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FORGOTTEN PRISONERS TODAY



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TODAY

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The following article by Francesca de Silva is based on documentation issued by Amnesty International for Prisoners of Conscience Week 1978. No single case of political imprisonment is typical. Each is an instance of acute personal suffering - of a human being severed from normal life by the failure of governments to obey universally accepted standards of decency and human rights. To illustrate this, each year Amnesty International selects case histories for special action during Prisoners of Conscience week as symbol of the distress of all such victims throughout the world.

FORGOTTEN PRISONERS TODAY

A former teacher and mechanical engineer has disappeared without trace in South Yemen.

A dissident Turkmen poet has been interned in a psychiatric hospital in USSR; the exact location is unknown.

The decapitated body of a peasant leader, arrested by El Salvador's security forces, has been found by local farmers in San Pedro Perulapan; his severed head was hanging from a tree.

A Chinese-born agricultural labourer has spent the past 28 years as a political prisoner in Taiwan; he was last reported held in isolation on Green Island off the country's east coast.

These are among the forgotten prisoners of 1978.

They are among more than 5,000 such cases in 110 countries taken up during the year by Amnesty International, the human rights movement which opposes political imprisonment, torture and execution around the world.

The movement itself was launched by an article entitled "The Forgotten Prisoners" which appeared in the *London Observer* on 28 May 1961. Written by British barrister, Peter Benenson, it focused on six contemporary cases of "prisoners of conscience" and called on people to help collect information about similar prisoners and give them maximum publicity.

Today, however, Amnesty International, which has more than 200,000 volunteer members in 107 countries, estimates that the several thousand individual cases it is now able to tackle is still only a small fraction of the total number of probable victims.

"For each name that is known", says Secretary General Martin Ennals, "there may be fifty or another hundred which

are unknown, amounting to an unacknowledged population of prisoners of conscience scattered over the globe held in secret interrogation centres, in overcrowded prisons, in labour camps, on isolated islands."

Many of the prisoners are held in remote locations without access to the outside world. Taiwan's Green Island, for example, holds some of the longest-serving political prisoners known to Amnesty International. Prisoners on the island live in complete isolation.

Part of the camp is reserved for political prisoners. In most cases they are serving sentences averaging 20 years, after being convicted of "sedition" for suspected pro-communist activities or sympathies. Arrested in the 1950's they were tried under martial law and the charges against them have never been tested in an open civilian court.

Among them is Li Chin-mu, an agricultural worker now over 50 years of age, who has spent 28 years in prison. Li was one of a group of 30 people arrested around 1950 for allegedly having been in contact with the now-defunct Taiwan Communist Party during the Japanese occupation which ended in 1945. He was reportedly tried in August 1950, but his sentence is not known.

Li's case features among a group of twelve histories being highlighted by Amnesty International this year in "Prisoners of Conscience Week", an annual event observed throughout the world in the third week of October. The twelve case studies cover violations of human rights in El Salvador, Indonesia, Lebanon, Morocco, Nicaragua, Rhodesia / Zimbabwe, Romania, Taiwan, Uganda, USSR, Vietnam and the People's Democratic Republic of Yemen.

According to Martin Ennals, "The forgotten prisoner in 1978 may often be a member of a subjugated ethnic group or someone living in a small rural community. It is our experience that such people frequently are unaware of their legal rights and are cut off from the possibility of international support when they become victims of arbitrary arrest, torture and detention."

In Africa, for example, the Sahrawi people who originate from the area of the Western Sahara face indiscriminate detention without trial in Morocco.

The Sahrawis are a culturally distinct people characterized by their dress, diet and dialect, having strong ties to the nomadic population of Mauritania. The Sahrawi detainees come from all walks of life: students, mechanics, cattle herders, peasants and nomads.

The political situation in the Sahara and the severe drought of the early 1970s caused many Sahrawis to move north from their homeland and settle in southern Morocco. After they had been pressured in 1975 to show open loyalty to King Hassan II of Morocco, arbitrary arrests began.

At least 150 Sahrawis, possibly many more, have been detained without charge or without trial. Numbers of Sahrawi students and even schoolchildren were arrested especially in the spring holidays of 1976 and 1977.

All the detainees are civilians who, it is believed, have not in any way participated in the military conflict in the region. After arrest they were initially held incommunicado at police centres such as Moulay Cherif in Casablanca where there is reason to believe they were ill-treated during interrogation.

Neither their detention nor any dissent from the government's policy of annexing the Sahara can be discussed openly inside the country.

In drawing particular attention to the "forgotten prisoners" this year, Amnesty International points out that peasants and the rural poor face special problems. Cut off from urban centres of communication, they are economically depressed and often come from ethnic or social groups with a history of being conquered, discriminated against or ignored by dominant forces in their societies. Rural workers and small farmers tend to suffer violations of their human rights in frequently insuperable isolation.

Precise information even about large scale massacres of *campesinos* (Latin American peasant farmers), *harijans* (the untouchables of the Indian caste system) or tribal people may be virtually impossible to obtain.

Rural dwellers' mistrust of any established authority or urban institution, ignorance about the possibilities of legal recourse, the remoteness of the areas in which the violations occur and the natural tendency of the authorities to suppress news of such happenings all combine to reduce the flow of information to the world at large.

Often the news will be fragmented or out of date. Frequently the authorities allege that arrests were made in response to an armed uprising or violent incident.

The government of Nicaragua, for example, has proffered different and contradictory replies to Amnesty International inquiries into more than 350 known cases of "disappearance" of arrested *campesinos*. Spokesmen have claimed that the disappeared "never existed", that their names were invented or that unquestionably they were guerrillas killed in combat with troops and buried anonymously.

According to Amnesty International, "the populations of entire *campesino* communities have 'disappeared' as prisoners of the Nicaraguan National Guard, or have been shot outright."

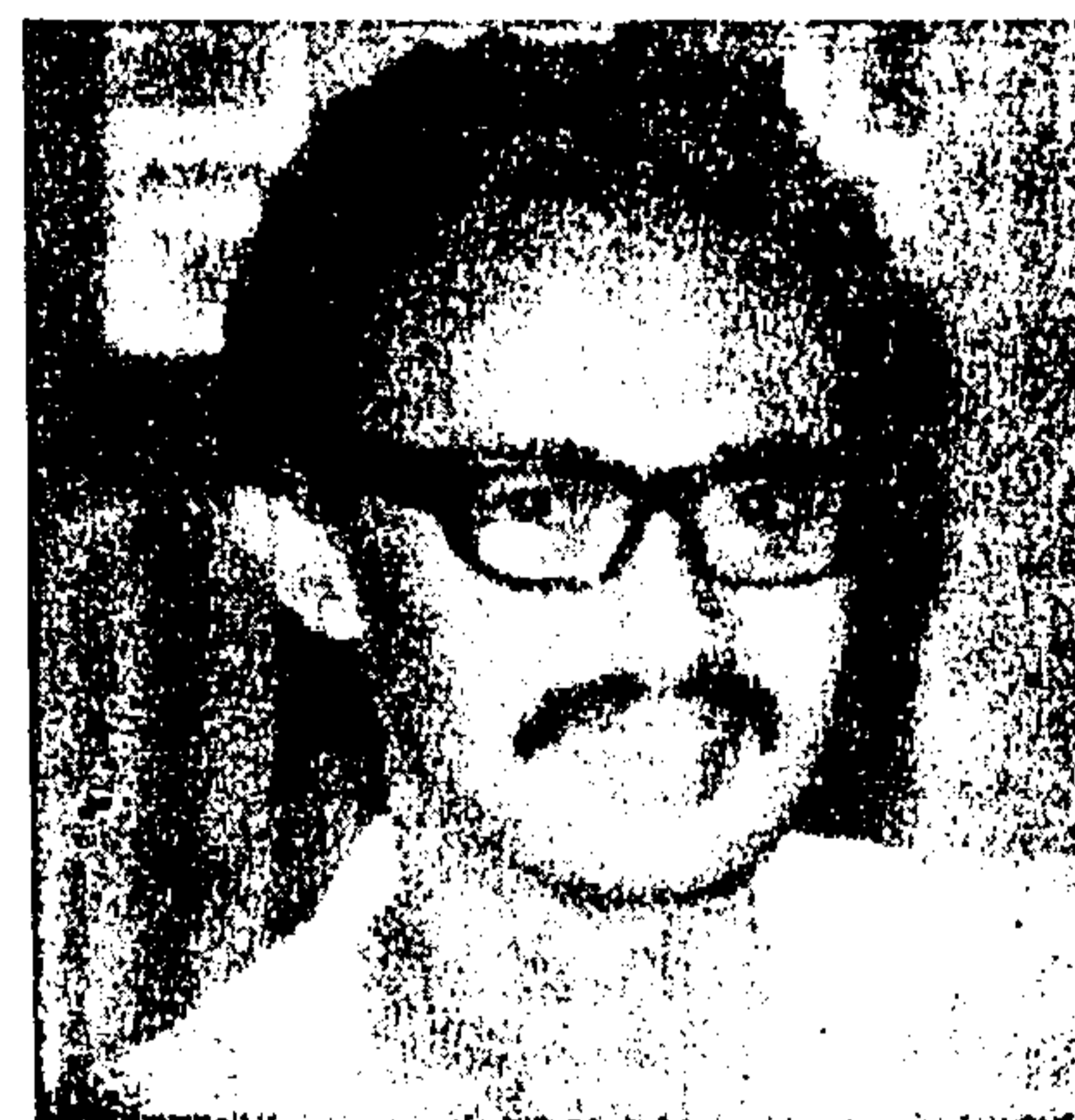
Rural communities in neighbouring El Salvador are also under attack. Sixty percent of Salvadorean people are peasant farmers. The majority are virtually landless and desperately poor. In 1932 a peasant revolt was crushed at a cost of 30,000 dead. The spectre of a repetition of the 1932 massacre remains, as landowners' associations use the mass media to attack the "peasant hordes" of the rural unions.

Transito Vazquez was a leader of one such union, the Christian Federation of Salvadorean Farmers. On the night of 20 March 1978, while at a meeting of peasants in the San Pedro Perulapan area, he was seized by members of the government paramilitary organization ORDEN.

The following day, his dead body was found by other members of the farmers' union. The decapitated torso bore marks of torture. The severed head was found hanging from a tree.

"Many of today's forgotten prisoners", says Ennals, "have literally disappeared after arrest. Their families—often silenced by intimidation or by the lack of financial resources—do not know whether the prisoners are alive or dead."

Among those missing is Bahadin Ahmad Muhammad, a former teacher and mechanical engineer in Aden in the People's Democratic Republic of Yemen (South Yemen). A week after his marriage in 1972, while staying at his sister's house, he went to answer a knock at the door and did not return. He was last seen being driven off in a jeep. About 18 other people were reported to have disappeared that night but, like Bahadin, the precise reasons for their disappearance are not known.



Bahadin Muhammad
People's Democratic Republic
of Yemen

Bahadin Ahmad Muhammad, is one of those who have disappeared without a trace. He was last seen being forced into a jeep outside his sister's house in 1972. The government has offered Bahadin's family compensation equal to the sum usually paid to relatives of people who have been judicially executed, but it denies all knowledge of his whereabouts.

Photo: Copyright Amnesty
International

Bahadin's relatives have made frequent inquiries to the authorities, to no avail. Just after his disappearance his family was offered 200 PDRY shillings a month by the authorities. This is the usual sum offered as compensation only to relatives of a person who has been judicially executed. The authorities however, deny any knowledge of Bahadin's whereabouts.

Since the country became independent in 1967, hundreds of people have disappeared without trace. It is likely that many are dead. Nevertheless, there are still persistent rumours that large numbers of prisoners are being kept on Socotra Island which lies 350 kilometres off the mainland in the Arabian Sea.

But the dead, also, in anonymous thousands, can become commonplace, too innumerable for memory. The total of those killed by security officers during the seven years of the Amin regime in Uganda is estimated at not less than 100,000. The names of only a small number are known; the majority are "unknown" and, according to Amnesty International, if the regime had its way, would be forgotten.

The structure of repression created and perpetuated by "Life-President" Amin has penetrated all areas of Ugandan society from the severely diminished urban elite to the poorest rural peasant.

Members of former President Obote's ethnic group, the Lango, and the related Acholi, have been particular targets of arbitrary arrest and killing.

Torture is the most frequently known cause of death, although detainees have been killed in other ways, either by prison guards or other security officers. It is also commonly reported that lines of prisoners are forced to kill one another by smashing each other's skulls with hammers, axes or car axles.

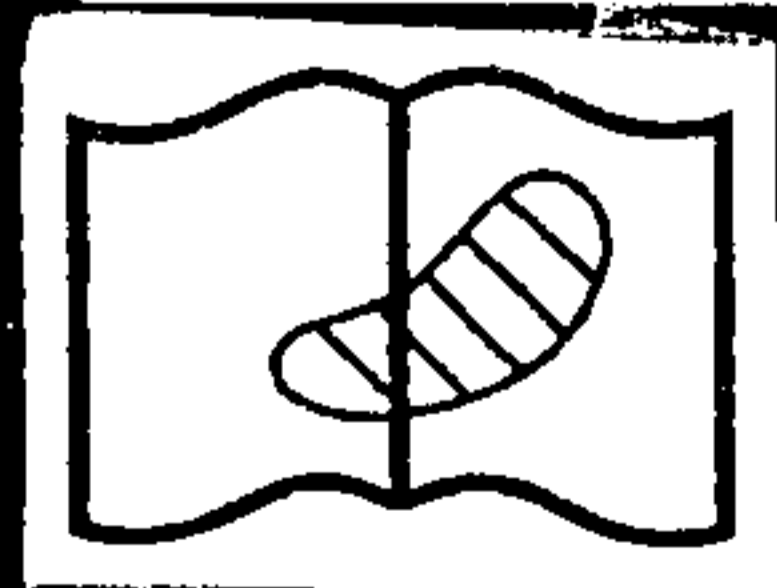
An escaped Ugandan, Geoffrey Mugabi, told the *Kenya Daily Nation* in February 1977 how he had been arrested and taken to Makindye prison in Kampala where he heard the noise of prisoners being strangled and their heads smashed. "The floors were littered with loose eyes and teeth", he said.

SOLDIERS OF THE UGANDAN ARMY LEAD AWAY A CIVILIAN



People who are arrested in Uganda are taken for interrogation to barracks or other centers belonging to the security forces. This generally involves torture and frequently results in the victim's death. Those who have been arrested or have "disappeared" are rarely seen again, and their relatives are generally too afraid of reprisals to make appeals or publicity about their relative's disappearance. President Amin denies that there have been massive violations and claims that human rights are respected in Uganda.

Photo: Copyright Marian Kaplan, Camera Press Ltd.



In its campaign for forgotten prisoners, Amnesty International also asks us to remember the 500,000 or more African civilians who have been moved into so-called "protected villages" by the Rhodesian authorities. The villages resemble fortified encampments and have been described by Africans as "cages" designed in such a way that civilians are used as a human shield to protect the officials who live in the village centre. Although the villages were ostensibly set up by the Smith government to protect African civilians against the activities of the nationalist guerrillas, there is now considerable evidence to suggest that they are being used to punish Africans suspected of supporting the guerrillas.

We are also asked not to forget numbers of Lebanese citizens who, like 38 year old bricklayer Joseph Hemmaam, have been abducted from Lebanon and detained without trial in Syria. Their families often have no knowledge of their fate or location.

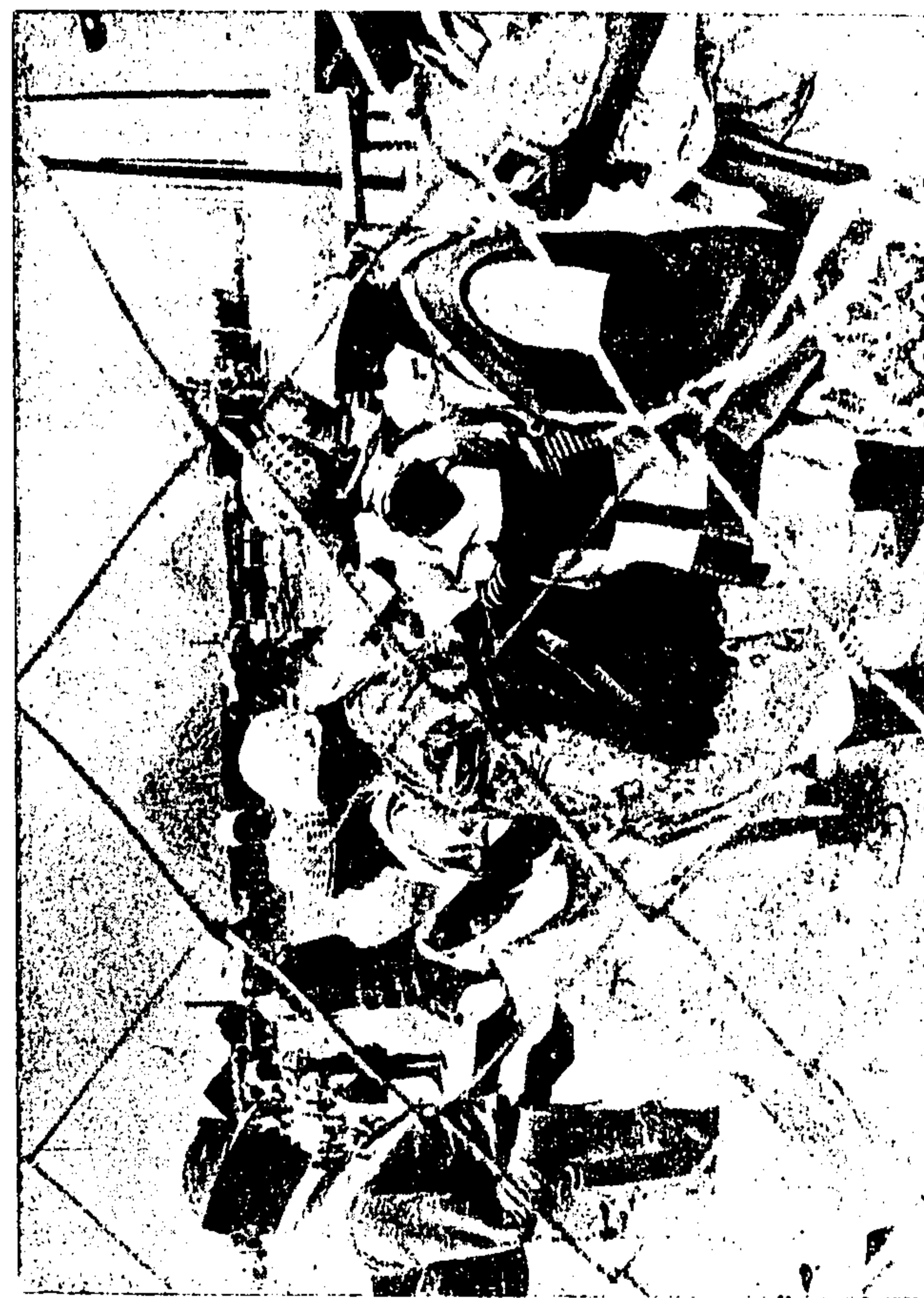
Prisoners in Indonesia's Irian Jaya and arrested Buddhist monks in Vietnam also figure in the Amnesty portrait of those whose fate has been seemingly by-passed by international public opinion.

"But the forgotten prisoners", warns Ennals, "are not only to be found in rural areas; not only in countries facing enormous economic and social challenges; not only in territories disrupted by armed conflict. Prisoners of conscience in any country are, by definition, unpopular with someone—certainly those in power—and in many cases no one wants to share their unpopularity. No one wants to talk about them. They get put out of the way. They get lost. They get forgotten."

Take the case of Jenő Szikszai, a school teacher in Romania and a member of the country's Hungarian ethnic minority. He was arrested by the state security police last year and accused of persuading parents of ethnic Hungarian pupils of protest against the elimination of Hungarian schools in the Brasov region of the country. It is believed that he committed suicide during interrogation. There has been no further news of him.

Another striking example is Annasoltan Kekilova, a young Turkmen poet, arrested on 26 August 1971 and confined

A "PROTECTED VILLAGE" IN RHODESIA



Security guards at the entrance to a "protected village" in Rhodesia / Zimbabwe check women "residents". More than 200,000 African civilians have been moved into these camps since 1972. Summary killing is the penalty for breaking camp curfew.

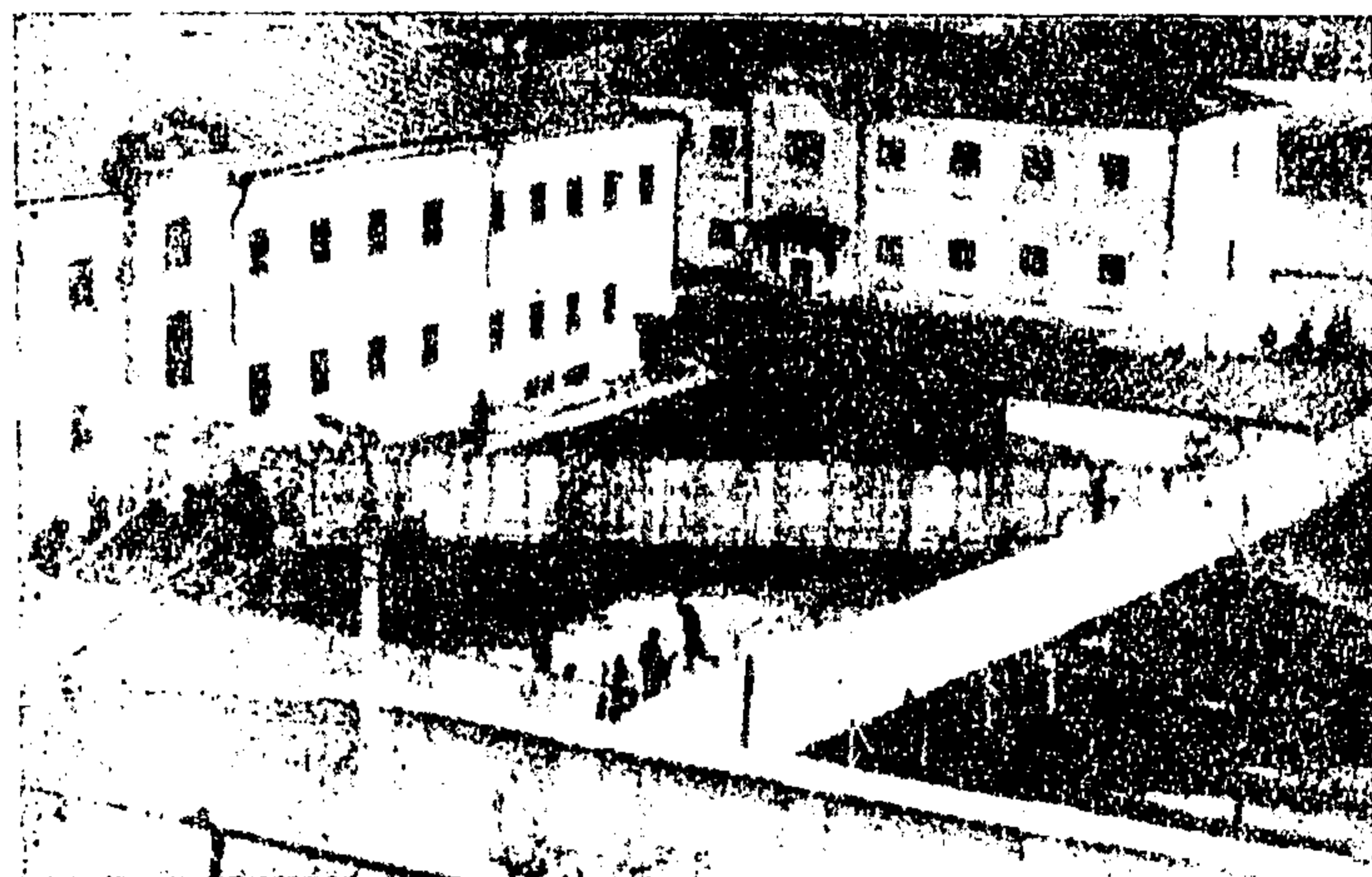
Photo: Courtesy International Defence and Aid Fund for Southern Africa.

to a psychiatric hospital because she had written letters to the Communist Party of the Soviet Union criticizing conditions in the Turkmen Soviet Republic.

According to Ms. Kekilova's mother, the doctors in the psychiatric hospital told her daughter: "If you don't give us a signed statement that you wrote to the central committee because you were in a nervous condition, you'll stay in hospital forever".

Over the next few years no further information on Ms. Kekilova was forthcoming — Amnesty International was even unsure if she was still confined to a psychiatric hospital. In the spring of this year, however, one of the Amnesty adoption groups working on the case received a reply from the deputy Minister of Health of the Turkmen SSR in which he confirmed that she was "still interned in a psychiatric hospital." No other details are known.

ORYOL SPECIAL PSYCHIATRIC HOSPITAL



Among the cases of psychiatric abuse in the USSR known to AI is a category of "forgotten prisoners" confined in psychiatric hospital for dissenting political or religious convictions rather than for authentic medical reasons. They are left for long periods of time in conditions of virtual secrecy. The obscurity of their cases and difficulty of obtaining information about their present conditions has resulted in both a lack of public awareness of their fate and probably greater exposure to ill-treatment.

Photo: Courtesy Aid to the Russian Church.

Amnesty International's reminder about such prisoners who have been forgotten is overdue. It comes at a time when much attention has been paid to the trials and the fate of a few well-known political prisoners. We need to have the full breadth of the problem brought home to us with realism and genuine humanity.

It is also important that we be reminded about those who are unknown and unheard of in this year, the 30th anniversary of the United Nations *Universal Declaration of Human Rights*. Much ado is being made to celebrate the anniversary of the declaration, adopted in 1948. From Amnesty International's point of view, there will only be something to celebrate when the killings have ceased, when those who have disappeared have been reunited with their families and when there are no longer prisoners needing to be remembered.

AMNESTY INTERNATIONAL is a worldwide movement which is independent of any government, political faction, ideology, economic interest or religious creed. It plays a specific role within the overall spectrum of human rights work. The activities of the organization focus strictly on prisoners:

- It seeks the release of men and women detained anywhere for their beliefs, colour, sex, ethnic origin, language or religion, provided they have neither used nor advocated violence. These are termed 'prisoners of conscience'.
- It advocates fair and early trials for all political prisoners and works on behalf of such persons detained without charge or without trial.
- It opposes the death penalty and torture or other cruel, inhuman or degrading treatment or punishment of all prisoners without reservation.

AMNESTY INTERNATIONAL acts on the basis of the United Nations Universal Declaration of Human Rights and other international instruments. Through practical work for prisoners within its mandate, Amnesty International participates in the wider promotion and protection of human rights in the civil, political, economic, social and cultural spheres.

AMNESTY INTERNATIONAL has over 2,000 adoption groups and national sections in 35 countries in Africa, Asia, Europe, the Middle East, North America and Latin America and individual members in a further 74 countries. Each adoption group works for at least two prisoners of conscience in countries other than its own. These countries are balanced geographically and politically to ensure impartiality. Information about prisoners and human rights violations emanates from Amnesty International's Research Department in London.

AMNESTY INTERNATIONAL has consultative status with the United Nations (ECOSOC), UNESCO and the Council of Europe, has cooperative relations with the Inter-American Commission on Human Rights of the Organization of American States and has observer status with the Organization of African Unity (Bureau for the Placement and Education of African Refugees.)

AMNESTY INTERNATIONAL is financed by subscriptions and donations of its worldwide membership. To safeguard the independence of the organization, all contributions are strictly controlled by guidelines laid down by Amnesty International's International Council and income and expenditure are made public in an annual financial report.