please write calling for full, independent investigations into these two incidents, and for all those responsible to be brought to justice. Send appeals to: Prof. Dr. Yusril Izza Mahendra, Minister for Justice and Human Rights, Jl. H.R. Rasuna Said Kav. 6-7, Kuningan, Jakarta Selatan, Indonesia. Fax: +62 21 5253095/310 4149/5225036.

## USA

### Death penalty sought for juvenile



© PHOTOFEST

Joe Ward (pictured), is facing a trial in Rapides Parish, Louisiana, at which the prosecution intends to seek a death sentence. He was 17 years old at the time of the murder of which he is accused. International law prohibits the use of the death penalty on defendants who were under 18 at the time of the crime.

The USA accounts for more executions of child offenders in the past decade than have been documented in the rest of the world combined. In the last four years, such executions have occurred in the Democratic Republic of the Congo (1), Iran (3) and the USA (8). There are more than 80 prisoners on death row in the USA for crimes committed when they were 16 or 17. Two of them were prosecuted in Rapides Parish.

Joe Ward is charged with the murder of 25-year-old schoolteacher Christina Smith who was shot dead in September 2000. About six months earlier he had been released from Tallulah Correctional Center for Youth, a privatized juvenile detention facility which the *New York Times* described in 1998 as "so rife with brutality, cronyism and neglect that many legal experts say it is the worst in the nation". In late 1999, the facility was taken back into state control after revelations of the routine physical, sexual and psychological abuse of inmates. Joe Ward, who was held in the centre for about a year for joyriding in his mother's car, was among those allegedly subjected to serious ill-treatment.

Although Joe Ward is not scheduled to go to trial until February 2002, important pre-trial hearings are due in the coming weeks.

➔ Please send appeals, acknowledging the seriousness of the crime, expressing sympathy for the family and friends of Christina Smith, but urging the prosecutor to comply with international law and drop his pursuit of the death penalty for Joe Ward, to: Assistant District Attorney Mike Shannon, PO Drawer 1472, Alexandria, LA 71309, USA. Fax: +1 318 449 5455.

## DEMOCRATIC REPUBLIC OF THE CONGO

### Child soldier condemned to death

Nanasi Kisala's life has been dominated by the prolonged and bitter war in the Democratic Republic of the Congo. Born in 1984, he became a child soldier in the government's army. He was arrested in October 2000, reportedly on charges of manslaughter.

On 27 April 2001, at the age of 17, he was sentenced to death, although international law prohibits the use of the death penalty on defendants who were under 18 at the time of the crime. The court that sentenced him — the *Cour d'ordre militaire*, which is a military tribunal — does not meet international fair trial standards. There is no right of appeal against the sentences of the court and, although the President has the power to commute death sentences, in practice people sentenced to death have been executed within days or even hours of their trial.

After sentencing, Nanasi Kisala was transferred from Mbandaka to the capital, Kinshasa, where he is held at the main prison in a block with at least 60 adult prisoners condemned to death in previous trials.

Although no state executions have been reported in 2001, death sentences continue to be regularly handed down by military courts after unfair trials, despite repeated assurances from the government — most recently in March and September 2001 — that it is committed to a moratorium on executions.

➔ Please write, calling for the death sentence on Nanasi Kisala to be commuted, for an end to the practice of sentencing child soldiers to death and for a moratorium on all executions. Send appeals to: Professor Ntumba Luaba, Minister of Human Rights, Ministry of Human Rights, 33/C Boulevard du 30 juin, Kinshasa-Gombe, Democratic Republic of the Congo.

## NEW ANTI-TORTURE TREATY AT CRITICAL POINT

Negotiations on a new Optional Protocol to the UN Convention against Torture are at a critical point. The new Protocol aims to establish a system of independent, international visits to prisons, police stations and detention centres.

AI's five key principles to guarantee that the proposed system will be effective and independent remain in the balance: there are still at least three alternative drafts on the table. The next session of the UN Working Group is in January 2002, so now is the time to remind your government of the tremendous effect the Protocol could have in preventing torture in custody.

For further details and campaigning ideas, see *Time to take a stand on the prevention of torture* (AI Index: IOR 51/007/2001).

## POLITICAL RIGHTS FOR WOMEN IN KUWAIT

A new challenge to the constitutionality of Kuwait's election law, which prevents women voting, was brought before the courts in October. A decision is due in November and Kuwaiti women hope it will at last give them the right to vote. Many will go to registration centres in February 2002 to try and register to vote, continuing their struggle for political rights.

## REPORTS AND BRIEFINGS



Justice for torture victims, no impunity for torturers (AI Index: ACT 40/022/2001)



End impunity: Justice for victims of torture (AI Index: ACT 40/024/2001)

The Backlash — Human rights at risk throughout the world (AI Index: ACT 30/027/2001)

Afghanistan: Protect Afghan civilians and refugees (AI Index: ASA 11/012/2001)

Central Asia: No excuse for escalating human rights violations (AI Index: EUR 04/002/2001)

Amnesty International's position on arms transfers and military aid to Afghanistan (AI Index: ACT 30/033/2001)

# 'Street children' have rights too

## Homeless children let down by Spanish authorities

All over the world children suffer violations of their human rights against which they have little or no defence. "Street children", without the protection of parents or adult community, are particularly vulnerable to victimization and abuse.

A 16-year-old boy was reportedly "slapped around hard" by Spanish police officers in Melilla, a Spanish enclave in North Africa, before being forcibly returned to the Moroccan frontier in late July. He was one of a group of children being expelled from Melilla, ostensibly to be reunited with their families. In fact he and three other children found their way back to the city on their own, either because their families had not been traced or because they had already been abandoned.

Many children have been directly and illegally expelled from both Melilla and Ceuta, another Spanish enclave bordering Morocco. The practice was officially brought to an end in March 1999, following a judicial complaint by three local police officers. The officers alleged "serious irregularities" in the detention of undocumented Moroccan children by the police, including physical abuse. They alleged that minors were detained for several hours in a police van without seats, windows, ventilation or even water, in the company of adults, and sexually abused by at least one officer. According to some allegations, made anonymously by police officers, children were also beaten with truncheons. There are also reports that Moroccan police have beaten children handed over to them by the Spanish police before detaining them in cells or releasing them back on to the streets.

However, the forcible expulsions appear to have resumed. In July AI wrote to the Spanish

government, expressing concern at reports that Ceuta and Melilla were seeking to be exempted from parts of Spanish legislation regulating the rights and duties of foreigners, which includes the obligation of the authorities to protect and care for unaccompanied foreign minors and to grant residence permits, within a period of months, to those they have not been able to reunite with their families. AI also recalled Spain's international obligations to ensure that unaccompanied children enjoy all the rights guaranteed under the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child.

Children are living in the streets, port installations and in underground or hillside tunnels in Ceuta and in Melilla. Under Spanish law the children must be housed, fed and educated by the local authority. However, Ceuta's only reception centre for "street children" was recently described as "lacking minimum standards of hygiene". It was said to be infested with lice and rats and lacking sheets, beds and blankets. There have been cases of children staying there catching contagious diseases and being physically ill-treated, not only by other inmates but also by carers at the centre.

The Spanish authorities – as well as the autonomous governments of Ceuta and Melilla – must abide by their national and international obligations to protect all children within their jurisdiction.

Ceuta and Melilla must be given the resources to care for each child, and to examine each case thoroughly and on an individual basis, ensuring also that the child's views are taken into account, before any decision is taken to remove that child from Spanish territory.



Moroccan children sleeping on the streets of Ceuta, the Spanish enclave in North Africa

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could investigate each killing, establish the truth and recommend measures to limit the loss of life. They could stand at checkpoints and give protection by monitoring the action of security forces. They could ensure the passage of ambulances and the sick. They could guarantee that villages and towns are kept open, restoring some normality to life in the Occupied Territories. They could patrol the roads of the Occupied Territories and by their presence offer protection to Israeli and Palestinian civilians who travel along them.

A permanent and durable peace can only be built on a foundation of human rights. It is time the international community acted decisively to this end. The past year has shown more clearly than ever that if human rights are sacrificed in the search for peace and security, there will be no peace and no security.

See AI's report, *Israel/Occupied Territories/Palestinian Authority: Broken Lives – A year of intifada* (AI Index: MDE 15/083/2001), published 13 November 2001.

## UK child soldiers in combat

The UK is recruiting children – under 18-year-olds – into its armed forces, and is sending them on military operations. Seventeen-year-old Jodie Sewell was on board *HMS Illustrious*, a Navy warship, as it made its way towards the Afghan conflict.

Since November 2000, when AI published a report on the issue and called on the UK government to change its policy,\* AI has also raised the case of Craig Sewell, a 17-year-old deployed in Macedonia with NATO troops. The UK has 12 people under the age of 18 serving with NATO forces in the Balkans.

The UK relies on school leavers to swell the ranks of its armed forces and is the only country in Europe which routinely sends under-18s into armed conflict situations. AI believes that no one under the age of 18 should be deployed in hostilities irrespective of whether or not the recruit wants to go, and that such recruitment and deployment put at risk the right to life and the physical and mental integrity of children.

\* *United Kingdom: U-18s – Report on recruitment and deployment of child soldiers* (AI Index: EUR 45/057/2000).



Children abducted by UNITA arrive at Luanda airport after their release

## INNOCENT VICTIMS OF ANGOLA'S CRUEL WAR

In May 2001, forces of the armed opposition Union for the Total Independence of Angola (UNITA) attacked the Children's Town orphanage outside the town of Caxito, 60 kilometres from the capital, Luanda. They abducted 60 children – nine girls and 51 boys – aged between 10 and 18. The children were forced to work as porters for the troops, carrying heavy loads for 12 hours every day. Twenty days later, following worldwide condemnation, UNITA handed the children over to the Catholic mission in Ambaca, Uige province, about 250 kilometres north-east of Caxito. The Angolan Armed Forces took charge of the children and flew them to Luanda the next day.

It was not the first time that UNITA had attacked a children's home. In February and July 2000 it attacked two such centres in the province of Huambo, in the central highlands. In the first attack, six children were reportedly killed. In the second, 21 children, aged between 11 and 18 years, were abducted. Four eventually escaped; the other 17 have not been seen since and their whereabouts remain unknown.

As is so often the case in such brutal conflicts, the children of Angola have suffered disproportionately in the civil war which has devastated the country almost continuously since its independence from Portugal in 1975. They have been casual victims of the fighting as well as targets. Their most basic human rights have been violated. Their physical, emotional and mental development has been damaged.

In the last decade tens of thousands of children have lost their lives in indiscriminate bombings and many more have been killed or maimed by between 10 and 20 million landmines estimated to have been scattered throughout the country. The armed conflict has forced hundreds of thousands of children to flee their homes and made many orphans. During two weeks in July alone, about 120 children reportedly died of starvation in the province of Malanje. Most of them were internally displaced from other provinces. There are an estimated 4,000 "street children" in Luanda.

Both parties to the conflict, the Angolan government and UNITA, have been responsible for abusing children's human rights, failing to protect them and disregarding their needs. The Angolan government has forcibly recruited boys of 18 and under into the armed forces in violation of the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child which Angola ratified in 1990. In June, in the city of Kuito in the central highlands, children as young as 15 were reportedly rounded up in schools and the streets and forcibly recruited into the armed forces. Those who resisted were beaten.

UNITA has abducted children of both sexes and used them as carriers of food and weapons. The older boys are forced to join its forces as combatants, while the girls are used as sex slaves. Since the resumption of the war in 1998, after four years of uneasy peace, UNITA is said to have abducted hundreds of children, most of whom remain in captivity. Although it is difficult to obtain figures, in 1998 Save the Children, an international non-governmental organization, estimated that there were about 7,000 child soldiers aged 15 or younger, in Angola, fighting on both sides of the conflict.



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