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Amnesty International Today

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CURT GOERING

*Amnesty International Today**

I am very happy to speak to you today. I know that there is a strong thread within the Catholic tradition which emphasizes issues relating to social justice and human rights and the individual's responsibility to help make this world a little bit of a less painful place. And I speak to you today with deep respect for your work, and inspired by some of the great human rights fighters of your tradition. You should know that there are thousands of people who are more qualified and could speak with more authority about the meaning and importance of human rights than I. Unfortunately, for reasons very much beyond their control none of these people could be here today. I would like to tell you about just three of them. They are the reason I'm here, the reason Amnesty International exists.

I cannot talk to you about human rights without thinking of someone like Father Francis Wang Yijun, the 75 year-old Roman Catholic Vicar General of the Wenzhou Diocese in China. He was sentenced last February to three years of "re-education through labor." Father Wang had previously spent thirteen years in prison because of his religious convictions. When he was released in February, he was immediately re-sentenced to another three years for refusing to repent and for maintaining ties to the underground Catholic church in Wenzhou. He is one of thirty Roman Catholic priests, bishops, and church members who were arrested and imprisoned in North China over the past two years, persecuted and prosecuted for remaining loyal to the Vatican and refusing to join the official church in China, jailed in effect for recognizing and affirming that there is a higher authority than the state.

I think also of Abie Nathan, a well-known Jewish peace campaigner in Israel. He was sentenced again just this month to

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another one and one-half years in prison for having met PLO Chairman Yassir Arafat in Tunis earlier this year. Upon receiving his

sentence, he said it was a sad day for democracy, human rights, and peace. He said he was convinced that Israeli leaders would eventually have to do what he did if they were really interested in negotiating a settlement to the conflict. Abie Nathan got another prison term, joining the hundreds of Palestinian political prisoners, for doing what you are doing here and what many of you do every day, trying to break down the walls which divide people, and working for peace.

And I can't forget the story of Gurmit Kaur from India, only seventeen when she was arrested, tortured, and raped, because her father and brother were accused of hiding members of an armed Sikh opposition group. During interrogation, she was blindfolded, beaten, and hung upside down, and had chili powder put in her eyes. Then, like so many women prisoners, she was raped, repeatedly. Just like so many other torture victims, even if she is released, she will now in some ways always be a prisoner.

These are brave, courageous people but their stories are awful, terrible. I don't like to stand up here and tell these stories. I wish they didn't have to be told. These kinds of stories were to have ended with the defeat of fascism. In 1948, just three years after the end of one of the worst examples of government terror the world has ever known, out of the incomprehensible pain and suffering that resulted because a government believed there was nothing that could not be done to human beings in the name of the state, there emerged a remarkable document: the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, the foundation of the modern day human rights movement.

For the first time in human history, virtually all the governments of the world agreed that every human being has certain rights that governments can never violate for any reason. Everyone has the right, they proclaimed, to freedom of thought, conscience, and religion, of opinion and expression. Everyone has the right to life and the right not to be subjected, for any reason, to torture and cruel, inhuman, and degrading punishment or treatment. That was almost forty-three years ago. December 10, the anniversary of the document which promised that the lessons of the holocaust would never be forgotten, should be today an occasion of celebration. Instead, it is an occasion for anger. Because we know that today, in 1991, torture and murder, abduction and imprisonment – often sanctioned at the highest levels of government – are systematic practices in nations around the world.

Your community is unfortunately only too familiar with this ugly reality: just look at El Salvador and Guatemala. Thousands have been liquidated by death squads acting under official orders or abducted by security forces and never seen again. Special courts have ordered wholesale political executions. Victims have been shot or hanged after summary hearings, often without any right of appeal, and sometimes without even any hearing at all. Deaths in prison or military or police custody are reported regularly, often as a direct result of torture.

In many countries, imprisonment on racial, religious, or political grounds goes on indefinitely. Let's remember the continued imprisonment of the Buddhist monks in Tibet. In the words of a former victim, now free, the prisoners' cells have become "tombs for the living." Today, in 1991, still more than half the governments of the world are holding what we call prisoners of conscience: men, women, and in many cases even children who have never used or advocated violence and are in jail only because of what they have said or written, or because of what their parents did.

We know that in more than 50 countries there are people in prisons who have never been tried, and often who have never even been charged. We know that in 1977, the year Amnesty International received the Nobel Peace Prize, there was an extermination camp in full operation in Pnomh Penh, Cambodia, in which 20,000 people were liquidated, and that today in scores of countries from Guatemala to Burma there are governments which simply murder their own citizens. And the full extent of these atrocities may never become. Just this week new mass graves of thousands of Buddhist monks executed in the 1930s were discovered in Mongolia. And the returning Khmer Rouge now wants all of us to forget the millions killed in Kampuchea less than fifteen years ago. This is during our lifetime, not some part of ancient history. And this week the Khmer Rouge said it wants to close down the museums at the prisons where thousands were executed. They want to remove the evidence so that people will forget.

We know that in more than sixty countries, thousands of people have been subjected to the cruelest of all punishments – they have been put to death – and that whether it is executions without trial in China, or the executions following a lengthy trial process in the United States, the result is the same: a human being is exterminated in

the name of the state. In our own so-called civilized country we have more juvenile offenders on death row than any country in the world, and have executed more of them in the last decade than any country except Iran or Iraq.

Torture that is just as gruesome as the Nazis used is practiced systematically in more than one-third of the world's nations, from the prisons of Mexico to the detention camps of Myanmar, now Burma or South Korea, from Turkey, where wives have been tortured in front of their husbands, to Iran, where children have been forced to watch the torture of their mothers. In Kuwait under Iraqi occupation, over the past few months we have seen the horrific and graphic evidence of the most brutal forms of torture on television for all to see. And yet this very thing had been happening inside Iraq for more than the previous ten years, documented meticulously in report after report by Amnesty International, and no one bothered to pay attention: not the US government, not the United Nations, not Saddam Hussein. And now that the Kuwaitis are back, human rights violations are again being perpetrated.

It is all systems of governments that are at fault. Prisoners of conscience are held both in countries with free elections and countries with no elections. Torture is reported from countries with civilian governments and countries with military governments. Political prisoners are held without charge or trial in countries of the left and countries of the right. Both democracies and dictatorships execute their own citizens. This hypocrisy on human rights must end. Torture is torture and murder is murder, whether it is done by the Iraqis in Kuwait, the Iraqis in Iraq, the Egyptians, Syrians, or Israelis, and we must be opposed to it wherever it happens.

This is how far we have to go: as the Iraqi government's human rights record worsened, after it twice used chemical weapons against its own population who happened to be Kurdish, following the disappearance of thousands, following the mass executions of large numbers of political prisoners and the widespread and systematic use of torture, including children as young as five years old, the UNHRC in 1989 voted to take Iraq off the list of countries whose human rights record were subject to confidential scrutiny. The United States government that same year refused to co-sponsor a resolution critical of Iraq's human rights record on the grounds that it was ``too

confrontational." And in June of last year, just six weeks prior to Iraq's invasion of Kuwait, the Bush administration before the Senate refused to agree with Amnesty International's assessment of the human rights situation in Iraq. Then a few weeks later, when the victims were Kuwaitis, instead of Kurds or other Iraqis, Saddam Hussein was roundly condemned. It is an appalling testament to the hypocrisy of our times and it is proof, if that were ever needed, of how much we still have left to do.

And we know that right now, as we gather here, in countries from China to Cuba to Peru or Sri Lanka, and from Syria to Vietnam to Iran or Israel, thousands upon thousands of political prisoners languish, uncharged and untried, in filthy and overcrowded prison camps, in mountains and in deserts, beaten humiliated, and isolated. This is the awful reality of human rights in the world today, and it is no a secret. We can't say what so many people tried to say after the Second World War (remember Nuremberg): we didn't know; we never heard; we thought it was only rumors. We do know: because of the work of human rights groups and others, anyone who can read a newspaper or watch television or listen to a radio knows.

So we say something else. We search for another defense. We say "What can we do? What can individuals do against governments so far away, governments so ruthless that they are willing to allow even children to be tortured?" Well, here is what one individual did.

Peter Benenson is a British lawyer who in 1961 was riding the subway when he noticed an item about two students in Portugal. Sitting at an outdoor cafe, they had dared to raise a toast to liberty. For that "crime" they were sentenced to seven years' imprisonment. Benenson was outraged and began to dash off a letter of protest to the Portuguese government. He'd done that sort of thing before, so often that this time it occurred to him that more was needed. One letter never seemed to have much effect. But what if there were a hundred letters, or a thousand, or even tens of thousands, coming not just from Britain, but from all over the world, letters aimed at freeing specific individuals in jail for their beliefs. He put this simple, and what some must have thought eccentric, idea into an article titled "The Forgotten Prisoners," which began, "Open your newspaper any day of the year and you'll find a report from somewhere of someone imprisoned, tortured, or executed because his/her beliefs are unacceptable to their

government." The article appeared in the *London Observer* and then scores of other newspapers. The response was overwhelming. Offers of help began to pour in. Amnesty International was born.

Today Amnesty International is a worldwide movement, with more than 1,100,000 members and supporters in 160 countries. There are more than 6000 groups in over 70 countries, and that includes the many groups here in New England. The groups here, like all the others, consist of volunteers from all walks of life, all political views, who come together to work on behalf of their assigned prisoners of conscience, those arrested because of the nonviolent expression of their views, and on behalf of anyone threatened with torture or execution. And more and more of our members are young people, especially college students. These young people are becoming a formidable force for human rights, and with their energy we can and we will enter a new era of human rights protection.

These activists are backed up by a 280 person staff at the International Secretariat; a research department, which through missions and contacts documents the violations of human rights; a campaign and membership unit, which mobilizes members in all parts of the world to stop them; and a press and publications department, which through the media increases the pressure of public opinion. But as big and sophisticated as Amnesty International has grown, its starting point remains the outrage of the individual over the unjust imprisonment, torture, or execution of another individual. The link to the individual human being in the prison cell is the key to understanding how and why Amnesty International works.

It is because we have the responsibility for the freedom, and often the lives, of real men and women that we keep our mandate limited. We are not trying to remake the world, and we don't pretend to have the key to universal happiness. We don't even work for all the rights contained in the Universal Declaration of Human Rights. We limit ourselves — and believe me, it gives us plenty to do — to freeing prisoners of conscience, guaranteeing fair trials for all political prisoners, and stopping any prisoner, whether political or not, from being tortured or subjected to the cruelest of all punishments: death. We limit ourselves not because we don't care about those other things or think that other causes such as ending hunger or bringing peace are not equally important, but because we want to be effective. We have

to be effective. Human lives are immediately at stake.

It is because we are rooted in concerns for the individual human being that we must be impartial and accurate. It is not that we are any less opinionated or biased than any other group of people. Probably we are more so. And if our goal was to overthrow a government or win support for a particular ideology, perhaps we could afford to engage in rhetoric or be a little loose with our facts. But when your purpose is to persuade governments to give someone freedom or protect their life, every sign of political bias, every loose fact, every bit of inflammatory language, can mean prolonging or intensifying the suffering of a human being.

And it is because Amnesty International's only allegiance is to the individual – not to a political party, not to a religion, or ideology, or economic interest – that we can speak the truth. We frankly don't care if the government is torturing someone in the name of the revolution, or in the name of fighting revolution, or in the name of restoring order so that democracy might flourish. All we care about is that the torture stop. And to stop, we must first tell the truth about it.

That truth does indeed have power. Think about how many governments over the past decade have collapsed because human rights abuses ran rampant? Human rights information and action can and has unleashed a chain of events which have led to the fall of governments. We have just seen this happen. The truth about human rights violations was decisive in the overthrow of governments in recent times, as Erich Honecker of East Germany and Nikolai Ceausescu of Romania learned too late. Like so many others before them, these governments followed in the unfortunate tradition of the Shah of Iran, Somoza of Nicaragua, Marcos of the Philippines, Duvalier of Haiti, General Numeiry of the Sudan, and the list goes on.

It is because of that power that governments of all kinds spend so much time trying to destroy our credibility, not by questioning our facts – they are rarely if ever able to do that – but by questioning our motivations. The government of Guatemala has charged that we are communists, with "unhinged minds and with obsessive ideological aberrations." Radio Moscow once reported that "The role of coordination on the massive propaganda attack against the USSR belongs to Amnesty International. Threads from this organization based in London lead to American, British, and Israeli secret

services." The Iranian government was more original. According to them, we are "lackeys of Satanic power." And the former President of Afghanistan said that Amnesty International had "a fertile imagination and is spoon-fed by the propaganda centers of Radio Peking, the BBC, the Voice of America, Islamabad, and Teheran."

We respond to these attacks by publishing them periodically. Last week it was Djibouti and Peru. The fact that we can be called communist and anti-communist by different governments, sometimes literally in the same week, seems to us strong evidence of our impartiality. In today's world, with the collapse of the Soviet Union and Eastern European authoritarian states, this may no longer be the same measure it once was. But it is because of this impartiality, and the credibility related to it, that Amnesty International is able to mobilize hundred of thousands of people around the world to act on behalf of people they have never met, who speak a different language, come from a different culture, but who look to them with hope.

Is that hope justified? Does it work? Does publicity and letter-writing really break down prison walls? Can people in one country free people imprisoned far away in another? These questions are not easy to answer. We know from thirty years of experience that even the most repressive government does not want to be hated around the world, is afraid of the impact of a bad public image on its national interests. Turkey, where torture is still a widespread and systematic practice, is not the only country to pay millions for professional help to improve its images. Governments forced to choose between contributing to that bad image or letting a prisoner go free will often open the cell, and that is precisely what they did in nearly 1500 cases last year. We know there is a very high ratio – some studies put it at above 50% – between letter-writing campaigns and improvements in a prisoner's situation. But we also know that it is counter-productive for Amnesty International to claim that it has forced a government to release someone. So we don't. Instead, we let others give their opinion of the importance of this work.

A Soviet prisoner wrote:

Sometimes your spirits sink and you despair – and suddenly
you get a letter from some city where you have
never been, and where you know nobody. What joy!

All your troubles go away and your soul becomes cheerful again.

Another of the many victims was a teacher in Latin America. While he was being tortured by the police they opened a telephone line between the torture chamber and the prisoner's home, forcing his wife to listen to her husband's screams. During that ordeal she died of a heart attack. The prisoner himself survived and was eventually allowed to go into exile with his children. He told us: "They killed my wife. They would have killed me too, but you intervened and saved my life."

And some times we hear from the other side. A former Salvadoran torturer known in the United States told a journalist: "If there is a lot of pressure – like from Amnesty International or some foreign countries – then we might pass them, the prisoners, on to a judge. But if there's no pressure, then they're dead." And from a Latin American prisoner who knows first hand how true that statement is, came this letter:

For years I was held in a tiny cell. My only human contact was with my torturers. For two and a half of those years I did not experience the glance of a human face, see a green leaf. My only company was the cockroaches and mice. The only daylight that entered my cell was through a small opening at the top of one wall. For eight months I had my hands and feet tied.

On Christmas eve, the door to my cell opened and the guard tossed in a crumpled piece of paper. I moved as best I could to pick up the paper. It said simply: "Constantine, do not be discouraged; we know you are alive." It was signed "Monica" and had the Amnesty International candle on it. Those words saved my life and my sanity. Eight months later I was set free.

These and so many letters like them are the answer to the

question "What can we do?" We may not be able to stop all this completely, but we can create a world where it happens less.

Forty-three years ago, the governments of the world promised it would never happen again. But it has happened, and is happening, again and again, in countries around the world. Nineteen-hundred-and-ninety-two is a good time, not to celebrate Columbus' discovery of America, but to remember what that meant for millions of Native Americans, and what it still means today. The ordeal is not yet over. The human rights abuses against Native Americans continues, and Amnesty International members around the world must be much stronger in our fight against those violations which are being done right here at home.

As we approach the year 2000, we need to recognize that human rights work is more important than ever. Our responsibilities are greater than ever. Had more attention been paid to human rights in Iraq, Saddam Hussein may not have felt that he could get away with what he did. He had every reason to believe he could get away with it. When human rights are abused, it's a sign that something else is seriously wrong, as we should have learned by now, a type of early warning system we should all watch out for.

The best future would be for Amnesty International to be able to go out of business tomorrow. I'm sure you too would rather hear about more pleasant things than what I'm talking about. But countless prisoners remain. Torture remains. Executions are reported daily. As long as these exist, we need help. We need whatever you have to give: time, money, a piece of your freedom. More than ever, we need people like you to work with us. Thousands of prisoners look to the human rights movement, and that means to those of you in groups and to those of you who write individually. They look to you with hope. You are one of the few hopes for many. They expect Amnesty International to be able to do something.

Our work is a long-standing commitment we have made to the prisoners. As long as they are incarcerated for their beliefs, we must be ready to use our freedom in defense of theirs. And we will not stop until the last prisoner of conscience has been freed, the last torture chamber is closed, and the last execution has been carried out forever.