

Peter Benenson - Power of the individual

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A singer from Senegal, an activist from Mongolia, and a former prisoner of conscience from Benin will be among those celebrating the life of Peter Benenson, founder of Amnesty International, this week. Human rights supporters from across the globe will attend his memorial service at the church of St Martin-in-the-Fields in London.

Peter Benenson created Amnesty International in 1961, in the depths of the Cold War, at a time when the world was divided along ideological lines. Peter was adamant that the organisation should be politically impartial, working for people regardless of who they were, where they lived, or which government committed the abuse.

Today the world is still divided, but the fault lines are now around the 'war on terror'. In 2005, the need for a neutral organization, willing to campaign against abuses whether committed by a world power or by an obscure group of militants, is just as important.

Peter Benenson's vision -- of individuals speaking out for the forgotten prisoner and the forgotten victim, wherever they are, regardless of politics, power or religion -- remains fundamental to Amnesty International's work today. Indeed, in a world in which governments are betraying human rights and armed groups are resorting to ever more horrific acts of terrorism, Peter's vision is more important than ever.

Today, the forgotten victims are women raped during the conflict in the Solomon Islands; or civilians caught in the cross-fire in the Democratic Republic of Congo, where unscrupulous arms dealers continue to trade. The forgotten prisoners are men caged for years on end in secret detention centres, with no idea why they are imprisoned beyond being suspected of 'terrorism'; or young girls in Afghanistan trapped against their will in forced marriages, with no means of escape.

Peter Benenson demonstrated that it is possible for one person to make a real difference. Today, more than ever, we as individuals need to play our part to shine light on such hidden abuses and campaign for justice.

In paying tribute to Peter Benenson, UN Secretary General Kofi Annan said, "[He] did not merely lament the injustice that offended him. He chose to act... The best tribute we can pay to Peter Benenson is to work every day to follow his example."

Whether by writing a letter to government leaders protesting against torture and ill-treatment, or by speaking out when we witness domestic violence, each one of us can continue the path Peter Benenson started to tread, and show our commitment to making human rights a reality for all.