

# Transparency Watch

DECEMBER 2008

## INTERVIEW OF THE MONTH

Irene Khan, Secretary General, Amnesty International

By Michael Sidwell

The 60th anniversary of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights represents a symbolic moment to reflect on the relationship between fighting corruption and preventing human rights abuses. Transparency Watch spoke with General Secretary of Amnesty International Irene Khan about the hurdles corruption presents to furthering human rights.



**Transparency Watch (TW):** *Do you think corruption exacerbates or facilitates human rights violations? And, if so, to what extent and how?*

**Irene Khan (IK):** Corruption very frequently causes human rights violations. A very common example is the way in which bribery can subvert the justice system – police demand bribes, judges' verdicts are influenced. It also takes place on a larger scale when funding, development assistance for example, is diverted from services. This denies people their right to water or their right to health and, of course, there is also the illicit enrichment that takes place, particularly in the public sector. So, in many ways, these are all examples of how corruption subverts human rights, undermines the rule of law and denies people equal access. In that way, I would say that corruption is a major cause of many human rights abuses.

**TW:** *Do you think enduring human rights can be achieved while corruption is prevalent?*

**IK:** Human rights are basically there to regulate power in favour of the individual. When an individual has human rights, it means the state and other actors have obligations to respect those rights. I actually feel that, with respect to human rights as a means to bring corruption under control, human rights promote accountability, transparency, and the active participation of people. These are all tools through which you can address corruption. In that sense I feel very strongly about the link between the promotion of human rights and the eradication of corruption.

**TW:** *Has Amnesty International, in its documentation of human rights abuses, come across many that deal with corruption? Is there a case that stands out?*

**IK:** One particular case that comes to my mind is Zimbabwe, where political abuse of power, corruption and massive human rights violations come together, and we have seen cases from the justice sector of personal enrichment, illustrating how a corrupt system generates massive human rights abuses.

Another example on which Amnesty International has worked and documented is the situation in the Niger Delta, where again the authorities have been extremely corrupt, diverting funds away from local communities, sometimes with the collusion of the corporate actors in that area, with the result that it has actually led to massive communal violence in that region.

**TW:** *What risk do anti-corruption advocates face in some countries?*

**IK:** Amnesty International's experience has been that wherever people have actively protested, organised themselves or spoken out against abuse of power they have come under pressure. Human rights activists have been attacked, environmental activists have been attacked, and now, as more and more people engage in the fight against corruption, they are also coming under attack, particularly journalists who expose corruption. In Russia for instance, a journalist was recently attacked. There have been incidents in other countries too, where individuals are now being attacked because they speak out against corruption.

**TW:** *The Committee to Protect Journalists reports that of the 713 journalists murdered from 1992-2008, coverage of corruption was one of the top three reasons they were targeted – do you see a corruption connection in Amnesty International's work advocating for press freedom?*

**IK:** We in Amnesty International see journalists very often as defenders of human rights, because through their work they are making transparent human rights abuses. And corruption so often links to human rights abuses either by facilitating it, or serving it, or creating an environment in which abuses can take place. The figure that you quote does not surprise me at all. It is very clear that journalists that are covering corruption are being attacked.

**TW: *Transparency International's 2007 Global Corruption Report on corruption in judicial systems, shows that corruption feeds impunity. Have there been occasions where this has frustrated Amnesty International's work?***

**IK:** One of Amnesty International's biggest challenges, which we have been working on for the longest time, is impunity – no remedy, no action taken against those that commit human rights crimes. Very often corruption in the judicial system has been a factor in that, but at the end of the day, what it comes down to is lack of political will. Corruption in the judiciary and the police force cannot exist without top-level collusion. Ordinary police would not dare to take a bribe if it were not being sanctioned at the highest levels of government. So, yes, impunity is encouraged by corruption, but it is not only petty corruption, I would say large scale larceny is taking place alongside human rights abuses right at the top.

**TW: *We know that corporations can do a lot to fight corruption. Do you see a link between anti-corruption corporate policies and ones that address human rights?***

**IK:** The OECD guidelines is one example of where efforts to control bribery in the private sector can actually help to reduce human rights abuses, as corrupt practices very often lead to human rights abuses, or create the space in which human rights abuses can take place.

There is a strong link between positive behaviour, a reduction in corruption and a reduction in human rights abuses. I gave you the example of the Niger Delta where corrupt practices of the political authorities there have been condoned by corporate actors and led to massive human rights abuses.

Amnesty International would argue that corporate behaviour is not only about financial corruption. The way business does business is important, and we have noticed in certain cases that companies have negotiated what we would term exploitative contracts that exploit weak governments or communities. This too is in a way corruption.

Where corporate behaviour is concerned, I think there is a need to raise the bar and standards of public behaviour. Business is powerful when it enters into dialogue with governments in conflict ridden societies. Their behaviour can either help to set the tone for peace, security and rehabilitation, or drive communities down the path of violence. Instability is not in the interest of business, stability is in the interest of business, and there should be hope that business can be more active in the area of anti-corruption.

**TW: *In 2009 Amnesty International is set to launch a global campaign on poverty and human rights. Will fighting corruption play a role?***

**IK:** We have a number of projects that are part of this campaign. One of these projects actually looks at proper accountability in the extractives sector. We hope to highlight this through the project.

Overall our [Amnesty International] project is going to look at how human rights can promote the eradication of poverty. Many human rights are denied or sidelined because of corruption. For example, we will be looking at the issue of the right to health and particularly the issue of maternal mortality. We will be looking at slums and how people who live in them are denied basic human rights. These are all situations where corruption is a major factor in the denial of human rights. I suspect that our [Amnesty International] campaign on human dignity will show in a number of areas where the interrelationship between corruption and human rights abuses is so strong that you can't fight human rights abuse unless you tackle corruption. This is why I hope the anti-corruption and the human rights movements will work together in their campaigns.

**Learn more:**

- [Amnesty International](#)
- [Universal Declaration of Human Rights](#)
- [Every Human has Rights](#)
- [TI publication: Human Rights and Corruption](#)