

Women's day, women's lives

Discrimination and violence against women remain widespread in Kenya as the government fails to take measures to protect women

International Women's Day – 8 March – is an opportunity to celebrate the achievements of women and to redouble efforts to secure women's human rights.

Despite worldwide progress in promoting women's rights, in no country are women free from discrimination. This discrimination feeds, and is reinforced by, violence against women.

The experiences of women in Kenya show how the failure of the authorities to combat discrimination and in particular to prohibit, investigate and punish violence against women perpetuates suffering.

In a new report published on International Women's Day, AI documents violence against women, and in particular rape, in Kenya. Every day, women are physically and sexually abused. Rape occurs in all social and ethnic groups. It is a crime that shocks and traumatizes the victim, but it is largely suffered in silence.

Despite its moral and legal obligations, the government has not reformed Kenya's laws to make all acts of violence against women criminal offences, nor has it addressed the discriminatory practices of the police force, prisons services and court system.

Although Kenya's various ethnic groups have different cultures and traditions, some of which contribute to promoting women's rights, in general the status of women in Kenya is that of second-class citizens. Customarily, women do not own property or the land they work, which causes them economic hardship and places them in positions of dependence.

Forced marriage is customary in some communities. On the death of her husband, a woman is "inherited" by his brother or close relative. The woman's consent to this new marriage or to sexual relations with her new "husband" is not sought.

For example, Mary's husband died in 1993 and she was "inherited" by her husband's elder brother. She needed his help to support her six children. Since 1998, she says, her new "husband" has regularly beaten her and forced her to have sex with him. She has never been to the police, because she is certain that they would not investigate her case or help her gain protection or redress.

Rape is a crime of violence, aggression and domination, which affects women disproportionately.

Rape causes severe physical or mental suffering, is a deliberate act by the perpetrator and is carried out with the intention to intimidate, degrade or humiliate the victim. Rape is torture when the state has failed in its responsibilities to protect, investigate and provide redress to women victims.

Victims of rape in Kenya often face insurmountable obstacles in trying to bring the perpetrators to justice. Many rape victims are too intimidated by cultural attitudes and state inaction to seek redress.

To do so can lead to hostility from family, the community and the police, with little hope of success.

Those who do seek justice are confronted by a system that ignores, denies and even condones violence against women, and protects perpetrators, whether they are state officials or private individuals.

Kenyan law does not recognize marital rape as a criminal offence because of the presumption, especially in customary law, that consent to sexual intercourse is given by marriage. A man convicted of assault after allegedly pushing the broken legs of a stool into his wife's vagina was sentenced to a fine equivalent to US\$12.

Rape by police officers, prison guards or other state officials always constitutes torture. In Kenya a large number of women in custody have been tortured, many by police officers to extract information during investigations.

Hadaja Choro told AI that while held in a prison in Kakamega, female prison warders beat her and colluded in her rape by a security guard. She bore a son as a result of the rape and was released in December 2000. Although she reported the incident to police, she was not asked to make a formal statement and to her knowledge there has been no investigation by the police.

The lack of an effective system to investigate allegations of sexual violence and rape is reflected in the procedure that a woman victim must go through in order to bring her case to court. Women victims face obstructions in the criminal justice system and in the lack of facilities for gathering essential medical evidence, and most cases are never heard in court. Few women in Kenya can afford to pay to bring a case to court.

Some courts view any form of domestic violence as a private affair which should be settled only by village elders. In August 2000 a High Court set free a man who had admitted stabbing to death his wife, on the grounds that the accused had been highly provoked by his wife's infidelity.

The government of Kenya is failing in its human rights obligations towards half its citizens. It should reform both its law and practices to end impunity for violence against women. As a general election draws near, women's rights should be a top priority on the election agenda.

See Kenya: Rape – the invisible crime (AI Index: AFR 32/001/2002).

Caption: Nairobi, Human Rights Day 2001. Women in Kenya march for equal rights.

Sri Lanka: Rape in custody

On 19 March 2001, two young Sri Lankan women suffered a terrifying ordeal at the hands of state officials – the very people who should protect them from harm.

Sinnathamby Sivamany, aged 24, and Ehamparam Wijikala, aged 22, both internally displaced Tamils, were arrested by navy officials in the coastal city of Mannar and taken to the office of a special police unit. There, Ehamparam Wijikala was blindfolded, beaten, stripped and raped by two officials.

Sinnathamby Sivamany was tortured by a navy official in a van outside the police unit. The official blindfolded her, ripped off her clothes and raped her. Soon after she was taken to join Ehamparam Wijikala in the police unit. Both women were made to parade naked in front of the men. They were then suspended for 90 minutes from a pole to which they had been tied by their ankles and wrists, and beaten with thick wire.

Such allegations of rape in custody by army, police and navy officials in Sri Lanka have increased markedly in the past year. Most incidents have occurred in the context of the armed conflict between the security forces and the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam, which is fighting for an autonomous state in the north and east of the country. Many of the victims have been internally displaced women. AI has welcomed steps taken by successive governments in recent years to combat torture and rape in custody. Despite such steps, however, complaints of such serious abuses are still not dealt with effectively by police, magistrates or doctors. This is particularly true when those responsible for the investigation (the police) are colleagues of the alleged perpetrators.

Among other reasons why investigations into complaints of rape are generally unsuccessful are: threats by the perpetrators against the victim or witnesses; political or other pressure brought to bear on the investigators; and the withdrawal of the complaint by the victim because of the stigma associated with rape. To AI's knowledge, not a single perpetrator of rape in custody has been brought to justice.

AI has urged the new government of Prime Minister Ranil Wickremasinghe to send a clear message to all security forces that rape and other sexual violence in custody will not be tolerated and that perpetrators will be brought to justice. AI has also called for other measures, including the establishment of an independent investigative body to deal with allegations of torture and rape in custody.

For further information see AI's report: Sri Lanka: Rape in Custody (AI Index: ASA 37/001/2002).

Caption: A woman joins a protest in the Sri Lankan capital, Colombo, against an alleged rape of a Tamil woman by three policemen, 6 July 2001.

Guatemala's lethal legacy of impunity

When Guatemala's long civil conflict finally ended in 1996, hopes were high for a new era of respect for human rights. These hopes have not been fulfilled.

Successive governments have failed to implement the human rights elements of the UN-brokered Peace Accords. This failure has contributed to alarming new abuses, particularly directed against those trying to combat impunity.

An estimated 200,000 people "disappeared" or were killed during the conflict. Two painstaking post-conflict inquiries firmly attributed the blame for the vast majority of these abuses to the counter-insurgency campaign carried out by the Guatemalan military and their civilian adjuncts, the civil patrols, during the late 1970s and early 1980s.

Today those seeking justice for these atrocities are prominent among the victims of a new spiral of violence. Death threats, attacks and other acts of intimidation are a daily occurrence and Guatemala's human rights community is living under siege.

The failure of the legal system to deliver justice is a major contributory factor.

Key human rights cases are habitually assigned to judges who appear to be partial to the accused, reportedly because of bribes or fear of reprisals. Evidence is often lost and interpretation for indigenous witnesses inadequate. Political interference in legal cases, particularly those involving highly placed officials, is the norm.

These cases are slow and complex, as defendants use every tactic to evade justice. Often, witnesses have to return to court over and over again, repeatedly remembering and describing deeply traumatic events. Some have withdrawn their suits or changed their testimonies after threats and intimidation. Others have fled abroad in fear of their lives and still others have been killed.

For example, the massacres at Río Negro, where more than 420 men, women and children were killed in the early 1980s, were officially investigated only in 1993. The murder trial of three civil patrol members caught removing bodies from a secret grave site was due to start in 1996 but was delayed by legal manoeuvrings until 1998. One child survivor, whose life was spared when a civil patroller decided to take him as a child slave, told the court: "The patrollers would grab the women one by one and drag them to the edge of the ravine... There they would slaughter them and throw them over the edge. I remember seeing that the sandals of the patrollers were covered and full of blood."

In December 1998, three civil patrollers were convicted of the murder of three women identified because of their advanced pregnancies, but the convictions were set aside on appeal. After a second trial the patrollers were again found guilty, this time for two deaths, and sentenced to 50 years' imprisonment. No action has been taken against anyone else involved in ordering or carrying out the Río Negro massacres.

In another case, Cándido Noriega, leader of the local civil patrol, was charged with more than 150 abuses including rapes and murders of indigenous villagers from Tululché, Quiché Department. It took 17 years, three trials, and the intervention of the Inter-American Commission on Human Rights to gain protection for witnesses, before Cándido Noriega was convicted of six murders and two homicides. Continued interest and pressure on such cases from abroad is one of the factors which has helped bring a handful of perpetrators to justice. These few convictions have in turn aroused hopes that new and tenacious efforts both in Guatemala and abroad may eventually bring results.

See Guatemala's lethal legacy: Past impunity and renewed human rights violations (AI Index: AMR 34/001/2002), or contact AI for details of our campaign to combat impunity in Guatemala.

Caption: Indigenous massacre survivor lights a candle in memory of victims at an event in 2000 launching a suit for genocide against officials of the government that ruled Guatemala from 1978 to 1982. A second genocide suit was launched in 2001 against officials of the administration of General Ríos Montt (March 1982 to August 1983).

Tunisian justice system undermined

Judge Mokhtar Yahiaoui sent an open letter to President Zine el-Abdine Ben Ali in July 2001. It stated that judges are forced to comply with decisions made by the executive on the outcome of investigations and trials and called for the constitutional principle of the independence of the judiciary to be applied and guaranteed.

Mokhtar Yahiaoui was dismissed by a disciplinary council on 29 December 2001, reportedly for undermining the reputation of the judiciary, breach of professional duty and breach of confidentiality. The dismissal coincided with unsuccessful attempts to launch an association in Tunisia campaigning for the independence of the judiciary and the bar association. He continues to face police harassment and intimidation. In January 2002 he was arbitrarily stopped at the airport when he tried to travel to France.

The Tunisian government has taken other steps to undermine the independence of the judiciary. It has described political opponents as “terrorists” as an excuse to have them tried by military, rather than civilian, courts, where procedures fall short of international standards of fair trial. Civilians brought before military courts are deprived of their right to appeal.

Three Tunisians were sentenced to heavy prison sentences by the Tunis military tribunal on 31 January 2002 on charges of belonging to a “terrorist organization operating from abroad”. Mounir Ghaith and Abdelbasset Dali, who had been living in Italy, were arrested when they returned home for family reasons. Bechir Ben Zayed was arrested in Algeria and turned over to the Tunisian authorities, reportedly after being tortured. They were denied basic rights during the judicial process, and no convincing evidence was

produced to substantiate the charges. Bechir Ben Zayed was sentenced to 10 years’ imprisonment, Mounir Ghaith and Abdelbasset Dali to eight years. Thirty-one other defendants were sentenced in their absence to up to 20 years’ imprisonment.

Four leaders of an unauthorized political party – the Tunisian Workers’ Communist Party, (PCOT) – emerged in February after years of being in hiding. Three faced a retrial, having previously been sentenced in their absence, the fourth attended the court hearing. Before the trial even began, the three defendants were dragged from a courtroom by six policemen so forcefully that several people were knocked to the ground.

When the court reconvened hours later only two of the defendants – Hamma Hammami and Samir Taamallah – were brought to court. The whereabouts of Abdeljabbar Madouri remained unknown, raising fears about his treatment. Within minutes the court confirmed prison sentences of nine years and three months for Hamma Hammami and Samir Taamallah, and increased to over 11 years the sentence of Abdeljabbar Madouri. The defendants were taken into custody. The fourth man, Ammar Amroussia, was arrested outside the court; his two-year four-month sentence had been confirmed in 1997. AI called for the four to be immediately and unconditionally released as prisoners of conscience. Scenes of police brutality were reported throughout the day in and outside the court. At least two supporters of unauthorized political parties needed hospital treatment after being beaten and severely injured by the police.

Captions: Judge Mokhtar Yahiaoui, Mounir Ghaith, Hamma Hammami

Eritrea arrests critics and closes independent press

There has been a major crack-down on dissent in Eritrea over the last six months. Scores of people have been detained and at least 30 are held incommunicado, but no one knows where.

The whereabouts of 11 government officials who were arrested on 18 and 19 September 2001 in the capital, Asmara, are still unknown. Held without charge and without access to their families or lawyers, there are growing fears about their safety. Several have serious health problems including Ogbe Abraha who has asthma, Haile Woldetensae who is diabetic, and Astier Feshatsion (pictured) who has stomach ulcers. Conditions of detention are extremely harsh and they may not be receiving essential medication.

The 11 were part of a group of 15 senior officials of the only political party in Eritrea. In March 2001 they wrote an open letter to party members criticizing the government for acting in an “illegal and unconstitutional” manner. Some of the group were removed from their ministerial positions. One later recanted and the other three are out of the country. Around 60 short-term arrests have been reported, including supporters and family members of the 15 signatories to the open letter.

The National Assembly has met for the first time in 18 months, and “strongly condemned” the 11 “for the crimes they committed against the people and their country”. It gave the government “full responsibility to properly follow this case and bring it to its final conclusion”. AI is calling on the Eritrean authorities to take immediate action to ensure that the situation of the detainees is resolved in strict accordance with international and regional human rights standards.

Since 2001 the independent press has been more critical of government policies and some newspapers reported the open letter. The government’s reaction was to suspend all independent newspapers on 19 September 2001 because they had “put at risk the unity and interest of the country”. At least nine journalists were arrested in September 2001. They also remain held in incommunicado detention without charge.

In July 2001 students at Asmara University protested over a number of issues, in particular some aspects of the compulsory student work program. Student leader Semere Kesete was arrested and in the days following his arrest, several hundred other students were taken into custody. They were sent to the student work program, in which conditions were so harsh that two of them died. Semere Kesete also remains held in incommunicado detention without charge.

AI fears that these detainees may be prisoners of conscience. Please write to your government, calling on them to appeal publicly to the Eritrean authorities for all those who have been arrested to be brought to court promptly, charged with a recognizably criminal offence or released. They should also be given adequate medical care and immediate access to legal counsel and their families.

Worldwide appeals

USA

Defence lawyers ‘utterly ineffective’

Abu-Ali Abdur’Rahman is under sentence of death and is scheduled to be executed in Tennessee on 10 April 2002. He was convicted in 1987 of the murder of Patrick Daniels.

International safeguards require that defendants in death penalty cases receive adequate representation at all stages of the proceedings, above and beyond that afforded in non-capital cases.

Abu-Ali Abdur’Rahman’s representation at the sentencing phase of his trial – when his lawyers were supposed to defend him from the death penalty – patently failed to meet this standard.

The defence presented none of the abundant mitigating evidence available, including of Abu-Ali Abdur’Rahman’s appalling childhood abuse at the hands of his military policeman father. This included being stripped, hog-tied, and locked in a cupboard; being struck on the penis with a baseball bat; and being made to eat a pack of cigarettes as punishment for smoking, and when he vomited, forced to eat the vomit. The jurors were also left unaware of Abu-Ali Abdur’Rahman’s history of serious mental health problems, and that of his siblings. His brother committed suicide as an adult. His sister attempted suicide many times.

In 1998 a federal judge overturned Abu-Ali Abdur’Rahman’s death sentence, citing the “utterly ineffective” representation, and describing the defence as “breathtakingly brief”. In Tennessee, the death penalty can only be passed by a unanimous jury. The federal judge concluded that if the trial lawyers had presented the mitigating evidence, there was “more than a reasonable probability that at least one juror would have voted for a life sentence”. He would appear to be right. Eight of the original trial jurors have signed affidavits indicating that they might or would have voted for life if they had heard about Abu-Ali Abdur’Rahman’s background.

Nevertheless, in 2000 a higher court overturned the 1998 ruling. One of the three judges dissented, citing the “constitutionally inadequate” defence. A Tennessee Supreme Court judge has noted that even the two judges who voted to reinstate the death sentence “did not seriously challenge the finding that Abu-Ali Abdur’Rahman had received deficient representation”. He has gone on record as stating that Governor Sundquist should commute the death sentence.

Please appeal for clemency to: Governor Don Sundquist, State Capitol, Nashville, TN 37243, USA.
Fax: +1 615 532 1353.

e-mail: dsundquist@mail.state.tn.us

Liberia

School students shot by police

John Kpannah, a 14-year-old schoolboy, was shot and killed by a senior police commander in the town of Gbarnga, central Liberia on 8 December 2001. The local police chief admitted on local radio that he had killed the boy, alleging that he was an “armed robber”. The national director of police, Paul Mulbah, announced that the police chief had been suspended from duty and that a full investigation would be initiated.

On 11 December, police opened fire on a demonstration held by hundreds of school students in Gbarnga in protest at the killing. One schoolboy was reportedly shot and killed. Several others were injured as the demonstrators ran away.

The police and other government forces have an appalling record of human rights violations. Critics of the government, including students, journalists, human rights defenders and political opponents, are frequently verbally and physically attacked by government forces to intimidate and silence them. On 21 March 2001, more than 40 students were arbitrarily detained and tortured and female students were raped after security forces stormed the University of Liberia campus to stop a peaceful rally. Government forces act with almost complete impunity. In the rare event that human rights violations are investigated by the authorities, the inquiries are a sham and suspects are seldom, if ever, brought to justice.

Please write, welcoming the initiation of an investigation into the killing of John Kpannah and calling for an investigation into the events of 11 December. Say that the investigations must be independent and impartial and that those suspected of being responsible must be brought to justice in prompt and fair trials. Call for an end to the impunity enjoyed by government forces. Appeals should be sent to: Paul Mulbah, Director of Police, National Police Force, National Police Headquarters, Monrovia, Liberia.

Please also send letters of solidarity to the Liberian youth organization YMCA, expressing support for their work in such difficult circumstances. Letters should be sent to: YMCA coordinator, YMCA Building Broad Street, PO Box 6159, Monrovia, Liberia.

Spain

Racist ill-treatment by police

Boaventura SimãoVaz, a national of Guinea-Bissau and a mechanic by trade, alleges that he was beaten and racially abused by Spanish police.

According to his complaint, on 1 March 2001 he was eating with two companions in a bar in Madrid when a National Police officer in plain clothes approached and asked for his identity papers. As he was looking for them, and before he had said anything, he was dragged out of the bar, handcuffed, and taken to a police station without explanation. He says he was later told he was suspected of trafficking in drugs, which he denies.

He says that in the police station, he saw another detainee being struck by an officer. When Boaventura SimãoVaz protested, he alleged that he was punched and kicked by three officers who

threatened him with a pistol and racially insulted him. Although five of his ribs were broken, he says he was denied medical assistance while in the police station and his mobile phone was smashed. Boaventura Simão Vaz lodged an official complaint, supported by a hospital medical report confirming that he had five broken ribs and was suffering internal bleeding.

Please appeal to the Spanish authorities, calling for a prompt, impartial and thorough investigation into this case, for those responsible to be brought to justice, and for clear instructions to be given to all police officers that racist ill-treatment will not be tolerated.

Send appeals to: Excmo. Sr. D. Mariano Rajoy Brey, Ministro del Interior, Ministerio del Interior, Paseo de la Castellana 5, 28046 Madrid, Spain.

Fax: +91 537 10 03

Worldwide appeals update:USA

Joe Ward (featured in the Wire November 2001 issue) no longer faces the death penalty. He was only 17 at the time of the crime. The charge against him has been amended to one of second degree murder, which does not carry the death penalty. It is believed that appeals by AI members contributed to the prosecutor's decision. Joe Ward's lawyer sends his thanks all those who sent appeals.

Release in Senegal

Michel Pereira was released from prison on 10 January 2002 as a direct result of appeals by AI. When AI delegates interviewed him in the prison of Dakar in Senegal in June 2001, they were concerned at his mental health and the lack of medical care.

A Senegalese national from Casamance, he had been detained without trial since August 1997 and showed signs of being psychologically disturbed. He was arrested on 29 August 1997 near the Dial Diop military camp in Dakar and imprisoned on 5 September 1997 on charges of threatening state security. He was seen by a psychiatrist at the Hospital of Fann in Dakar several times during his detention but no regular medical services were available in the prison of Dakar where conditions are generally poor.

AI raised the case with the Minister of Justice, the Human Rights adviser in the Office of the President and with the President of the Senegal Committee for Human Rights. Appeals called for the immediate and unconditional release of Michel Pereira unless he was charged with a recognizable criminal offence. After additional pressure, he has now been released.

News in brief

RUSSIAN FEDERATION

On 25 January the UN Committee on the Elimination of Discrimination against Women (CEDAW) examined the Russian Federation's fifth periodic report on implementation of the Women's Convention. In written and oral briefings to the Committee, AI highlighted its concerns about impunity for the perpetrators of human rights abuses, violence against women in custody, domestic violence, trafficking and human rights abuses against women in Chechnya. These concerns were reflected in the Committee's dialogue with government representatives.

WINTER OLYMPICS

Isolde Kostner, an Italian silver medalist at the 2002 Winter Olympics, has dedicated her medal to AI saying, "I dedicate this medal to Amnesty International, with whom I collaborate in a project to stop torture around the world."

PORTUGAL

The Portuguese President has awarded AI an Order of Merit decoration in recognition of its work to further the cause of human rights. He said, "Portugal is grateful to Amnesty International not only for

its fundamental role the world over in defending the supreme value of human dignity but also for its actions in favour of freedom and democracy in Portugal.”

Tibetan music scholar released

“As individuals living under the system of democracy and free speech we personally hold the tools to assist those who would be otherwise disempowered, tortured or imprisoned. We owe it to ourselves as human beings with a conscience, not to abandon or neglect this power. If you are not a member of Amnesty International or another such organization then you haven’t yet realised or understood what a difference you can make.”

Annie Lennox, the UK-based singer-songwriter, who campaigned with AI, other organizations and Ngawang Choephel’s mother to obtain his release.

AI members around the world who have campaigned on behalf of Ngawang Choephel over the last six years welcomed the news of his release on 20 January 2002. But the fact remains that like numerous other prisoners of conscience in Tibet, he should never have been jailed in the first place. Ngawang Choephel was released on medical grounds after serving six and a half years of his 18-year sentence. He was then flown to the USA for essential medical treatment. He is thought to be suffering from lung and liver ailments contracted during his time in prison and is currently under-going medical tests. Tibetan prisons are notorious for their poor food and insanitary conditions which frequently contribute to long-term health problems for many prisoners.

A Tibetan music scholar, Ngawang Choephel grew up in Tibet’s exile community in India. He travelled to Tibet in July 1995 to make a video documentary about Tibetan music and dance. He failed to return to India and the Chinese authorities only confirmed his detention one year later. His trial was held in secret and the authorities failed to produce any evidence linking him to his “crimes”. He was imprisoned solely for exercising his fundamental human right to freedom of expression.

He thanked AI members for their years of work to gain his freedom. He expressed gratitude for organizing numerous events highlighting his case and urged AI members to continue their work to get other Tibetan prisoners released. “It is important that you succeed in other cases like you succeeded in my case” said Ngawang Choephel.

AI will continue to campaign for the immediate and unconditional release of all prisoners of conscience in Tibet, and China as a whole.

Russians hear AI’s message

AI held one of its most successful public events in Russia on Human Rights Day, 10 December 2001. AI sent an Open Letter addressed to the members of the State Duma (Russian parliament) in Moscow, urging them to fully abolish the death penalty. This was accompanied by three days of intensive campaigning in Moscow against the death penalty, including participation in two conferences at the State Duma, the opening of the Moscow International Human Rights Film Festival, a meeting with the Presidential Clemency Commission, a discussion forum at Moscow State University (organized by local AI members) and a day at the film festival dedicated to AI.

AI’s event concluded with the screening of the internationally acclaimed film “Dead Man Walking”. With the help of AIUSA, a special video address was prepared by actress Susan Sarandon. For the first time Russian parliamentarians, government officials and the general public were able to hear and meet US anti-death penalty activists. By inviting Sister Helen Prejean, who wrote the book on which the film “Dead Man Walking” is based, as well as Denise LeBoeuf, a famous death penalty lawyer from Louisiana, and Bud Welch, a father who lost his daughter during the Oklahoma bombing and who now actively campaigns against the death penalty, AI was able to show that it is an international organization which is working for abolition of the death penalty, not just in Russia but also in the USA. The personal accounts of these activists had an immediate impact on people. For example, a young law student, a former soldier in Chechnya, came up after the showing of the film, crying. He said the

film had changed his mind, and he no longer supported the death penalty. One of AI's translators told Bud that he too had supported the death penalty all his life, but after the few days he had spent with Bud, he had changed his mind.

Caption: Sister Helen Prejean, discussing her book *Dead Man Walking* in Moscow, December 2001
AI welcomes releases in Pakistan

Fifteen prisoners of conscience from the Ahmadi Muslim minority were acquitted by an Anti-Terrorism Court in Sindh province, Pakistan, on 4 December 2001. They had been arrested in August 1998 and charged with "outraging religious feelings" under the blasphemy law.

Ahmadi Muslims are considered heretics by orthodox Muslims, and in Pakistan it is an offence for them to profess, practise or propagate their faith. AI has campaigned for years against the harassment and imprisonment of Ahmadis, and has pressed the Pakistan authorities to fulfil their obligations to protect minority rights.

Dr Waheed Ahmad Shaikh, also a prisoner of conscience from the Ahmadi minority, was released on bail on 11 January 2002. He had been sentenced to 10 years' imprisonment in 1998 for "outraging religious feelings". His lawyer is trying to get the charges quashed.

AI welcomes these releases, which are framed by other positive developments that may herald an improvement in the treatment of minorities in Pakistan. In January 2002 the government ended the discriminatory separate electorate for minorities that was introduced in 1965.

In a recent meeting with Irene Khan, AI's Secretary General, the Minister of the Interior acknowledged the need to amend the blasphemy laws, signalling further potential improvement in the situation for minorities in Pakistan.

Voice of Afghan women

Fatana Gailani, head of the Afghanistan Women's Council, spoke to the Wire in January while she was visiting Ireland and the United Kingdom on behalf of her organization.

Fatana Gailani grew up in Kabul, the capital of Afghanistan. She married there and had a daughter. After the Soviet army entered Afghanistan in 1979, she fled to the city of Peshawar in neighbouring Pakistan, where she had a second daughter.

"I was a very young woman and didn't have any experience of the horrible things in life. I learned a lot and studied for two years. Lots of refugee women came to me asking for help with their children and families. I realised that the women there had no voice and no one was caring about them."

In response, Fatana opened a medical clinic for women and then a school for the refugees. The school catered for 1,000 children, 400 of them orphans. She also took up work for human rights, "because the women had no voice, no rights, no normal life".

In 1992, after a brief break in Europe, she returned to Peshawar to work with Afghan refugees. The following year she set up the Afghanistan Women's Council and began working with AI.

"We set up a health department with a mother and child clinic in Peshawar, a mobile clinic and a school for refugees, and a human rights department. There are a hundred women in our organization. We opened an office in Kabul two weeks ago. We tried to support women there before, but it was in secret. My life and my husband's life were in a lot of danger in the Taleban time."

Fatana spoke of the human rights problems currently facing women in Afghanistan: "Women have no power, no salary, no jobs. The important thing is that women have lost their dignity during 23 years of war... In the camps they don't have any shelter, they don't have any water or medical treatment or school for the children. Life is very difficult for them."

When asked about the peace process and the role of the international community, Fatana said:

"The women don't trust the leaders in power. The peace process needs to be strong. The international community should stop the war and the bombing and see how much has been destroyed in the country and ask who did it. The people need economic and political support and security."

Fatana appealed for support from AI and the human rights movement. "AI members are my colleagues and friends. They must understand the difficulties of our situation... We need to be very honest with each other. Our work is very important for people, especially the women. There should be serious work done, not just fine speeches and letters.

"We still have hope for the future. If we lose that we lose everything."

New dawn for Bahraini women

Bahrain has seen dramatic human rights improvements in the past 18 months. Wide-ranging political, administrative and judicial reforms are currently underway.

At the beginning of 2001 all political prisoners and detainees were released unconditionally. Bahraini nationals who had been living in forced exile were allowed home and laws that facilitated arbitrary arrest, torture and unfair trials were repealed.

In February 2001 Bahraini women and men voted overwhelmingly for a National Charter which would establish a two-chamber parliament and for Bahrain to become a constitutional monarchy. Municipal and parliamentary elections are planned.

A number of political associations, representing a wide range of ideologies, have been recognized by the authorities. Scores of non-governmental associations, including the Bahrain Human Rights Society, have also been set up.

Bahraini women have a prominent role to play in this climate of change. They will be able to vote and stand as candidates in the forthcoming elections. Several new women's associations have been formed, including an umbrella body, the Union of Bahraini Women, to raise awareness of women's legal, political, economic and family rights.

In August 2001 a Supreme Council for Women was established by the government to encourage women's participation in public life and promote their rights. Its Secretary General was given the rank of government minister.

Many Bahraini women have been campaigning against domestic violence and for equal rights with men. They continue to seek an end to laws and practices that discriminate against them. For example, a woman cannot obtain a passport without her husband's consent; women do not have the right to own or rent property in their own name; children of Bahraini women married to foreign nationals do not have the right to Bahraini citizenship.

AI delegates visited Bahrain twice last year, and discussed ways to enhance cooperation with women's associations and other human rights groups. These associations have been pressing their government to ratify the UN Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women. Government officials told AI that ratification of this Convention would be announced soon.