Politics of fear creating a dangerously divided world

by Amnesty press via rialator - Amnesty International *Tuesday, May 22 2007, 12:41pm*
international / social/political / other press

Report 2007 -- 23/5/2007

> (London) Powerful governments and armed groups are deliberately fomenting fear to erode human rights and to create an increasingly polarized and dangerous world, said Amnesty International today as it launched Amnesty International Report 2007, its annual assessment of human rights worldwide.

"Through short sighted, fear-mongering and divisive policies, governments are undermining the rule of law and human rights, feeding racism and xenophobia, dividing communities, intensifying inequalities and sowing the seeds for more violence and conflict," said Irene Khan, Secretary General of Amnesty International.

"The politics of fear is fuelling a downward spiral of human rights abuse in which no right is sacrosanct and no person safe."

"The 'war on terror' and the war in Iraq, with their catalogue of human rights abuses, have created deep divisions that cast a shadow on international relations, making it more difficult to resolve conflicts and protect civilians."

Scarred by distrust and division, the international community was too often impotent or weak-willed in the face of major human rights crises in 2006, whether in forgotten conflicts like Chechnya, Colombia and Sri Lanka or high profiles ones in the Middle East.

The UN took weeks to muster the will to call for a ceasefire in the conflict in Lebanon in which approximately 1,200 civilians lost their lives. The international community showed no stomach to tackle the human rights disaster resulting from severe restrictions on freedom of movement of Palestinians in the Occupied Territories, reckless attacks by the Israeli army and inter-factional fighting among Palestinian groups.

"Darfur is a bleeding wound on world conscience. The UN Security Council is hampered by distrust and double dealing of its most powerful members. The Sudanese government is running rings around the UN. Meanwhile 200,000 people have died, more than ten times that number have been displaced, and militia attacks are now spreading to Chad and the Central African Republic," said Ms. Khan.

Thriving in an arc of instability, extending from the borders of Pakistan to the Horn of Africa, armed groups flexed their muscles and engaged in massive abuse of human rights and international humanitarian law.

"Unless governments address the grievances on which these groups feed, unless they provide effective leadership to bring these groups to account for the abuses they have committed and are ready to hold themselves accountable, the prognosis for human rights is dire," said Ms Khan.

In Afghanistan, the international community and the Afghan government squandered the

opportunity to build an effective state based on human rights and the rule of law, leaving the people to chronic insecurity, corruption and a resurgent Taleban. In Iraq, the security forces incited sectarian violence rather than restrained it, the justice system proved woefully inadequate, and the worst practices of Saddam's regime –- torture, unfair trials, capital punishment and rape with impunity –- remained very much alive.

"In many countries, a fear-driven political agenda is fuelling discrimination, widening the gap between the 'haves' and the 'have nots', 'them' and 'us', and leaving the most marginalized people unprotected," said Ms. Khan.

In Africa alone hundreds of thousands of people were evicted forcibly from their homes with no due process, compensation or alternative shelter –- often in the name of progress and economic development.

Politicians played upon the fears of uncontrolled migration to justify tougher measures against asylum-seekers and refugees in Western Europe, while migrant workers were left unprotected and exploited around the world, from South Korea to the Dominican Republic.

The divide between Muslims and non-Muslims deepened, fuelled by discriminatory counter-terrorism strategies in western countries. Incidents of Islamophobia, anti-Semitism, intolerance and attacks on religious minorities increased worldwide.

Meanwhile, hate crimes against foreigners were widespread in Russia while segregation and exclusion of the Roma community were rampant around Europe, illustrating the blatant failure of leadership to combat racism and xenophobia.

"Increasing polarization and heightened fears about national security reduced the space for tolerance and dissent. Around the world, from Iran to Zimbabwe, many independent voices on human rights were silenced in 2006," said Ms Khan.

Freedom of expression was suppressed in a variety of ways from the prosecution of writers and human rights defenders in Turkey, to the killing of political activists in the Philippines, to the constant harassment, surveillance and often imprisonment of human rights defenders in China, to the murder of journalist Anna Politkovskaya and new laws regulating non-governmental organizations in Russia. The Internet became the new frontier in the struggle for dissent as activists were arrested and companies colluded with governments to restrict access to information on-line in countries such as China, Iran, Syria, Vietnam and Belarus.

Old-fashioned repression gained a new lease of life under the guise of fighting terrorism in countries like Egypt, while loosely defined counter-terrorism laws posed a potential threat to free speech in the United Kingdom.

Five years after 9/11, new evidence came to light in 2006 of the way in which the US Administration treated the world as one giant battlefield for its 'war on terror', kidnapping, arresting, arbitrarily detaining, torturing and transferring suspects from one secret prison to another across the world with impunity, in what the US termed 'extraordinary renditions'.

"Nothing more aptly portrayed the globalization of human rights violations than the US-led 'war on terror' and its programme of 'extraordinary renditions' which implicated governments in countries as far apart as Italy and Pakistan, Germany and Kenya," said Ms. Khan.
"Ill-conceived counter-terrorism strategies have done little to reduce the threat of violence or ensure

justice for victims of terrorism but much to damage human rights and the rule of law globally."

Amnesty International called on governments to reject the politics of fear and invest in human rights institutions and the rule of law at the national and international level.

"There are signs of hope. A momentum was created by European institutions for transparency and accountability on renditions. Thanks to civil society pressure, the UN agreed to develop a treaty to control conventional arms. In a range of countries new leaders and legislatures coming to power have an opportunity to redress the failed leadership that has plagued the human rights scene in recent years. A new US Congress could take the lead in setting the trend, restoring respect for human rights at home and abroad," said Ms Khan.

"Just as global warming requires global action based on international cooperation, the human rights meltdown can only be tackled through global solidarity and respect for international law."

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Cleaves Alternative News. http://cleaves.lingama.net/news/story-525.html