

HUMAN RIGHTS A THORNY ISSUE IN ASIA DESPITE OFFICIAL SILENCE.By **Chaitanya Kalbag**

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MANILA, Sept 30, Reuter - Charges of widespread human rights violations in Asia met silence or official denials on Wednesday but a Reuter poll showed personal liberty is still a prized possession across much of the sprawling continent.

The charges were made by the London-based Amnesty International in its annual report for 1986.

Amnesty cited mass arrests in India, executions in China and massacres by Soviet and Afghan forces in Afghanistan, as well as mass arrests of political opponents in Pakistan and Bangladesh.

Thai officials said they had no comment on Amnesty's charges that the government mistreated Kampuchean refugees.

Thongchai Phatara-Sunthornchai, a Thai human rights lawyer, said more important was the treatment of common convicts.

"Prison authorities want to maintain order at any cost, so infringements are severely punished ... the attitude is to reform prisoners by breaking them," he said.

Authorities in Malaysia, where Amnesty said the death penalty for drug-related offences was being increasingly used, also declined comment on the punishment, in force since 1983.

Chandra Muzaffar, President of Aliran, a social reform group, said about 30 political prisoners were still being held some years after they were arrested under the Internal Security Act (ISA) which permits indefinite detention without trial.

In Peking, Chinese officials condemned the Amnesty report, which said 257 people were executed in the country last year, some at humiliating mass rallies. Executions are believed to total at least 10,000 since 1983.

Amnesty said local Chinese officials were sometimes guilty of arbitrary use of torture. One official ordered the torture of 17 people he suspected of stealing a part of his bicycle bell.

A police spokesman called the torture report "malicious fabrication", while a Foreign Ministry official accused Amnesty of being biased against China.

"Our policy is to oppose and deal with these illegal incidents," he said. "Amnesty International has always observed China through coloured spectacles."

Indian officials also had no comment on Amnesty's finding that torture was a serious problem in the country.

Sikh politicians in Punjab state, wracked by a violent separatist campaign, have accused police of killing many suspected extremists in "fake encounters".

An Indian Home Ministry spokesman said senior officials have toured Punjab villages asking for evidence of the alleged police killings. "So far only a few cases have been mentioned to police," he added.

The spokesman confirmed that about 370 Sikhs were still being detained following the Indian Army storming of the Sikhs' holiest shrine, Amritsar's Golden Temple, in June 1984.

He said a petition by the detained Sikhs was pending before the Supreme Court and declined further comment. Three anti-terrorist laws passed by the government since 1984 allow police to conduct searches and seize property without warrants and hold extremist suspects without trial.

Bangladesh's Deputy Prime Minister Abdul Matin denied Amnesty's allegations about mass political arrests.



"The report is totally wrong. We haven't had any mass arrests of political opponents," said Matin, who also heads the Home Ministry. But he added that some political leaders, mainly from left-wing groups, had been imprisoned in the past few months on charges of inciting anti-government violence.

The existence of political prisoners is also denied in Pakistan, but opposition politicians say several hundred people are serving sentences imposed by military courts before President Mohammad Zia-ul-Haq lifted martial law in 1985.

Opposition leader Benazir Bhutto called for an amnesty for such people last Monday.

Across the border in Afghanistan, both sides in the nine-year-old guerrilla war regularly trade allegations of atrocities, few of which can be independently confirmed.

The Kabul government and its Soviet backers accuse the Mujahideen rebels of shooting down civilian planes, rocketing schools and mosques and terrorising villages. The guerrillas allege widespread carpet bombing, destruction of crops and villages and the execution and torture of political opponents.

Amnesty said there was a marked improvement in the Philippines after the overthrow of President Ferdinand Marcos in February 1986 and human rights groups confirmed the trend.

A spokesman for the Task Force Detainees of the Philippines, a church-backed group, said only 291 people, mainly militant farmers and left-wing labour unionists, were in detention at the end of 1986 compared to 1,712 at the beginning.

He said 406 political prisoners were in detention at the end of last month.

Mary Concepcion Bautista, Chairwoman of the government's Commission on Human Rights, denied there were any political prisoners. "They are charged with specific crimes," she said.

Bautista said the commission, established by the country's new constitution, had the power to subpoena witnesses and hold hearings. She said nobody could be held without charges in the Philippines, adding: "This government does not tolerate any violations of human rights."

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