Amnesty says US leads in human rights violations following September 11

Mike Ingram
8 June 2002

The Amnesty International (AI) Report 2002 covers the period from January to December 2001, with a particular focus on the world situation following the September 11 terrorist attacks in the United States.

The foreword to the report, written by Irene Khan, secretary general of Amnesty, together with most of the introduction, addresses the attitude of governments towards human rights since the launching of the so-called war against terrorism by US President Bush.

Under the heading "Countering the backlash," Kahn notes that human rights activists now face an uphill battle: "As the 'war against terrorism' dominated world news, governments increasingly portrayed human rights as an obstacle to security, and human rights activists as romantic idealists at best, 'defenders of terrorists' at worst."

Leading into this passage she quotes a revealing comment by an unnamed government official: "'Your role collapsed with the collapse of the Twin Towers in New York.' This blunt statement to AI delegates by a senior government official captured the challenge faced by the human rights movement following the events of 11 September 2001." Amnesty was unable to source the above quotation as Kahn is presently away, but promised to do so as soon as possible. There is no reason to doubt its veracity, however, given that one attack after another on democratic rights has been mounted in the name of combating terrorism.

Kahn explains, "the readiness of governments to trade human rights in the interest of security is nothing new," but the difference today is that this is not done by "autocratic regimes but established democracies in the name of public security." Heading the list of culprits is the US itself, with Britain also earning dishonourable mention.

The summary introducing the section on the US paints a picture far removed from that presented by Bush in his recent State of the Union address, when he insisted, "America will always stand firm for the non-negotiable demands of human dignity" and that these include "the rule of law" and "equal justice."

AI writes that more than 1,200 people, mainly foreign nationals were detained during investigations into the September 11 attacks. Though public information on these detentions remains scant, it is clear that some were held incommunicado. The report speaks of "Muslim detainees suffering physical or verbal abuse from guards or other inmates while held in local jails and of cruel conditions of confinement, including prolonged solitary confinement, inadequate exercise and the wearing of shackles during non-contact visits."

In late November last year, the Attorney General revealed that 104 people had been charged with various criminal offences, "many of them minor and one directly related to 11 September, of whom half remain in custody. Another 548 unidentified individuals were held on immigration charges," the AI report states.

Alongside anti-terrorist legislation that severely curtails human rights and civil liberties, "AI has called for inquiries into several incidents involving the killing of civilians by US and allied forces during military action in Afghanistan and into the killing of hundreds of prisoners in Qala-i-Jhangi fort following an uprising."

The report continues, "An as yet unknown number of Afghan civilians were killed or injured or had their homes or property destroyed during the US-led coalition bombing which began on 7 October and continued for the rest of the year. AI raised concerns with the US authorities about specific attacks in which civilians were killed and civilian objects were destroyed, urged that investigations be conducted into possible violation of international humanitarian law and called for a moratorium on the use of cluster-weapons. In November, AI called on the USA, the United Islamic Front for the Salvation of Afghanistan (United Front) and the United Kingdom to conduct an inquiry into the deaths of hundreds of Taleban prisoners and others at Qala-i-Jhangi fort, after an uprising by some Taleban captives was put down by bombing by US warplanes and United front artillery."

Both the US and British governments denied AI's request for an investigation into what happened at the Qala-i-Jhangi fort.

The stance of the Bush administration finds its reflection throughout the globe. Indeed the AI report makes clear that the launch of the US war on terrorism has had a major destabilising effect on world politics. It is broken down into regional sections including the Americas, Asia, the Middle East and North Africa, Europe, and Africa. Whatever the region, the

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assessment notes increased militarism and the systematic abuse of human rights. Khan says in the foreword, “A number of governments jumped on the ‘anti-terrorist’ bandwagon to stifle political dissent.”

Explaining that governments, “rushed through laws formulating new crimes, banning organisations and freezing their assets, curbing civil liberties and reducing the safeguards against human rights violations,” Kahn adds, “Regrettably, a number of these laws used definitions of ‘terrorism’ which were dangerously broad and vague.”

It is indicative that Britain, America’s main ally in the war on terrorism, is also singled out for particular criticism. The section dealing with Britain includes Northern Ireland and a substantial part of the report is given over to the record of human rights violations there. As with America, however, the September 11 attacks have been seized upon to introduce sweeping new legislation that severely curtails democratic rights and civil liberties.

British Prime Minister Tony Blair sought to strengthen Britain’s ties with the US by providing crucial political support to Bush’s war drive. As with Bush, the climate of hysteria produced after the terrorist attacks provided a useful cloak behind which to make inroads into democratic rights and civil liberties within Britain.

The report explains, “In the United Kingdom (UK), the government passed ‘emergency’ legislation which provided for detention of foreign nationals without charge or trial, thereby creating a shadow criminal justice system without the essential safeguards of the formal system. Legislation was passed in the USA allowing for indefinite detention on national security grounds of non-US nationals facing deportation,” Kahn writes.

“The Anti-terrorism, Crime and Security Act 2001 was passed in December after less than a month of parliamentary and public scrutiny. The UK derogated from Article 5(t) of the European Convention on Human Rights and Article 9 of the ICCPR [International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights] in order to allow for indefinite administrative detention. Under the Act, the Secretary of State may order such detention, without charge or trial and without recourse to judicial review, of any non-UK national deemed a ‘suspected international terrorist and national security risk’ on the basis of reasonable suspicion. The evidence would not be subject to public scrutiny or effective challenge. Among other measures, the Act also denies asylum-seekers labelled as ‘terrorist’ the right to have the merits of their claim individually assessed. In December, eight people were detained under the new legislation.” the report says.

In a separate press briefing on anti-terrorism legislation internationally, AI says of the European Union, “The European Commission prepared a proposal for a set of ‘terrorism’ offences that all member states should prohibit. In Amnesty International’s view, some of the proposed offences were excessively broad or too vague and could criminalise peaceful activities. The Commission also proposed an EU arrest warrant and surrender procedures between member states. Aspects of this would infringe human rights guarantees, e.g. not to be extradited to a jurisdiction where the person might face an unfair trial. New measures might prevent people from seeking asylum on the basis that they may be involved in ‘acts of terrorism’ without fully considering their claims in fair and satisfactory procedures.”

Kahn goes on to cite many other examples of countries that have imposed repressive and undemocratic legislation, concluding, “the aftermath of 11 September saw a resurgence in the powers of the military. More and more civilians were detained by the military and tried by military courts. Military forces, as well as unaccountable security and intelligence services, were increasingly involved in public security functions and in intelligence operations targeted at the civilian population.”

The “hypocrisy and selectivity of governments,” while not new, “became even clearer in the drive to build an alliance in the ‘war against terrorism’. Governments remained silent on abuses committed by those they counted or sought as allies. The same governments that denounced the human rights abuse of women by the Taleban government of Afghanistan remained silent about the plight of women in Saudi Arabia. Those who condemned human rights violations in Iraq did not protest against human rights violations by Russian troops in Chechnya, or by the authorities in Uzbekistan against Muslims who peacefully practise their faith outside state controls.”

The AI report draws particular attention to the impact of the war on terrorism upon immigrants and asylum seekers. Kahn states that the “tendency... to portray foreigners, particularly refugees and asylum-seekers, as ‘terrorists’” has led to “a refuelling of the fires of racism... People were attacked in the USA, Canada, western Europe, parts of Asia and Africa, not for what they did but for who they were, simply for being a Muslim or Arab or Asian, or even for looking like a Muslim, Arab or Asian.”

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