Support for Western military intervention provokes divisions within Amnesty International

Richard Tyler
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Amnesty International's *Report 2000* details widespread human rights abuses over the past year, painting a bleak picture of the situation confronting billions at the dawn of the twenty-first century. It exhaustively documents the assault on every continent against such basic democratic rights as freedom from arbitrary arrest, detention and torture, and freedom of expression and association.

This year's report is all the more noteworthy because it is prefaced by the remarks of Amnesty International Secretary General Pierre Sané that indicate a crisis within his organisation. In his foreword, he poses the questions, “Are invasion and bombardment by foreign forces justifiable in the name of human rights? And have external military interventions succeeded in winning respect for human rights?”

Sané goes on to say, “These are the issues at the heart of the debate within the human rights community and the UN over the use of external armed force to counter massive human rights abuses.” He is referring to the political reaction of many of those who have traditionally supported AI to the shift by the major imperialist powers to colonial-style policies and direct military intervention—epitomised by the NATO bombing of Yugoslavia in 1999. This has found its most steadfast defenders within a layer of liberals and ex-radicals who have, in the name of stopping human rights abuses, abandoned their earlier pacifist leanings and openly embraced the use of Western military might against small and relatively defenceless countries.

Sané identifies the pressure for Amnesty to come out in support of armed intervention:

“For members of AI, the debate [on whether to endorse military intervention] is... fuelled by frustration that AI's traditional techniques of focusing on individual victims seem to be ineffective in chaotic situations and in the face of mass abuses.” Accordingly, “Many individual AI members believe that armed intervention is the logical next step... and that there are circumstances where soldiers should be deployed to prevent or end human rights violations.”

He opposes demands by these layers for AI to overtly support armed interventions, noting that they have not succeeded in their stated aim of ending ethnic conflict and human rights abuses. But his argument for not doing so only serves to underline why such calls are being made within his organisation.

Sané veers between Pilate-like professions of impartiality—“AI has long refused to take a position on whether or not foreign armed forces should be deployed in human rights crises. We neither support nor oppose such interventions”—and assurances that, “AI does not reject the use of force...even lethal force.”

Substantially, however, his only caveat on AI's support for military intervention is that it should be conducted under the authority of the United Nations. He cites supportively the criteria advanced by UN Secretary General Kofi Annan to ensure military interventions gain the UN seal of approval, highlighting that the use of force should be “limited and proportionate...with attention paid to the repercussions upon civilian populations and the environment.”

He is forced to admit that governments conducting such operations do so for their own reasons and “a degree of politicization and national self-interest is inevitable”. Therefore he pleads that, “the humanitarian element must be credible...”

The emergence of a significant lobby within AI in support of military intervention is rooted in the political perspective on which the organisation was founded and the impact of profound historical changes on world politics, particularly the collapse of Stalinism in the Soviet Union and Eastern Europe.

The roots of the present crisis identified by Sané lie in the supposedly “non political” and “non class” perspective of the organisation. Amnesty was formed in 1961, following the publication of an article by British lawyer Peter Benenson highlighting the plight of six “prisoners of conscience.” The object of the campaign Benenson initiated was to place pressure on the offending governments to release the detainees, through mobilising public opinion. Emphasising the “impartiality” principle underlying Amnesty's work, Benenson wrote that for “the force of opinion to be effective, [it] should be broadly based, international, non-sectarian and all-party.”

From the beginning, Amnesty rejected drawing any political distinction between different regimes carrying out human rights abuse. Membership groups were explicitly welcomed on the basis that they were “prepared to condemn persecution regardless of where it occurs, who is responsible or what the ideas suppressed.” The six “prisoners of conscience” he chose to highlight in the 1961 article comprised a philosopher detained in Rumania, a civil rights activist gaoled in America, an Angolan poet jailed by the Portuguese colonial power, an archbishop held in Czechoslovakia, a trade unionist incarcerated in Greece and a Cardinal imprisoned in Hungary.

The first years of Amnesty International coincided with a radicalisation of significant layers of workers and middle class people. The organisation's early membership was largely comprised of liberal-minded professionals, particularly those involved in education.

The 1960s witnessed the emergence of a mass civil rights movement in America, the launching of the Vietnam War, armed guerrilla struggles in a number of Latin American and African countries, and an upsurge in the class struggle throughout Europe, such as the general strike movement in France of May-June 1968.

The period was one in which the Cold War between the Western powers and the Stalinist regimes dominated international political relations. The false identification of the Stalinist regime in the USSR with socialism was

constantly re-enforced by Western propaganda about the “communist threat.” Many ordinary people were repelled from seeking a socialist solution by the crimes carried out by the Kremlin and its satellites. They were encouraged to believe that the advanced capitalist countries of the West offered an, albeit imperfect, model for democratic development, at least in comparison with the police tyranny of the Stalinist bureaucracy and the oppressive regimes in many of the undeveloped countries.

The nominally non-partisan stance taken by Amnesty International was lent credibility also by the bankrupt politics of the labour and social democratic parties and trade unions in the West. Though still able to command the support of millions of working people, they refused to mobilise this social force to mount an independent defence of democratic rights. Instead they usually either supported their own government's propaganda and military adventures, or held up the United Nations as a defender of universal democratic norms of conduct. To the extent that dissenting opinion was expressed within these parties or in the larger European Communist parties, it was dominated by Stalinists and fellow travellers who either slavishly followed the line of the Kremlin or provided a critical apologia for its abuses.

Amnesty articulated the political prejudices of the liberal middle class. It held up the UN and the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, adopted by the United Nations in 1948, as enshrining the humanitarian principles on which AI was based.

This claim never stood up to close political scrutiny. The UN was created following the Second World War as the supposed representative of the “international community of nations”. But from its inception it has acted as a front organisation through which the world's major powers vie for influence and defend their interests against the smaller and weaker nations as well as against each other. It is this continual struggle of each against all that really constitutes the “international community” of global capitalism.

The political remit of the UN was always directed towards the defence of the capitalist system against the threat of social revolution. Only the embrace of the organisation by the Stalinist bureaucracy in line with its policy of “peaceful coexistence with capitalism” was able to partially obscure this central fact. The Universal Declaration of Human Rights was drafted with this aim in mind. Whereas several articles proclaim the “inalienable right” to freedom, justice and peace, article 17 enshrines the right to private property, the key element in capitalist society. Moreover, the role of the Declaration in providing legitimisation for UN actions in cases of civil unrest or revolution is made explicit in the preamble, which states “It is essential, if man is not to be compelled to have recourse, as a last resort, to rebellion against tyranny and oppression, that human rights should be protected by the rule of law.”

Amnesty was thus able to win the support of many individuals horrified by human rights abuses, but repelled by Stalinism and politically uncritical of the dominant liberal ideology of Western capitalism. It counterposed humanitarian protest to a perspective based on the political mobilisation of working people in defence of basic democratic rights, even boasting that it does “not work to change systems of government”. Its constituency was to increase dramatically during the 1980s, a decade that witnessed the rapid decay and degeneration of the official workers' movement in the West as it embraced free market policies and abandoned the reformist measures it once advocated. Many took the rightward lurch of the official labour movement as proof that only single-issue, “non political” organisations were viable and effective. Amnesty grew, attracting support on college campuses and from some prominent musicians and artists. This increased Amnesty's financial resources and the number of full-time staff expanded considerably, with offices being opened in many countries. From being a relatively small protest group, Amnesty has gained semi-official status with several international organisations such as the UN and the European Union.

It is an historic irony that AI should experience its greatest crisis at the very point where it seems organisationally most powerful and at a time when its underlying political principles were proclaimed triumphant. The collapse of Stalinism in the USSR and Eastern Europe in the 1990s was hailed as the beginning of a “New World Order”. “Communism” was proclaimed to have failed and liberal democratic values were held up as universal and unchallengeable—even heralding “The End of History”, according to one shortsighted ideologue.

Instead of a flowering of democracy and humanitarianism, however, the end of the Cold War brought with it massive social upheavals, poverty and repression. The wars and civil wars that erupted produced a seemingly never-ending stream of human misery that has had a shattering effect on Amnesty International.

The globe has once again witnessed a resurgence of militarism and colonialism. The “New World Order” proclaimed by the most aggressive imperialist power—the USA—was chillingly demonstrated on the killing fields of Iraq. Precision-guided munitions fired from the safety of the US battle fleet anchored in the Persian Gulf, or dropped from over 30,000 feet, well beyond the range of Iraqi fire, rained down on Baghdad. A country, once regarded as one of the more developed economically (and even socially) in the region was bombed back into the Middle Ages; and all in the name of human rights.

Speaking at Harvard Law School in 1993, Sané's predecessor as Secretary General, Ian Martin, pointed to the drastic changes since Amnesty was founded at the height of the Cold War, in “which the major rift among nations was the ideological division between East and West”. He said, “The human rights movement now finds itself in a radically different context from the one which shaped it.”

In his lecture—“The New World Order: Opportunity or Threat for Human Rights?”—Martin was already pointing to the political dilemma facing Amnesty. Significant sections of the formerly liberal intelligentsia had concluded from the collapse of Stalinism in the Soviet Union and Eastern Europe that only the Western powers could now act in order to prevent political instability and humanitarian abuses. “Many of today's human rights crises—most obviously Somalia and Bosnia—seem as if they can be addressed only by armed intervention,” he asserted, “Some have campaigned for armed US-led humanitarian intervention in Somalia, and some would argue for armed intervention in Bosnia today.” In language identical to that of Sané, he cautioned “against too easy an enthusiasm in the human rights movement, and especially in the United States, for military intervention on humanitarian grounds.”

In the intervening years, however, support for Western military intervention has become almost the norm in the political and social circles Amnesty has historically operated. Parties that once based themselves on opposition to war have become its most strident champions. This can be seen at its most grotesque in the transformation of the German Green Party. As late as 1990, its leaders Joschka Fischer and Daniel Cohn Bendit opposed the bombing of Iraq, proclaiming “no blood for oil.” Fischer now heads the Foreign Ministry in Berlin, and his party was at the forefront of those calling for German soldiers to once more undertake military operations in the Balkans; a region where many can still remember the tragic results of the last intervention by a German army under Hitler.

Amnesty's leadership today has no answer to the pro-military chorus of the illiberal intelligentsia other than to reiterate the moral authority of the UN as the supposed representative of the “international community.” This is patently false. The attack on Serbia last year was launched unilaterally by NATO, but was given UN clearance after the event. The American political elite treats the UN with disdain (in 1999 the US owed some $1.293 billion in outstanding UN membership dues) and acts independently of it wherever they see fit. Washington generally regards the UN as little more than a body for rubber-stamping and legitimising American actions around the world.

The UN is not some neutral arbiter, and Sané himself admits as much in his introduction, “The UN is composed of governments acting in their own interests. Every military intervention, no matter how it is described, is linked to the strategic interests of the governments behind the troops.” Among the European powers, there are those such as France who clearly regard the UN as a necessary counterweight to US hegemony in NATO.

The crisis Sané has identified inside Amnesty International is fundamentally tied up with the bankruptcy of the ideological outlook of the organisation, which subordinates the defence of human rights to the existing social order. Working people must adopt the same independent and critical attitude to abuses of human rights as they would to all attacks on basic democratic rights. They cannot be indifferent to such abuses, wherever they occur, but neither can they be indifferent to the true role played by those imperialist powers that claim to be defending them. Opposition to such abuses in an economically backward country or former colony cannot be based on supporting the major powers and former colonial masters.

The repressive character of many of the world's governments is, in the final analysis, the product of the economic and social backwardness resulting from centuries of imperialist oppression. Moreover, to the extent that human rights abuses are directed towards the political suppression of the working class, such regimes are lent either official or tacit support by the Western powers. Only when the political and economic ambitions of the major powers bring them into conflict with regimes such as that of Saddam Hussein in Iraq or Slobodan Milosevic in Yugoslavia do they seek to cloak their mercenary ambitions with talk of “defending human rights” and “upholding democracy”. After the experiences of Iraq, Somalia and the Balkans, those who continue to believe such duplicity are guilty of the worst forms of self-deceit.

The essential lesson to be drawn is that without critically addressing the nature of the system that gives rise to rampant human rights abuses and war, and identifying imperialism as its major source, it is impossible to formulate an effective policy to oppose such abuses. So long as the defence of elementary democratic rights is framed by an acceptance of capitalism and the imperialist world order, it will inevitably end up tacitly defending, if not championing, great power intervention.

Amnesty International *Report 2000* is available online at:
http://www.web.amnesty.org/web/ar2000web.nsf/ar2000

The Harvard lecture by Ian Martin can be viewed at:
http://www.law.harvard.edu/programs/HRP/Publications/martin.html