

Amnesty blames war on terror for abuses in Asia

AFP, London

Nations across Asia used terrorism to justify curtailing human rights last year, watchdog Amnesty International said yesterday in a new report outlining abuses in the region.

From secret court hearings in China to detention without trial in Australia to the US interment of Afghans at Guantanamo Bay, the group said armed conflict was the background for a range of serious violations.

"Arbitrary arrests in the name of combating terrorism were reportedly made in Afghanistan, including by US and coalition forces, and in Pakistan by the security forces," the London-based group said.

It said China carried out closed-door trials for those accused of terrorism and "state secrets"

offences, while Australia introduced new counter-terror legislation allowing for detention without trial.

The report also took aim at the US detention camp at Guantanamo, a part of President George W. Bush's "war on terror" which the United States has refused to close despite international criticism.

"Men returning to Afghanistan from US custody in Guantanamo Bay, Cuba, brought home gruelling accounts of torture and ill treatment which further fuelled local anger, anxiety and unrest," it said.

Instability in Afghanistan, where President Hamid Karzai's government has struggled to impose control over tribal areas reportedly held by militants, had also set the stage for ongoing rights abuses.

"Fundamental flaws in the

criminal justice system, the legacy of decades of conflict, and deeply embedded discrimination against women profoundly militated against the promotion of human rights," Amnesty said.

Other nations meanwhile continued to ignore international pressure to improve their rights records. "Governments in countries including Myanmar, North Korea and Vietnam appeared largely impervious to pressure to uphold human rights," the report said.

The region also continues to have a "poor profile" in issuing death sentences and executing citizens, Amnesty said.

Twenty-six countries in the Asia-Pacific region have retained the death penalty and execution rates were high, it said.

In 2005 China carried out at least 1,770 executions and handed

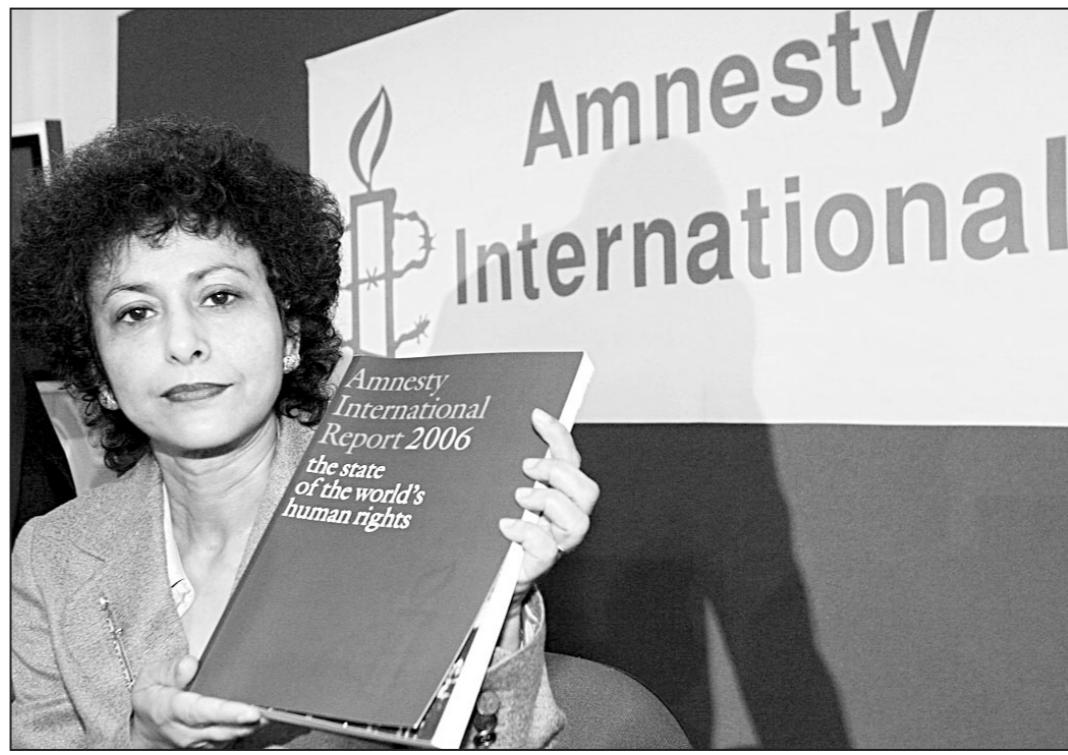
down 3,900 death sentences, it said.

There were also at least 31 executions and 241 death sentences in Pakistan, at least 21 executions and 65 death sentences in Vietnam, and at least 24 death sentences in Afghanistan, it said.

Nepal saw a takeover by King Gyanendra in February 2005 resulting in a serious curtailment of civil liberties, including mass detentions and a breakdown in security, the group said.

The king was last month forced to hand back power to an interim government.

And even though China and India enjoyed healthy economic growth, this was not reflected in improved human rights, the report said.



Amnesty International Secretary General Irene Khan holds a copy of the Amnesty International Report 2006 in London yesterday. The Report is a global overview of the state of the world's human rights in 150 countries.

19 more killed in fresh Afghan violence

AP, Kandahar

Angry villagers dug graves yesterday to bury dozens of suspected militants and civilians killed in one of the deadliest US airstrikes since the American-led invasion in 2001. Another 19 people were killed in new violence.

Taliban fighters ambushed a police patrol in southern Afghanistan, killing three police but leaving 12 militants dead, officials said. Also Tuesday, three health workers and their driver were killed by a land mine near the capital.

The deaths brought to 305 the number of people killed in fighting during the last week. Most of the dead were militants. It's the deadliest spate of fighting in four years and comes ahead of preparations for the US-led coalition to hand over security operations in southern Afghanistan to Nato by July.

UN nuclear chief seeks compromise on Iran

AFP, Vienna

UN nuclear watchdog chief Mohamed ElBaradei may be carrying a message from the Iranians on his visit to Washington this week amidst the crisis over Tehran's atomic ambitions, diplomats told AFP.

Diplomats said ElBaradei could play a role in secret diplomacy as he met in Vienna only last week with chief Iranian nuclear negotiator Ali Larjani, but they were pessimistic about a breakthrough.

ElBaradei left Monday from the Vienna headquarters of his International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA) for Washington where he is

expected to meet US Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice on Tuesday or Wednesday.

The visit comes at a time of deadlock in the standoff over Iran's nuclear power programme, which the United States claims hides the secret development of atomic weapons.

Iran insists its uranium enrichment is not up for negotiation, rejecting European Union efforts to secure a halt to this sensitive nuclear work that makes fuel for civilian reactors but also atom bomb material.

One Western diplomat said: "ElBaradei may indeed have a message from Larjani but the

Americans doubt that it will say anything useful."

A European diplomat said: "What is interesting is not what ElBaradei's views are. What is more interesting is what he may be carrying with him from Larjani."

A third diplomat, who like the others did not want to be identified, said: "The Iranians want to talk but they don't want to be seen as negotiating under pressure."

The diplomat said: "ElBaradei is saying, give the Iranians a generous offer. Give them nuclear technology. Be generous," in order to secure guarantees Iran will not make nuclear weapons.

Chaos dims Palestinian independence hopes

AFP, Gaza City

As violence in Gaza spirals out of control amid an escalating power struggle between rival factions, Palestinians fear the prospect of realising their dream of independence is growing ever more distant.

When Israel withdrew from Gaza last September, the seaside strip with its 1.3 million residents became a 27-mile-long (16-mile) test tube for Palestinian self-rule.

Gaza, observers said at the time, would be a portent of what a future Palestinian state might look like.

But in the intervening eight months, an already fragile security situation has degenerated into a deadly power struggle between the newly-elected Hamas government and the vanquished Fatah

factions that many feel could end up in civil war.

Foreigners have been kidnapped and unsubstantiated rumours abound of an al-Qaeda-inspired presence lurking in Gaza. The European Union and United Nations have had to withdraw their foreign staff on multiple occasions in recent months.

Even before a dramatic firefright by the parliament building in Gaza City on Monday, which left one dead and nine wounded, the Hamas government's refusal to renounce violence or recognise Israel's right to exist had alienated many in the international community and triggered economic sanctions.

Pakistan seeks to boost nuke ties with China

REUTERS, Islamabad

Pakistan is working to boost nuclear cooperation with long-time ally China to improve technology for power generation, Pakistani Prime Minister Shaukat Aziz said on Monday.

Upset over a US decision to supply civilian nuclear technology to its rival India, Pakistan has shown interest in buying nuclear reactors from China as well as Western countries to meet its growing needs.

"A significant area of cooperation between Pakistan and China has been the harnessing of nuclear technology for peaceful purposes under international safeguards -- for the production of electricity," Aziz was quoted by the official Associated Press of Pakistan as telling a gathering in Islamabad.

Nepali Maoists won't tolerate monarchy

AFP, Kathmandu

The chief negotiator for Nepal's rebel Maoists said yesterday there would be no early handover of weapons and set the stage for further political clashes over the role of the monarchy.

Krishna Bahadur Mahara said the Maoists did not want to return to violence after calling a temporary ceasefire in their decade-long insurgency, amid tentative peace moves with the newly-formed interim government.

But he repeatedly refused to say what the Maoists would do if Nepal's monarch were given even a ceremonial role in a planned new consti-

tution due to be thrashed out at an unspecified date.

King Gyanendra ended 14 months of absolute rule in the face of mass anti-monarchy protests in April and was forced to recall parliament after a four-year break.

The legislature immediately demanded elections to a body to write a new constitution, which could abolish the 250-year-old monarchy or reduce it to a ceremonial role.

"We won't be giving up arms to the government before the constituent assembly elections," said Mahara in an interview with AFP at a secret location in Kathmandu. "We will keep our arms, otherwise it will demoralise our army."

Norway worried about Lankan violence

AFP, Kilinochchi

Peacebroker Norway is "extremely concerned" about the high level of violence in Sri Lanka, Oslo's ambassador said yesterday after meeting a top Tamil guerrilla leader.

"We are extremely concerned and I think it's very important that international and diplomatic attention continues to be on the high levels of violence," ambassador Hans Brattskar said.

Amid fears of a return to full-scale war, he held discussions with S. P. Thamilselvan, the head of the political wing of the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE), for over an hour in this rebel-held town, 330km north of Colombo.

Brattskar said he had also met with officials in Colombo and had travelled Monday to northern Jaffna peninsula where he held talks with military officials, non-governmental organisations and the families of victims.

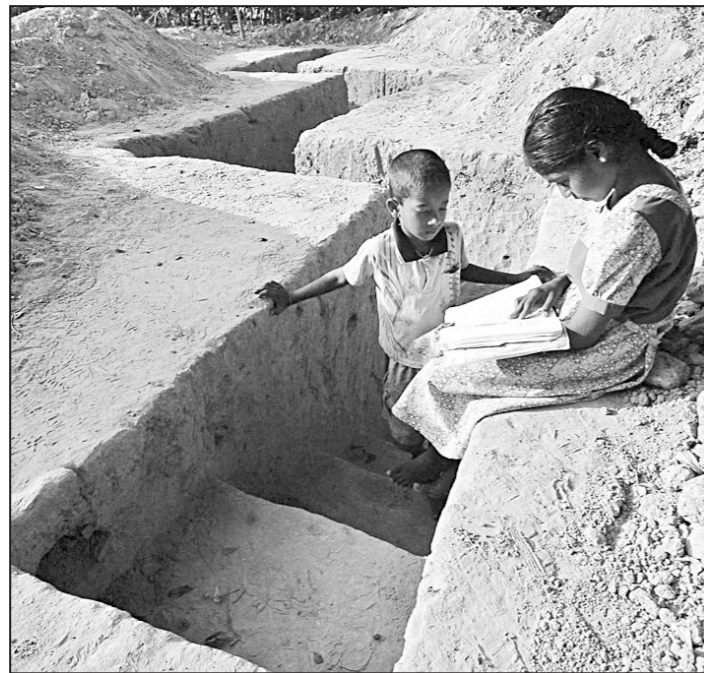


PHOTO: AFP

Children read a book while sitting in a 'self-defence' bunker in the Tamil rebel-controlled village of Uthayanagar East, near Kilinochchi yesterday. Peacebroker Norway is "extremely concerned" about the high level of violence in Sri Lanka, Oslo's ambassador Hans Brattskar said after meeting a top Tamil guerrilla leader.

Kashmir capital sealed off for PM's trip

Roundtable conference begins today

AFP, Srinagar

Indian troops sealed off large parts of Kashmir's summer capital following random grenade attacks and murders ahead of a visit today by Prime Minister Manmohan Singh.

Combat troops backed up commandos and border guards in Srinagar, where residents in several districts found themselves corralled into "sanitized zones" Tuesday amid unprecedented security before Singh's two-day trip.

"There is very tight security in view of the round-table conference and the prime minister's visit and operations are going on across the (Kashmir) valley," Indian army spokesman Lieutenant Colonel Vijay Batra told AFP.

He said Singh would head straight for a meeting of security commanders to review the situation

in Kashmir.

Muslim militants, waging an insurgency since 1989, have vowed to disrupt the talks aimed at restoring peace in the restive state.

Seven people died and 22 were wounded Sunday when rebels opposing peace efforts attacked hundreds of people at a political event in Srinagar.

The restrictions in the city of one million led to frayed tempers as office workers were forced to travel many extra miles on circuitous routes.

"Why can't the prime minister stay home in New Delhi and hold all his talks there?" asked resident Ghulam Rasool as he escorted his daughter to school near Srinagar's heavily-fortified airport zone.

US challenges Myanmar junta to release Suu Kyi this week

AFP, Washington

The United States on Monday welcomed a rare meeting between a top UN envoy and Myanmar's detained pro-democracy leader Aung San Suu Kyi but called on the Southeast Asian state's military junta to release the dissident this week when her current term of house arrest expires.

The State Department said Washington was pleased that visiting UN undersecretary for political affairs Ibrahim Gambari was able to see Aung San Suu Kyi in Yangon at the weekend but cautioned that it did not reflect progress in democratic reforms.

"The regime's decision to allow them to meet is positive, but by itself does not constitute progress," department spokesman Justin Higgins told AFP.

22 killed in Iraqi drive-by shootings, bombings

AFP, Baghdad

At least 22 people were killed yesterday in attacks including a car bombing on a busy Baghdad street, marring the first week of Iraq's new cabinet which has set restoring security as top priority.

The car bomb in the southeastern district of Baghdad al-Jadeeda targeting a police patrol killed five people and wounded seven, an interior ministry official said.

The neighbourhood has been hit repeatedly over the past three days.

In the main northern city of Mosul, a family of blacksmiths was targeted when gunmen drove up next to their car and opened fire, killing four and wounding one, police said.

Also in Mosul, a former official of the Baath party, which ruled Iraq under Saddam Hussein was killed in a drive-by shooting outside his home.

Three day labourers on their way

to work were also killed when gunmen in a car raked their mini-bus with bullets on the road from Baquba to Khalis, northeast of the capital, police said.

East of Baquba, in Balad Ruz, a bomb near the courthouse killed a 10-year-old boy and wounded two others.

In the northern oil centre of Kirkuk, a member of President Jalal Talabani's Patriotic Union of Kurdistan party working for the city education department was gunned down as he drove away from his home in the northern, oil-rich city.

In west Baghdad, gunmen opened fire on three elderly men, one of whom was blind and another disabled, killing them all.

In the city centre, a mortar round struck near the heavily fortified Green Zone administrative compound, killing one person and wounding four.