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ROMANIA: @BROKEN COMMITMENTS TO HUMAN RIGHTS

BUCHAREST -- Five years after the overthrow of President Nicolae Ceausescu -- and despite assurances to the international community -- serious human rights violations persist in Romania.

On the eve of the International Seminar on Tolerance, Amnesty International has issued a report condemning restrictions on the right to freedom of expression, imprisonment solely for homosexuality, torture and ill-treatment of detainees and a nationwide pattern of police failure to protect the Roma minority from racist violence.

In spite of the government's assurances to the international community -- including the Council of Europe -- that it is committed to upholding its international human rights obligations - and improvements in the human rights situation since December 1989 - Amnesty International continues to receive reports of human rights violations in Romania.

The human rights organization has documented cases of prisoners of conscience, torture and ill-treatment of detainees, death in detention in suspicious circumstances. Prisoners of conscience have included people who peacefully exercised their right to freedom of expression, those who were imprisoned for consensual homosexual acts between adults in private, and Roma who were detained apparently solely because of their ethnic origin.

While the number of prisoners of conscience is lower than in the years prior to the overthrow of Ceausescu, reports indicate that torture, beatings and other forms of ill-treatment of detainees continue to be widespread.

"The rise of nationalism in Romania since 1990 has had a particular impact on the Roma," Amnesty International says. "The impunity of police officers and a nationwide pattern of inadequate police protection of Roma lives and property has encouraged further acts of racist violence", the organization adds.

The Romanian authorities have failed to take all necessary measures to ensure the rights and freedoms guaranteed by the Constitution and international treaties that apply to everyone without distinction of any kind.

"The Romanian Government has assured the international community that it is committed to upholding its international human rights obligations. However, it has failed to reflect this commitment in its national political institutions," Amnesty International says. The human rights organization sees this as an essential step towards legislative reform, and towards ensuring that public and law enforcement officials respect human rights.

"Police officers have traditionally placed the protection of state interests above the universally recognized rights of individuals. Education and training designed to promote a human rights culture among public officials and law enforcement officers are therefore imperative," Amnesty International says.

The problem is further compounded by a pattern of impunity of law-enforcement officers responsible for human rights violations. International standards -- which require prompt, thorough and impartial investigations into allegations of human rights violations -- are seldom fulfilled.

Investigations in Romania are often unnecessarily obstructed and prolonged by inadequate methods of gathering evidence. Prosecutors do not exercise sufficient control over police officials who participate in investigations affecting their colleagues, and evidence in favour of a suspected police officer tends to be given more weight than evidence that supports the complainant's allegations.

Amnesty International welcomes the cooperation and information it has received from the Romanian authorities -- particularly from the office of the General Prosecutor. National and local authorities have engaged voluntarily in an open dialogue with the organization. However, the Romanian Intelligence Service (RSI) has in certain cases considered monitoring of human rights as a threat to national security. Several people who contacted Amnesty International about human rights violations were subsequently harassed and intimidated by RSI officials.

Among a series of recommendations included in its report, Amnesty International calls on the Romanian Government to establish a public commission of inquiry which satisfies international standards, and to initiate a review of the laws and other rules governing the protection of human rights. "We also urge the Council of Europe to ensure that Romania implements the reforms recommended by the Parliamentary Assembly to bring Romanian law and practice into line with the European Convention for the Protection of Human Rights and Fundamental Freedoms (ECHR)," Amnesty International says.

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