

January 2000 Newsletter

Colombia

Displaced community prepares to return

Two years after being driven from their homes, the people of the Cacarica River Basin are preparing to return and rebuild their lives. After months of enforced inactivity, living in temporary, overcrowded shelters, without any privacy, they are determined to overcome the dangers they face in order to regain their lands.

About 3,800 people were forcibly displaced in a joint army-paramilitary operation in January 1997. They were refused help when they turned to locally stationed troops, and were told: "the paramilitaries are in charge of the operation." Most sought refuge in the towns of Turbo and Bocas del Atrato in the northwestern department of Antioquia. A group that fled to Panama was later repatriated by Colombian and Panamanian authorities, in violation of their rights as refugees.

Approximately 2,100 men, women and children insist that they will reclaim their lands. In October 1999 a group of 80 people travelled to the region to prepare for the return of the community to two settlement camps – Nueva Vida (New Life) and Esperanza en Dios (Hope in God). Constant death threats from paramilitary groups, together with the presence of guerrilla forces in the region, raise serious concerns for the group's safety.

The community's return takes place in the midst of war, and paramilitary and guerrilla forces are active in the Cacarica River Basin – an area of economic and military strategic importance. Community members hold the Colombian authorities responsible for their safety. They want specific measures to be implemented, including action by the security forces to prevent incursions by army-backed paramilitary groups or guerrilla forces. They want civilian law enforcement agencies to be on hand to help prevent human rights abuses by the armed groups. They are also demanding that those responsible for the killing and "disappearance" of at least 70 members of their community be brought to justice: "How can I live in peace if my oppressors remain free?", asks one.

"This is a struggle for what we want to be and for what they will not let us be", says one father of four, talking about the land he was forced to abandon. "It is land which offers us everything a family needs; but there are those that stand in our way."

The people of the Cacarica River Basin are asking for international help and support for their return. Raising the profile of this community can help to ensure their safety. Both sides in Colombia's armed conflict must know that the eyes of the outside world are upon them.

You can help, by expressing concern for the safety of the displaced community and calling on the Colombian authorities to take all measures deemed appropriate by the community itself, to guarantee its safety. Send appeals to: Señor Presidente Andrés Pastrana, Presidente de la República, Palacio de Nariño, Carrera 8 No. 7-26, Bogotá, Colombia (fax: +57 1 286 7434/286 6842).

Write also to your own government, raising your concerns for the displaced community as it returns to its lands, and urging it to monitor efforts made by the Colombian authorities to guarantee its safety. Send messages of support to the Displaced communities of the Cacarica River Basin, c/o Comisión Intercongregacional de Justicia y Paz, AA 31861, Bogotá,

Israel and the occupied territories

Demolition of palestinian homes

Yusuf Atrash, his wife Suhur and their 10 children watched in despair in June 1998 as the house they had built on their own land near Hebron in Khirbet Qilqes was destroyed for the third time. The Israeli soldiers who oversaw the demolition beat Yusuf and Suhur and dragged them across the ground. The family was left destitute and is now living in a tent.

Many thousands of Palestinian families have suffered similar fates since 1967, when Israel occupied the West Bank and the Gaza Strip. Palestinians are systematically denied permission to build homes, even on land that has belonged to their families for generations, so they build "illegally". Planning prohibitions are then strictly enforced, resulting in demolition orders. Many owners face the additional punishment of substantial fines for illegal development and a bill to cover the costs of demolition.

Israelis are treated differently. They have few problems obtaining building permits and even if they build homes without authorization, their houses are rarely, if ever, demolished.

Hopes that demolitions of Palestinian homes would end with the signing of the 1993 Oslo peace agreement have proved unfounded. Since 1995 around 5,000 people, including 2,000 children, have been made homeless by the bulldozers. The policy has continued under the new government of Prime Minister Ehud Barak. In October 1999, for example, two houses in East Jerusalem where families had lived for years were destroyed. In East Jerusalem alone, 10,000 homes, housing a third of the Palestinian population, are threatened by demolition orders.

By targeting Palestinians almost exclusively for house demolitions, land confiscation and denial of building permits, Israel is breaching international humanitarian and human rights treaties that it has promised to uphold. The policy should be ended immediately.

For further information, see Israel and the Occupied Territories: Demolition and dispossession – the destruction of Palestinian houses (AI Index: MDE 15/59/99).

Solomon islands

Ethnic violence reaches unprecedented levels

An International Peace Monitoring Force coordinated by the Commonwealth arrived in the Solomon Islands, Southwest Pacific, in October 1999, to help end violent ethnic unrest on the main island of Guadalcanal.

At least 13 people are known to have been killed and at least 11 reported to be missing, but the real figures are likely to be far higher. Several hundred houses have either been burned down or looted. Hundreds of armed men, calling themselves the 'Isatambu Freedom Movement', have been terrorizing mostly Malaitan settlers across rural Guadalcanal since September 1998. More than 32,000 people, predominantly from Malaita Province, have since left their homes and villages on Guadalcanal. "Scared villagers and displaced families have given horrific accounts of both indiscriminate police shootings and cruel killings by armed groups known as 'militants'," said AI's Australia-Pacific researcher.

In one attack attributed to 'militants', fleeing children saw their father hacked to death when he protected his injured three-year-old daughter from the blows of machetes, covering her with his own body.

There have also been reports of excessive force being used by police. In September 1999, gunfire from a police boat destroyed the roof of a leaf hut, and eyewitnesses told AI how two unarmed teenage boys were killed by police bullets fired from the same boat. One of them was shot in the back.

AI delegates who visited the country in September found hundreds of families who had fled from such shootings sheltering in remote locations. Many had no access to medical assistance or emergency food supplies.

AI is calling for independent and impartial investigations into human rights abuses committed by all those involved in the conflict. By November, one police officer had been charged with the murder of a suspected 'militant', but no other deaths had been properly investigated.

For further information, see Solomon Islands: No end to ethnic violence (ASA 43/01/00).

Morocco

Hopes raised for protection of human rights

A series of significant human rights developments has taken place in Morocco and Western Sahara since the accession of King Mohammed VI to the throne in July, following the death of his father King Hassan II.

In August the new King ordered the establishment of a commission to decide on compensation claims by victims of arbitrary detention and families of those who had “disappeared”. Widely welcomed in September was the King’s decision to authorize the return to Morocco of Abraham Serfaty (see photo) after eight years’ forcible exile in France. After 17 years as a prisoner of conscience, the prominent left-wing critic was expelled from Morocco in 1991 following false claims from the authorities that he was not a Moroccan citizen. Abraham Serfaty has never been allowed to legally challenge the expulsion ruling, which has still not been overturned.

Despite these and other recent positive moves, the Moroccan authorities’ human rights record in Western Sahara has not seen any improvements. In September security forces violently broke up a sit-in by Sahrawi students in Laayoune, and, several days later, a march protesting at the brutal manner in which the sit-in had been dispersed. Dozens of Sahrawis were severely beaten, and many sustained serious injuries, including broken bones and teeth. There were also reports of torture and ill-treatment in custody. Police, in some cases accompanied by civilians, also reportedly attacked homes and businesses in predominantly Sahrawi areas of the city. Protests against these actions and the detention of tens of Sahrawis following the disturbances have continued.

AI welcomes the establishment of a commission to deal with claims of “disappearance” and arbitrary detention, but continues to urge the authorities to fully resolve the cases of all the 450 or so mostly Sahrawi “disappeared” and to bring the perpetrators of the “disappearances” and arbitrary detentions to justice.

Burundi

260,000 forced into regroupment camps

Following weeks of increasing attacks on the capital by Hutu-dominated armed opposition groups, over 260,000 Burundians (mainly Hutu) living around the capital, Bujumbura, in Rural Bujumbura province, were forcibly relocated into around 50 camps. This took place in September 1999, bringing the total of displaced people in the province to 320,000. The main aim appeared to be to facilitate counter-insurgency operations against the armed opposition groups; a strategy that the Burundian government has used widely since 1996.

Conditions in the camps are appalling; they are overcrowded, with poor hygiene and little or no infrastructure. Some camps have no water, and the nearest clean water may be kilometres away. In the first week of the regroupment at least 30 people, mostly women and children, were reported to have died primarily as a result of dehydration. As little or no medical care is available, many more deaths are likely.

Some sites are very isolated and accessible only on foot, making access and the provision of humanitarian assistance very difficult. In October, following the killing of two UN workers, humanitarian operations were drastically scaled down and in November 1999 virtually no aid was being provided.

Serious human rights violations are reported to have occurred in the camps, which are under military control. Members of the armed forces claim that armed opposition groups have infiltrated the camps, which, if true, further endangers the lives of civilians. Up to 36 unarmed civilians, including 22 women, were executed by members of the armed forces near the Kibembe regroupment camp on 22 October. The government claims that those killed were members of the armed opposition.

AI has also received reports of rape, arrest and “disappearance” occurring in the camps.

You can help by urging the authorities to end the practice of forcibly relocating the civilian population into camps, and calling for the human rights and humanitarian organizations to have immediate and free access to the camps.

Send appeals to: Lieutenant-Col. Alfred Nkurunziza, Minister of Defence, Ministère de la Défense Nationale, BP 1870 Bujumbura, République du Burundi (fax: +257 22 74 90).

Worldwide appeals - January 2000

Myanmar

Student given 59 years for organizing protests

Thet Win Aung is currently serving a 59-year prison sentence for organizing peaceful student protests. He is reported to have been tortured immediately following his arrest, and there are concerns for his health.

Since 1988, when he was a high-school student, he has taken part in organizing student protests against the government in Myanmar. Although students are not officially allowed to form unions, he became Vice-General Secretary of the unauthorized Basic Education Student Union (BESU) in 1989.

He was dismissed from school and imprisoned in September 1991 for nine months because of his BESU activities. During this period of detention he was reportedly severely tortured.

Following his release he became a leading member of the All Burma Federation of Student Unions, the unauthorized umbrella organization for student unions in Myanmar. He again became involved in publishing leaflets and organizing demonstrations, and was forced to go into hiding after the authorities tried to arrest him in 1994. He nevertheless took part in student demonstrations in December 1996 and, in 1998, helped to organize student protests against the poor quality of education and denial of human rights.

Thet Win Aung was finally arrested in October 1998. In January 1999 he was sentenced to 52 years' imprisonment, which was increased to 59 years after further interrogation. He is currently detained in Kalay Prison, Sagaing Division.

+Please write, asking for his immediate and unconditional release as a prisoner of conscience. Send appeals to: Lt General Khin Nyunt, Secretary 1, State Peace and Development Council, c/o Ministry of Defence, Signal Pagoda Road, Yangon, Union of Myanmar.

Cameroon

Five held for several years without charge or trial

Five men from Cameroon's English-speaking minority have been held without charge or trial for several years. In September 1995 Abel Acha Apong, a technician, and Chrispus Kenebie, John Kudi and Jack Njenta, all farmers, were arrested in Nkapa, some 20 kilometres north of Douala; Arrey Etchu Wilson, a driver, was arrested in Douala in February 1997.

All five were detained because they collected signatures for an unofficial referendum on independence for Cameroon's two English-speaking provinces, North-West and South-West Provinces. The referendum was organized in September 1995 by the Southern Cameroons National Council, a group which advocates independence for the two provinces.

Abel Acha Apong, Chrispus Kenebie, John Kudi, Jack Njenta and Arrey Etchu Wilson have not been officially informed of the reasons for their arrest, and have reportedly been denied access to lawyers and relatives.

The five detainees are held in the Central Prison, Nkondengui, in the capital, Yaoundé. Conditions in the prison, as in other prisons throughout Cameroon, are extremely harsh, with severe overcrowding, and inadequate food and medical care, resulting in a high mortality rate among prisoners.

AI believes that Abel Acha Apong, Chrispus Kenebie, John Kudi, Jack Njenta and Arrey Etchu Wilson may be prisoners of conscience who have been detained solely because of their political activities and have not used or advocated violence.

+Please write, expressing concern that Abel Acha Apong, Chrispus Kenebie, John Kudi, Jack Njenta and Arrey Etchu Wilson have been detained for several years without charge or trial; calling for their immediate and unconditional release unless they are to be promptly charged with a recognizably criminal offence and tried in accordance with international standards of fair trial; and urging that they be held in humane conditions. Send letters to: M. Laurent Ezzo, Ministre de la Justice et Garde des Sceaux, Ministère de la Justice, 1000 Yaoundé, République du Cameroun (fax: + 00 237 23 00 05).

Turkmenistan

Imprisonment of Jehovah's witnesses

Roman Sidelnikov refused to accept his call-up papers for military service. He informed the authorities that, as a Jehovah's Witness, his faith did not permit him to bear arms or swear allegiance to the Turkmen army. This was in April 1998; by the end of June he was serving a two-year sentence for evading military service. He is held in a prison in Chardvez near the border with Uzbekistan.

In May 1998, Jehovah's Witness Oleg Voronin was taken by force to a military prison in Gushgi after refusing to perform military service on grounds of conscience. According to eyewitness reports, he was then severely beaten. In September 1998 unofficial sources reported that Oleg Voronin had been sentenced to five and a half years' imprisonment for the military crime of desertion.

19-year-old Kurban Zakirov was first arrested in January 1999 while discussing the bible with fellow Jehovah's Witnesses in a private home. He was held in custody for 30 days for participating in an illegal religious meeting. Shortly after his release he was told to collect his call-up papers. He refused and, on April 23 1999, he was imprisoned for two years.

Military service in Turkmenistan is compulsory for all men when they reach 18 years of age. There is no civilian alternative for those who refuse to perform this military service because of religious, moral, ethical or other objections.

+Please write, calling for the immediate and unconditional release of Roman Sidelnikov, Oleg Voronin and Kurban Zakirov as prisoners of conscience, and urging the Turkmen authorities to introduce a civilian alternative to compulsory military service. Send appeals to: President of Turkmenistan, Saparmurad Atayevich Niyazov, 744000 g. Ashgabat, Apparat Prezidenta, Prezidentu Turkmenistana NIYAZOVU S.A., Turkmenistan (fax: + 993 12 or 7 3632, then 35 51 12).

January Focus 2000

1999 Worldwide Appeal updates

encouraging words...

'I wish that I could meet each and everyone of you personally, to say thank you for the support you gave me during my darkest days in prison.'

Antoinette Chahin was arrested, tortured and sentenced to death for a murder she had nothing to do with. She still suffers nightmares and is anxious about the future. She visited the International Secretariat and AI United Kingdom in October to meet some of those who had campaigned for her release from a Lebanese prison. She spoke movingly of her ordeal; of her arrest, of the physical and mental torture inflicted upon her by her captors, and of her hopes and fears now she has been released.

Antoinette Chahin featured in a Worldwide Appeal (WWA) in August 1997. She had been sentenced to death in January 1997 – this was subsequently commuted to life imprisonment with hard labour – on charges of involvement in a murder. The primary evidence against her was the confession of her two co-defendants, allegedly extracted under torture. They later claimed that they never knew Antoinette Chahin.

A medical examination eight days after her arrest in June 1994 stated that she suffered from bruises on her arms where she had been suspended from the ceiling, a large bruise on the left foot and ankle, and swelling in her right foot from scalding with hot water.

She was finally given a retrial which started on 23 June 1998 and, a year later, she was acquitted by the Criminal Court of Cassation. No investigation was ever carried out into her torture.

As well as the thousands of AI members who wrote in response to the WWA, AI groups in Canada, France, Japan and Morocco worked tirelessly on Antoinette Chahin's case. In a letter to AI, she wrote: "You were my light in the darkness of my jail, you were my hope that pushed me to survive."

Antoinette Chahin was not the only person to have been helped by WWAs in 1999; see overleaf for some of the many successful outcomes of the year. In the Democratic Republic of the Congo (DRC), for example, Mukobo Putu was spared from execution at the last minute when an amazed senior government official took a couple of sackfuls of letters from AI members down to the prison to meet him. The President of the DRC has since said that there is a moratorium on executions pending discussion on abolition of the death penalty.

Two Zimbabwean journalists visited the IS in March 1999. They had been harassed and tortured and were the subject of a WWA earlier that month. They told staff at the IS: "The ordeal we went through while we were in the hands of the military is something unspeakable and very shocking. We have managed to regain our strength, and take this opportunity to thank AI and the Medical Foundation for Victims of Torture for the second to none assistance that was extended to us."

Elsewhere the news was less positive. In Colombia, human rights defenders continued to be harassed, and those responsible for extrajudicial executions and "disappearances" continued to enjoy impunity. In the Philippines Dante Piadong, Jesus Morillos and Archie Bulan (WWAs, April 1999) were executed on 8 July. Archie Bulan's last words were reportedly: "President Estrada, I hope this is the last execution." Tragically, it was not, and another man was executed in October.

In Turkey, prisoner of conscience Akin Birdal – subject of two WWAs last year – was released on medical grounds in September. Sadly his conviction has not been overturned and his sentence has been suspended for six months. In Tunisia, human rights groups welcomed the release of 600 political prisoners in September, but remained concerned that Abdelmoumen Belanes (WWAs, November 1999) was not among those released.

Four WWAs on which members should continue to work appear on the following pages. Full details of all 1999 WWAs will appear in the next issue of AIWorks later this year.

[quote at side - 'You were my light in the darkness of my jail, you were my hope that pushed me to survive']

[quotes at side - 'The battle so far has been a hard one – sometimes lonely and sometimes frustrating – but counting on the support of people like yourselves we are confident that we shall triumph'
Mark Chavundaka and Ray Choto

'I would like to thank Amnesty International with my whole heart for getting involved in my fate. Being aware of your support, I am able more easily to bear the horror of my imprisonment... Thank you!' Grigory Pasko]

Malaysia February 1999

Dr Munawar Anees

Prisoner of conscience Dr Munawar Anees was released on 18 January 1999. He had been imprisoned as a result of the Malaysian authorities' investigations against former Deputy Prime Minister Anwar Ibrahim. He was sentenced in September 1998 to six months' imprisonment on the basis of a confession reportedly extracted under torture, that he had "allowed Anwar Ibrahim to sodomize him".

Dr Munawar Anees, a Pakistan national and former speech-writer for Anwar Ibrahim, was arrested at his house in Kuala Lumpur on 14 September 1998. He was taken to a secret detention centre where he was reportedly punched, humiliated, deprived of sleep and forced to confess to a homosexual relationship with Anwar Ibrahim. He was also denied adequate medical attention for a serious heart complaint.

He was held incommunicado under the draconian Internal Security Act, which allows for detention without charge or trial.

Dr Munawar Anees was represented at his trial by a police-appointed lawyer who entered a guilty plea, but Dr Munawar Anees appealed against his conviction and sentence on the basis that his confession was not made voluntarily.

AI believes that the charges laid against Dr Munawar Anees were politically motivated, and considered him a prisoner of conscience on this basis. Whatever the circumstances, however, AI would consider anyone imprisoned solely for homosexual acts between consenting adults in private to be a prisoner of conscience.

Thanks to all those who sent appeals on his behalf.

Trinidad and Tobago September 1999

Indravani Pamela Ramjattan

In October 1999, Trinidad and Tobago's Court of Appeal overturned Indravani Pamela Ramjattan's murder conviction and reduced the charge to manslaughter. The Court based its decision on a psychiatrist's report that stated she was suffering from "battered women's syndrome" at the time her common law husband was murdered. The Court ruled that Pamela Ramjattan must serve another five years.

She was convicted of involvement in the murder of her abusive husband, Alexander Jordan, in 1991. During the 11 years they lived together, she was subjected to appalling domestic violence which included his beating her, threatening to shoot her, and repeatedly raping her.

Pamela Ramjattan claims she was being held against her will at the time of the murder and had endured more than a week of extreme physical and mental abuse. Despite the circumstances of the case, in May 1995 Pamela Ramjattan was convicted of involvement in Alexander Jordan's murder and sentenced to death. Death by hanging is the mandatory sentence for all persons convicted of murder in Trinidad and Tobago.

This is believed to be the first time a Trinidad and Tobago court has accepted "battered women's syndrome" as a consideration in a murder trial.

Democratic Republic of the Congo

May 1999

Mukobo Putu

Mukobo Putu was at risk of imminent execution when he was made the subject of a WWA. He had been arrested in connection with shootings that took place in Kinshasa, Democratic Republic of the Congo (DRC), on 2 July 1998, resulting in the deaths of at least six civilians and two members of the Congolese security forces. Less than three weeks later he was sentenced to death by the Military Order Court, having been convicted of murder and plotting to overthrow President Laurent-Désiré Kabila.

Mukobo Putu is still in prison on death row, but has not been executed. During a recent visit to Kinshasa, AI delegates were told that so many sackfuls of mail on his case had arrived at the presidency that a senior government official had visited the prison where Mukobo Putu was held in order to establish why AI had lobbied so hard on his behalf.

Mukobo Putu's request for presidential pardon had been refused, but sources in Kinshasa informed AI that his life was spared by the enormous amount of letters that arrived shortly afterwards.

Zimbabwe March 1999

Mark Chavundaka and Ray Choto

Mark Chavundaka and Ray Choto, two journalists working for The Standard newspaper, were arrested on 19 January 1999 after reporting that an alleged plot to overthrow the government had been foiled. The two men were taken to a detention centre outside Harare, where they were beaten, given electric shocks and submerged in water with their heads wrapped in plastic bags. They were also threatened with death by their military interrogators and told that their families would also be tortured.

Both men were released on bail on 21 January following national and international protests on their behalf, but no independent, impartial investigation had been launched into their allegations of torture by the time of writing.

In March they travelled to London, United Kingdom, under the auspices of AI, to receive counselling from the Medical Foundation for Victims of Torture. They returned to Zimbabwe in early May to attend a court hearing. Their bail conditions were subsequently eased and remaining security conditions – such as surrender of passports and regular reporting to the police – were lifted. A new trial date has now been set for 5 January 2000.

Since returning to Zimbabwe, both men continued with their work at The Standard. Mark Chavundaka was awarded the Nieman Fellowship, which has enabled him to travel to the USA for nine months to study at Harvard University, and Ray Choto has been elected Secretary General of the newly-formed Independent Journalists Association of Zimbabwe.

Israel May 1999

Hassan Muhammad Sa'id and `Abdeh Qasem Malkani

Hassan Muhammad Sa'id, aged 75, and his wife, `Abdeh Qasem Malkani, aged 70, were finally released from Khiam Detention Centre. Hassan Muhammad Sa'id was released on 1 July 1999, and `Abdeh Qasem Malkani was released on 8 November.

The couple had been held without charge or trial in Khiam Detention Centre in Israeli-occupied southern Lebanon. They were arrested when the South Lebanese Army (SLA) stormed their home in al-Qaseir in September 1998.

The couple were initially taken to Kafer Kila security centre and transferred to Khiam Detention Centre shortly afterwards. Their detention is thought to be linked to their son's refusal to be conscripted into the SLA, Israel's client militia in southern Lebanon.

In November 1998 their son, Muhammad Hassan Sa'id, said: "My father has never held a gun in his life, but he insisted on staying in his village because he refused to be driven out of his home by occupation forces. He and my mother were subjected to all types of threats, from exile to destroying their house, before they were kidnapped."

`Abdeh Qasem Malkani suffers from chronic abdominal pain and rheumatoid arthritis. Hassan Muhammad Sa'id has high blood pressure and dyspepsia.

Thanks to all those who wrote on their behalf.

Cameroon February 1999

Nana Koulagna

Prisoner of conscience Nana Koulagna was provisionally released probably in July.

Before parliamentary elections in May 1997, Nana Koulagna – a former opposition member of the National Assembly in Cameroon – conducted an election campaign in Mayo-Rey Division, North Province, on behalf of the Union nationale pour la démocratie et le progrès (UNDP), National Union for Democracy and Progress. On 12 May 1997 he and other UNDP members were attacked by the private militia of the traditional ruler, the lamido, of Rey Bouba. Two UNDP members and three members of the militia reportedly died in the confrontation. Nana Koulagna and 15 other UNDP members and

supporters were detained, but no member of the private militia was arrested. All but Nana Koulagna and six others were subsequently released without charge.

The judicial authorities in Garoua later ordered Nana Koulagna's release without charge, yet he remained in administrative detention in Garoua Central Prison until October 1998, when he and the six others were charged by a military tribunal with murder, arson, looting, illegal possession of firearms and other offences related to the events which took place in May 1997. The charges against Nana Koulagna remain, despite his release.

Democratic Republic of the Congo

September 1999

Bonne-Année Nguba Hamuli

Bonne-Année Nguba Hamuli was released without charge from the main prison in Kinshasa in June or July. Unfortunately this information was only passed to AI long after the publication of the September WWAs in which he featured. However, there can be no doubt that all the letters generated by the appeal can only have helped the plight of other children languishing in jail, without charge or trial, in the DRC. Bonne-Année Nguba Hamuli was a 14-year-old soldier who was serving in the Congolese army when he was arrested in February 1998. He was never charged with any offence.

He had been informed that he was to stand trial before the Military Order Court, a court in which proceedings have consistently contravened international standards for fair trial. The Court passes an alarmingly high number of death sentences, and juveniles have not always been exempted. Those sentenced to death have no right of appeal. The number of executions to be carried out in the DRC last year exceeded 100.

Hundreds of soldiers – at least 100 of them under the age of 18 – are currently awaiting trial before the Military Order Court. The number of detentions of both soldiers and civilians has escalated, particularly since a renewed outbreak of conflict in August 1998.

Russian Federation

May 1999

GRIGORY PASKO

Grigory Pasko, journalist and prisoner of conscience, was released in July by a Russian military court in Vladivostok. The court found that the prosecution lacked sufficient evidence on charges of espionage and revealing state secrets, but nevertheless sentenced him to three years' imprisonment for "abuse of office". The court then ordered his release under a recent amnesty law. The charges had arisen from Grigory Pasko's reporting on the threat to the environment caused by accidents in the decaying Russian nuclear submarine fleet, including filming a Russian navy tanker dumping radioactive waste in the Sea of Japan in 1993. AI believes all remaining charges against him should be dropped and he should be fully acquitted.

Grigory Pasko wrote to AI in February 1999:

"I recently saw a television interview with an Amnesty International representative talking about my case. I would like to thank Amnesty International with my whole heart for getting involved in my fate. Being aware, at such a great distance, of your support, I am able more easily to bear the horror of my imprisonment... I heard and saw the interview – and my soul was comforted. Thank you!"

[box - Dates refer to month in which WWA first appeared]

Page 4 - Please continue sending appeals on these cases

Syria - Unfair trial/health concern - January 1999

'Abd al-Majid Nimer Zaghmout, a Palestinian, has been detained in Syria for almost 34 years after an unfair trial. He is now critically ill. In October 1998 he was admitted to hospital after a hunger strike in protest at his detention. He was comatose and suffering from internal bleeding caused by a chronic and untreated ulcer. He is now suffering from advanced cancer, and underwent an operation in June at Teshrin Military Hospital, where he is still held. Since the surgery, he has been unable to eat, and is being fed via a tube through his nose.

He was sentenced to death on charges of murder in 1966 by an exceptional Military Court after a grossly unfair trial. He alleges that he was tortured for six weeks after his arrest. In 1989 the Minister of

Defence commuted the death sentence to a prison term equivalent to the time already spent in custody, and ruled that he should be released unless he was charged with another offence.

This ruling was ignored and 'Abd al-Majid Nimer Zaghmout remains in detention.

+Please write, urging the Syrian authorities to release 'Abd al-Majid Nimer Zaghmout immediately and expressing grave concern at his deteriorating health. Send letters to: His Excellency, President Hafez al-Assad, Presidential Palace, Damascus, Syrian Arab Republic.

Guatemala - Extrajudicial execution - February 1999

Bishop Juan Gerardi Conedera was brutally murdered in April 1998, after launching a report accusing the security forces of carrying out tens of thousands of human rights abuses during the long-term civil conflict in Guatemala.

The investigation of the murder has been fraught with intimidation. Several people have been forced to flee the country after death threats, including a judge; a former member of the presidential guard who had accused some of his colleagues of involvement in the murder; and a taxi driver who had seen a military vehicle near Bishop Gerardi's home at the time of the murder. Two prosecutors have resigned from the case because of death threats, and the latest prosecutor, Calvin Galindo, fled the country after increased threats against his family. He had asked for DNA tests on the blood of 12 military officers and five others to be compared with those on blood samples found at the murder scene – these results have yet to be made public.

+Please write, urging the Guatemalan government to take effective measures to ensure the safety of all those involved in the investigation of Bishop Gerardi's murder, calling for the results of the DNA tests to be made public, and for those responsible to be brought to justice. Send your letters to: S.E. Álvaro Arzú Irigoyen, Presidente de la República de Guatemala, Palacio Nacional, 6a calle y 7a Avenida, Zona 1 Ciudad de Guatemala, Guatemala (faxes: 502 221 4537, e-mails: alvaroarzu@guate.net/alvaroarzu@guateconnect.com).

Laos - Prisoner of conscience/Ill-treatment - March 1999

Khamtanh Phousy, a 40-year-old army captain, was heavily fined and sentenced to seven years' imprisonment on charges of "irresponsibility" in his work and corruption. AI believes that these charges are politically motivated.

Khamtanh Phousy converted to Christianity in 1992 and began worshipping with a small group of family and friends. The Lao authorities ordered the weekly meetings to stop and Khamtanh Phousy was reportedly threatened with imprisonment or the loss of his job. He was arrested in March 1996.

The predominant religion in Laos is Buddhism, represented by the official Lao Unified Buddhists' Association, and the authorities view the churches that do not have state approval with distrust. AI believes that Khamtanh Phousy was imprisoned because the authorities were suspicious of his religious activities and his contact with foreign organizations. He had obtained funds from the Presbyterian Church in the USA to build a school in a local village and this was completed with the Lao authorities' approval in 1995.

Khamtanh Phousy's situation has been made worse by his ill-treatment in detention. Since December 1997 Khamtanh Phousy has been held at Prison Camp No. 7 in Ban Sophao, where for 20 days he was locked in an iron stock with his legs chained together and other prisoners were forbidden to talk to him on the grounds that he was a political prisoner. Conditions at the camp are generally harsh, and prisoners are routinely denied medical treatment.

+Please write, calling for Khamtanh Phousy's immediate and unconditional release as a prisoner of conscience, pending which he should be treated in accordance with international standards, to: President Khamtay Siphandone, Office of the President, Vientiane, Laos.

Egypt - Administrative detention - October 1999

Almost 10 years after he should have been released, Hassan al-Gharbawi Shahhata remains in prison. He has had tuberculosis since 1997, and recently his health has seriously deteriorated. Each time one of his detention orders expires, a new one is issued.

Hassan Shahhata, a lawyer, was tried and acquitted in May 1990 of involvement in public disturbances in 1989 in Cairo. However, he was not released and is now one of the longest-serving “administrative detainees” in Egypt. He is reportedly held in al-Wadi al-Gadid Prison.

In 1997 the UN Working Group on Arbitrary Detention stated that the Egyptian authorities had reportedly bypassed 25 court orders for Hassan Shahhata’s release by transferring him from his place of detention to ‘Ain Shams police station, or to the offices of the State Security Investigation Department for a few days, then returning him under a new detention order.

The Egyptian government has failed to acknowledge that Hassan Shahhata was tried and acquitted of all charges, and that his continuing detention contravenes international human rights law and standards.

+Please write, calling for Hassan al-Gharbawi Shahhata’s release. Send appeals to: His Excellency Mohammad Hosni Mubarak, President of the Arab Republic of Egypt, ‘Abedine Palace, Cairo, Egypt (fax: 202 390 1998, e-mail: webmaster@presidency.gov.eg).