

500 YEARS ON

**A**mnesty International is a worldwide human rights movement which works impartially for the release of prisoners of conscience: men, women and children detained anywhere for their beliefs, color, ethnic origin, sex, religion or language, provided they have neither used nor advocated violence.

Amnesty International opposes torture, "disappearances", extrajudicial executions and the death penalty in all cases without reservation and advocates fair and prompt trials for all political prisoners. AI is independent of any government, political faction, ideology, economic interest or religious creed. AI has been active since 1961, and was the recipient of the 1977 Nobel Prize for Peace.

Our success depends on the support of member-volunteers like yourself who are ready to write letters, send telegrams, organize meetings and join in the effort to publicize instances of human rights abuse. The local Fredericton AI Group is establishing a new Youth/campus group and is seeking for new members at UNB and STU.

Around the world, 1992 is being marked as the 500th anniversary of the arrival of Europeans in the Americas.

Since colonization the indigenous peoples of the region have suffered gross human rights violations, including massacres, targeted killings and "disappearances".

These abuses, and the ravages of disease and starvation, have virtually eliminated indigenous peoples from parts of the Americas.

Discrimination has further marginalized indigenous peoples: forced assimilation or evangelization has weakened their cultural identity. Today, the more than 30 million indigenous people who live in the Americas are often poor, suffering social and economic discrimination and limitations of their civil and political rights.

Human rights violations against indigenous people often arise out of disputes over land or resource use or ownership. In many countries, a pattern of official indifference or complicity has allowed indigenous peoples to be driven from their ancestral lands by the state or by private institutions and individuals. Indigenous rights activists have often suffered reprisals for campaigning on issues such as protection, retention, return or just compensation for land; self-determination or autonomy; and defence of cultural rights. Some have been murdered or "disappeared" by soldiers or police officers, others by the "death squads" - off-duty or plainclothes security agents acting with the collusion or acquiescence of the authorities. Hired gunmen have also been implicated in killings, threats and other abuses aimed at removing indigenous people from land wanted for commercial exploitation. The agents of repression often benefit from total impunity - exemption from punishment - because governments refuse to take action against the killers.

In Honduras for example, nine leaders of the Federation of Xicaque Tribes of Yoro have been killed in the past four years. The federation defends the rights of indigenous peoples to lands they claim have been unlawfully seized by civilians or government agents. No one has been brought to justice for any of these killings.

When governments fight an internal war against armed insurgency movements, indigenous communities living in the areas of conflict are often caught in the crossfire, suffering "disappearances", abductions, targeted killings and collective reprisals, including brutal massacres. Quechua and Aymara speaking peasants in Peru's Andean highlands have been the victims of both government forces and the clandestine Communist Party of Peru (Shining Path) during nearly 12 years of armed conflict. A pattern of "disappearance" and extrajudicial execution by the army has claimed the lives of

thousands of indigenous people in Colombia, Peru and Guatemala.

In Colombia, Peru and Bolivia, remote indigenous areas sometimes contain illegal coca plantations and drug smuggling routes. Some indigenous people use coca leaves in religious ceremonies or as part of their traditional way of life; a number have turned to cultivating coca as a reliable cash crop. As attempts to eradicate cocaine trafficking intensify, these factors can make indigenous peoples vulnerable to charges of involvement in drug trafficking or offering safe havens to drug smugglers or producers, accusations which can provide a pretext for officially sanctioned abuses.

Witnesses to abuses against indigenous peoples and people working in indigenous communities have also been threatened, attacked and "disappeared". Victims' relatives often become vulnerable when campaigning for those detained or "disappeared"; some, including children, have been targeted simply because they are related to people the authorities regard as "dangerous" or "subversive".

Melchisedec Velasco Allende and Miguel Angel Velasco, two and my wife and they would undress her and the girls in order to rape them in front of me, and that they were then going to start killing them one by one, starting with the youngest girls."

Triqui children from the Mexican state of Oaxaca "disappeared" in July 1988. They were allegedly abducted because Miguel Angel Velasco, father of one of the boys, was an activist in the Movement for Triqui Unity and Struggle, a non-violent Indian rights reform organization which was actively pressing an Indian land claim. Despite an official inquiry, the whereabouts of the two boys remain unknown. Spurred by a history of repression and victimization, indigenous peoples across the Americas and their supporters are mobilizing.

In the past 20 years, hundreds of new indigenous organizations have joined existing groups in the campaign to protect indigenous rights and raise awareness of the discrimination and repression they have suffered. Many of the activists involved in organizing indigenous peoples and publicizing their grievances have been victimized. But this has not stopped the work for which many have given up their lives.

Some progress has been made - mainly when indigenous people themselves have fought for change - but much remains to be done.

The human rights of indigenous peoples in the Americas continue to be massively abused. Only when the governments of the region recognize and enforce their commitments to protect the rights of all of their citizens can they begin to redress five hundred years of abuses.



The forms of torture inflicted on indigenous peoples and others throughout the Americas remain legion. Government agents use torture and ill-treatment to extract information from captives suspected of involvement in "subversive" activities, to punish political activists, or to dissuade others from joining or supporting the opposition. Many of the victims have been tortured to death.

In Brazil, in October 1988, Velario Tamir, a Macuxi Indian from north-east Roraima, was found dead in his cell at the police station in Normandia. He and two other Macuxi Indians had been arrested the night before after scuffles had broken out at an election rally. Other youths in custody said that they had all been badly beaten.

In 1990 the military police commander in Normandia told an AI delegate that four civil police officers had been charged with "bodily harm, followed by death", in connection with the killing. However, the officers charged have reportedly not appeared at any of the three court hearings set, and the case has effectively stalled.

One of the cruelest forms of torture is psychological. In a testimony given after his escape from a Guatemalan military base in 1982, indigenous leader Emeterio Toj Medrano said that although he had been tortured with electric shocks and confined in an oven, the hardest thing to bear had been the threats against his family: "The army threatened to murder my family in Huehuetenango. They told me that they had already kidnapped them, that they had all the children

Canada: There are an estimated 920 000 indigenous people in Canada, four percent of the population.

#### Land and Resources

In Brazil, Damião Mendes' body was found face down in the mud of a river bank in June 1990. He had been shot in the back of the neck. Nearby lay the body of his nephew, 19-year-old Mario Davis. Both men came from the Macuxi Indian Settlement of Santa Cruz near Normandia. The killings fell into a pattern of repeated attacks on the Macuxi Indians of Santa Cruz; the Macuxi community lies on land claimed by the largest private cattle estate in the area.

The basic facts of this case are far from exceptional: scores of Brazilian Indians have been murdered in similar circumstances, and the authorities have repeatedly failed to bring the guilty to justice. Damião Mendes and Mario Davis were killed because of a land dispute. The investigation into the case was cursory, and no one has been charged with the murders.

In the USA, Lakota Sioux Leonard Peltier, a leader of the American Indian Movement (AIM), is serving two consecutive life sentences for the 1975 killing of two Federal Bureau of Investigation (FBI) agents on the Pine Ridge Indian Reservation in South Dakota. The agents were shot and killed in a gunfight with Indian activists.

The Pine Ridge Reservation is rich in uranium deposits, and AIM had reportedly been invited to Pine Ridge in an effort to prevent uranium mining on the reservation.

Leonard Peltier, who has consistently denied killing the FBI agents, may have been singled out for particularly aggressive prosecution because of his role in AIM. Moreover, there were irregularities in the trial proceedings which led to his conviction. Leonard Peltier was extradited from Canada in 1976 on the basis of evidence which the FBI admitted fabricating, and the trial judge refused to allow evidence demonstrating a pattern of FBI misconduct in other cases. Such evidence could have shown the jury that

the authorities were prepared to use improper methods to secure convictions.

These and other factors have led AI to conclude that Leonard Peltier should be granted a retrial.

#### What You Can Do:

Amnesty International (AI) does more than just talk about human rights violations; it expects its members and supporters to take action, and to encourage others to take action too. You may already sympathize with our aims, but we need more than sympathy. Get in touch with the Amnesty International section in your country and tell them you want to join in the action. You can also involve other people in this campaign. Many of us have access to large groups or organizations such as workplaces, unions, churches or social clubs. Contact your local Amnesty International office and ask them how you can help distribute this article to other people you know.

This article is a part of Amnesty International's 1992 campaign to stop human rights violations against indigenous peoples in the Americas.

#### Ten Steps to Protect the Human Rights of Indigenous Peoples

- Initiate a national review of whether international standards that protect the rights of indigenous peoples have been implemented. The rights examined should include all fundamental civil, political, economic, social and cultural rights.
- Investigate all reports of human rights violations against indigenous peoples and bring those responsible to justice. No impunity for violations should be permitted.
- All detainees should be brought promptly before a judge, and given regular access to lawyers, relatives and doctors. Ensure that all prisoners are treated humanely and that the special needs of indigenous detainees are respected.

- Protect victims and witnesses who give evidence of human rights violations.
- Guarantee that land disputes will be quickly and justly resolved.

- Instruct the security forces that basic human rights must be protected under all circumstances, including internal conflict or other national emergency.
- Prevent the forcible return of any person to a country where he or she would risk serious human rights violations.
- Make human rights education materials available in indigenous languages and ensure that indigenous peoples are aware of their rights.
- Consult indigenous peoples about all matters affecting their protected rights.
- Take measures to end discrimination against indigenous peoples, which has been a key factor in human rights violations against them.

If you are interested in finding out more about Amnesty International, or how you can become involved as an active member, please contact:

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Watch for posters around campus regarding future meetings and AI publicity campaigns.



Human rights violations against the indigenous peoples of the Americas