* **Amnesty International releases its Annual Report for 2016 to 2017**
* **Risk of domino effect as powerful states backtrack on human rights commitments**
* **Salil Shetty, head of the global movement, warns that “never again” has become meaningless as states fail to react to mass atrocities**

Politicians wielding a toxic, dehumanizing “us vs them” rhetoric are creating a more divided and dangerous world, warned Amnesty International today as it launched its annual assessment of human rights around the world.

The report, *The State of the World’s Human Rights,* delivers the most comprehensive analysis of the state of human rights around the world, covering 159 countries. It warns that the consequences of “us vs them” rhetoric setting the agenda in Europe, the United States and elsewhere is fuelling a global pushback against human rights and leaving the global response to mass atrocities perilously weak.

“2016 was the year when the cynical use of ‘us vs them’ narratives of blame, hate and fear took on a global prominence to a level not seen since the 1930s. Too many politicians are answering legitimate economic and security fears with a poisonous and divisive manipulation of identity politics in an attempt to win votes,” said Salil Shetty, Secretary General of Amnesty International.

 “Divisive fear-mongering has become a dangerous force in world affairs. Whether it is Trump, Orban, Erdoğan or Duterte, more and more politicians calling themselves anti-establishment are wielding a toxic agenda that hounds, scapegoats and dehumanizes entire groups of people.

 “Today’s politics of demonization shamelessly peddles a dangerous idea that some people are less human than others, stripping away the humanity of entire groups of people. This threatens to unleash the darkest aspects of human nature.”

**Politics of demonization drives global pushback on human rights**

Seismic political shifts in 2016 exposed the potential of hateful rhetoric to unleash the dark side of human nature. The global trend of angrier and more divisive politics was exemplified by Donald Trump’s poisonous campaign rhetoric, but political leaders in various parts of the world also wagered their future power on narratives of fear, blame and division.

This rhetoric is having an increasingly pervasive impact on policy and action. In 2016, governments turned a blind eye to war crimes, pushed through deals that undermine the right to claim asylum, passed laws that violate free expression, incited murder of people simply because they are accused of using drugs, justified torture and mass surveillance, and extended draconian police powers.

Governments also turned on refugees and migrants; often an easy target for scapegoating. Amnesty International’s Annual Report documents how 36 countries violated international law by unlawfully sending refugees back to a country where their rights were at risk.

Most recently, President Trump put his hateful xenophobic pre-election rhetoric into action by signing an executive order in an attempt to [prevent refugees from seeking resettlement in the USA](https://www.amnesty.org/en/latest/news/2017/01/usa-trumps-policy-decisions-blocking-refugees-puts-hateful-rhetoric-into-action/" \t "_blank); blocking people fleeing conflict and persecution from war-torn countries such as Syria from seeking safe haven in the country.

Meanwhile, Australia purposefully inflicts terrible suffering by trapping refugees on Nauru and Manus Island, the EU made an illegal and reckless deal with Turkey to send refugees back there, even though it is not safe for them, and Mexico and the USA continue to deport people fleeing rampant violence in Central America.

Elsewhere, China, Egypt, Ethiopia, India, Iran, Thailand and Turkey carried out massive crackdowns. While other countries pursued intrusive security measures, such as prolonged emergency powers in France and unprecedented catastrophic surveillance laws in the UK. Another feature of “strongman” politics was a rise in anti-feminist and -LGBTI rhetoric, such as efforts to roll back women’s rights in Poland, which were met with massive protests.

“Instead of fighting for people’s rights, too many leaders have adopted a dehumanizing agenda for political expediency. Many are violating rights of scapegoated groups to score political points, or to distract from their own failures to ensure economic and social rights,” said Salil Shetty.

“In 2016, these most toxic forms of dehumanization became a dominant force in mainstream global politics. The limits of what is acceptable have shifted. Politicians are shamelessly and actively legitimizing all sorts of hateful rhetoric and policies based on people’s identity: misogyny, racism and homophobia.

“The first target has been refugees and, if this continues in 2017, others will be in the cross-hairs. The reverberations will lead to more attacks on the basis of race, gender, nationality and religion. When we cease to see each other as human beings with the same rights, we move closer to the abyss.”

**World turns its back on mass atrocities**

Amnesty International is warning that 2017 will see ongoing crises exacerbated by a debilitating absence of human rights leadership on a chaotic world stage. The politics of “us vs them” is also taking shape at the international level, replacing multilateralism with a more aggressive, confrontational world order.

“With world leaders lacking political will to put pressure on other states violating human rights, basic principles from accountability for mass atrocities to the right to asylum are at stake,” said Salil Shetty.

“Even states that once claimed to champion rights abroad are now too busy rolling back human rights at home to hold others to account. The more countries backtrack on fundamental human rights commitments, the more we risk a domino effect of leaders emboldened to knock back established human rights protections.”

The world faces a long list of crises with little political will to address them: including Syria, Yemen, Libya, Afghanistan, Central America, Central African Republic, Burundi, Iraq, South Sudan and Sudan. Amnesty International’s Annual Report documented war crimes committed in at least 23 countries in 2016.

Despite these challenges, international indifference to war crimes has become an entrenched normality as the UN Security Council remains paralyzed by rivalries between permanent member states.

“The beginning of 2017 finds many of the world’s most powerful states pursuing narrower national interests at the expense of international cooperation. This risks taking us towards a more chaotic, dangerous world,” said Salil Shetty.

 “A new world order where human rights are portrayed as a barrier to national interests makes the ability to tackle mass atrocities dangerously low, leaving the door open to abuses reminiscent of the darkest times of human history.

“The international community has already responded with deafening silence after countless atrocities in 2016: a live stream of horror from Aleppo, thousands of people killed by the police in the Philippines’ ‘war on drugs’, use of chemical weapons and hundreds of villages burned in Darfur. The big question in 2017 will be how far the world lets atrocities go before doing something about them.”

**Who is going to stand up for human rights?**

Amnesty International is calling on people around the world to resist cynical efforts to roll back long-established human rights in exchange for the distant promise of prosperity and security.

The report warns that global solidarity and public mobilization will be particularly important to defend individuals who stand up to those in power and defend human rights, who are often cast by governments as a threat to economic development, security or other priorities.

Amnesty International’s annual report documents people killed for peacefully standing up for human rights in 22 countries in 2016. They include those targeted for challenging entrenched economic interests, defending minorities and small communities or opposing traditional barriers to women’s and LGBTI rights. The killing of the high-profile Indigenous leader and human rights defender Berta Cáceres in Honduras on 2 March 2016 sent a chilling message to activists but nobody was brought to justice.

“We cannot passively rely on governments to stand up for human rights, we the people have to take action. With politicians increasingly willing to demonize entire groups of people, the need for all of us to stand up for the basic values of human dignity and equality everywhere has seldom been clearer,” said Salil Shetty.

“Every person must ask their government to use whatever power and influence they have to call out human rights abusers. In dark times, individuals have made a difference when they took a stand, be they civil rights activists in the USA, anti-apartheid activists in South Africa, or women’s rights and LGBTI movements around the world. We must all rise to that challenge now.”

**Background**

Amnesty International has documented grave violations of human rights in 2016 in 159 countries. Examples of the rise and impact of poisonous rhetoric, national crackdowns on activism and freedom of expression highlighted by Amnesty International in its Annual Report include, but are by no means limited, to:

**Bangladesh**: Instead of providing protection for or investigating the killings of activists, reporters and bloggers, authorities have pursued trials against media and the opposition for, among other things, Facebook posts.

**China:** Ongoing crackdown against lawyers and activists continued, including incommunicado detention, televised confessions and harassments of family members.

**DRC**: Pro-democracy activists subjected to arbitrary arrests and, in some cases, prolonged incommunicado detention.

**Egypt:** Authorities used travel bans, financial restrictions and asset freezes to undermine, smear and silence civil society groups.

**Ethiopia**: A government increasingly intolerant of dissenting voices used anti-terror laws and a state of emergency to crack down on journalists, human rights defenders, the political opposition and, in particular, protesters who have been met with excessive and lethal force.

**France:** Heavy-handed security measures under the prolonged state of emergency have included thousands of house searches, as well as travel bans and detentions.

**Honduras**: Berta Cáceres and seven other human rights activists were killed.

**Hungary:** Government rhetoric championed a divisive brand of identity politics and a dark vision of “Fortress Europe”, which translated into a policy of systematic crackdown on refugee and migrants rights.

**India**: Authorities used repressive laws to curb freedom of expression and silence critical voices. Human rights defenders and organizations continued to face harassment and intimidation. Oppressive laws have been used to try to silence student activists, academics, journalists and human rights defenders.

**Iran:** Heavy suppression of freedom of expression, association, peaceful assembly and religious beliefs. Peaceful critics jailed after grossly unfair trials before Revolutionary Courts, including journalists, lawyers, bloggers, students, women’s rights activists, filmmakers and even musicians.

**Myanmar:** Tens of thousands of Rohingya people - who remain deprived of a nationality - displaced by “clearance operations” amid reports of unlawful killings, indiscriminate firing on civilians, rape and arbitrary arrests. Meanwhile, state media published opinion articles containing alarmingly dehumanizing language.

**Philippines:** A wave of extrajudicial executions ensued after President Duterte promised to kill tens of thousands of people suspected of being involved in the drug trade.

**Russia**: At home the government noose tightened around national NGOs, with increasing propaganda labelling critics as “undesirable” or “foreign agents”, and the first prosecution of NGOs under a “foreign agents” law. Meanwhile, dozens of independent NGOs receiving foreign funding were added to the list of “foreign agents”. Abroad there was a complete disregard for international humanitarian law in Syria.

**Saudi Arabia**: Critics, human rights defenders and minority rights activists have been detained and jailed on vaguely worded charges such as “insulting the state”. Coalition forces led by Saudi Arabia committed serious violations of international law, including alleged war crimes, in Yemen. Coalition forces bombed schools, hospitals, markets and mosques, killing and injuring thousands of civilians using arms supplied by the US and UK governments, including internationally banned cluster bombs.

**South Sudan:** Ongoing fighting continued to have devastating humanitarian consequences for civilian populations, with violations and abuses of international human rights and humanitarian law.

**Sudan:** Evidence pointed strongly to the use of chemical weapons by government forces in Darfur. Elsewhere, suspected opponents and critics of the government subjected to arbitrary arrests and detentions. Excessive use of force by the authorities in dispersing gatherings led to numerous casualties.

**Syria**: Impunity for war crimes and gross human rights abuses continued, including indiscriminate attacks and direct attacks on civilians and lengthy sieges that trapped civilians. The human rights community has been almost completely crushed, with activists either imprisoned, tortured, disappeared, or forced to flee the country.

**Thailand:** Emergency powers, defamation and sedition laws used to restrict freedom of expression.

**Turkey:** Tens of thousands locked up after failed coup, with hundreds of NGOs suspended, a massive media crackdown, and the continuing onslaught in Kurdish areas.

**UK:** A spike in hate crimes followed the referendum on European Union membership. A new surveillance law granted significantly increased powers to intelligence and other agencies to invade people’s privacy on a massive scale.

**USA:** An election campaign marked by discriminatory, misogynist and xenophobic rhetoric raised serious concerns about the strength of future US commitments to human rights domestically and globally.

**Venezuela**: Backlash against outspoken human rights defenders who raised the alarm about the humanitarian crisis caused by the government’s failure to meet the economic and social rights of the population.

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