# what makes amnesty international work?

AMNESTY INTERNATIONAL
South Asia Publications Service

**AMNESTY INTERNATIONAL** is a worldwide movement which is independent of any government, political grouping, 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:

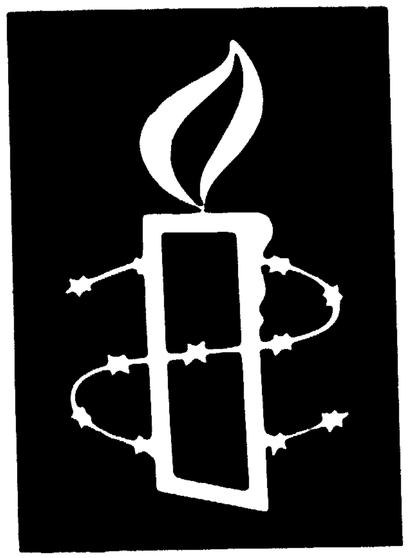
— It seeks the *release* of men and women detained anywhere for their beliefs, colour, sex, ethnic origin, language or religion, provided they have not used or advocated violence. These are termed *"prisoners of conscience"*.
— It advocates *fair and early trials* for *all political prisoners* and works 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 more than 500,000 members, subscribers and supporters in over 160 countries and territories, with over 3,000 local groups in more than 50 countries in Africa, Asia, Europe, the Americas and the Middle East. Each group works on behalf of 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. No section, group or member is expected to provide information on their own country, and no section, group or member has any responsibility for action taken or statements issued by the international organization concerning their own country.

**AMNESTY INTERNATIONAL** has formal relations with the United Nations (ECOSOC), UNESCO, the Council of Europe, the Organization of American States and the Organization of African Unity.

**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 the International Council and income and expenditure are made public in an annual financial report.



Symbol of
Amnesty International

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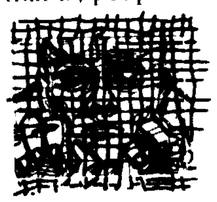
# WHAT
# MAKES AMNESTY INTERNATIONAL WORK?

Founded little more than twenty years ago, Amnesty International holds a special place among all organizations concerned with the protection and promotion of human rights.

Amnesty International is concerned strictly with prisoners. It seeks the release of "prisoners of conscience," — that is, people detained for the nonviolent expression of their political or religious beliefs, or because of their colour, ethnic origin, race or sex. It works for a fair and prompt trial for all political prisoners. It acts against torture and any other cruel, inhuman or degrading treatment or punishment, and seeks the abolition of the death penalty.



"Forgotten prisoner" from the Appeal for Amnesty, original

Amnesty International is noted for the practical methods it has developed for dealing with these human rights abuses. The best known example is the "adoption" of individual prisoners of conscience. Through a worldwide network of local groups Amnesty International works each year on behalf of more than four thousand individual cases of prisoners of conscience. It also launches major publicity campaigns to highlight patterns of repression in countries around the world.

Equally significant is the sustained level of research which Amnesty International devotes to these human rights problems. Today the organization is recognized as one of the most important resource centres in the world for information on political imprisonment and related violations of human rights.

Amnesty International has a record of concrete achievement. To be sure, there is little to be happy about when our accomplishments are judged in the light of the worldwide persistence of arbitrary political imprisonment, torture and executions. Nevertheless, Amnesty International has managed to help many of the victims. The monthly **Amnesty International Newsletter** publishes in every issue three cases of prisoners of conscience detained in different parts of the world. Amnesty International members are asked to send [illegible] on behalf of these prisoners to heads of state and other appropriate officials. Thousands of people in dozens of [illegible] participate each month. Over 600 prisoners of conscience in more than sixty countries have been featured in [illegible]. Virtually one of every two of these prisoners was [illegible] granted a reduction of sentence, or given [illegible] treatment, some within a few weeks after their cases were published.

Amnesty International has played a leading role in the fight against torture. There is little doubt that the worldwide Campaign for the Abolition of Torture launched by Amnesty International in 1973 played a significant role in the adoption by the United Nations in 1975 of the landmark Declaration on the Protection of All Persons from Torture and Other Cruel, Inhuman or Degrading Treatment or Punishment.

## Campaign for Prisoners of the Month

**Each of the people whose story is told below is a prisoner of conscience. Each has been arrested because of his or her religious or political beliefs, colour, sex, ethnic origin or language. None has used or advocated violence. Their continuing detention is a violation of the United Nations Universal Declaration of Human Rights. International appeals can help to secure the release of these prisoners or to improve their detention conditions. In the interest of the prisoners, letters to the authorities should be worded carefully and courteously. You should stress that your concern for human rights is not in any way politically partisan. In *no* circumstances should communications be sent to the prisoner.**

**HOANG CAM**, *Viet Nam*
*A 63-year-old poet, former resistance fighter, teacher and Communist Party member, he has been detained since August 1982 for [illegible] links with [illegible].*

**Suleyman YASAR**, *Turkey*
*A primary school teacher, aged 32, he is serving an eight-year prison sentence for his membership of and non-violent activities in TOB-DER, the Turkish teachers' association.*

**Mohamed Yehdih Ould BREIDELEEYL**, *Mauritania*
*A former government minister, aged 40, he was sentenced after an unfair trial in October 1983 to 12 years' imprisonment with hard labour.*



Amnesty International today is one of the largest and most active human rights organizations with consultative status at the United Nations. In 1983 the Amnesty International task force consisted of over three thousand local groups around the world, more than forty sections in as many countries, and over five hundred thousand members and supporters in some one hundred and sixty countries. Its International Secretariat takes action on human rights violations normally in more than one hundred countries per year, issues News Releases, sends missions or trial observers to countries, publishes major reports and distributes humanitarian aid to prisoners and their families. If the actions undertaken by Amnesty International's voluntary members around the world were also added up — letters, Urgent Action telegrams, appeals and petitions on behalf of political prisoners — the total number of initiatives would run into thousands upon thousands.

*A Buddhist monk, member of a local AI group, talks to a meeting of students during Prisoners of Conscience Week. Groups help carry AI's campaigns to an ever growing public.*

In recent years Amnesty International's work has gained international recognition and high prestige. In 1977 it received the Nobel Peace Prize, and in 1978, on the occasion of the 30th anniversary of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, Amnesty International was given an award by the United Nations for "outstanding achievement in the field of human rights."

*Nobel Peace Prize Medallion*

*The Nobel Peace Prize was awarded to Amnesty International for its contribution to "securing the ground for freedom, for justice, and thereby also for peace in the world"*

People often ask: how is it that Amnesty International has earned such international respect within such a short time? What is the secret of its success? What makes Amnesty International work? We believe that the answer lies in certain principles that underlie its activities. These are principles that have evolved out of experience and which now direct and control all of Amnesty International's action.



**A LIMITED MANDATE**

Amnesty International has chosen to concentrate only on political imprisonment, torture and execution. This does not mean that it believes that these rights are more important than the many others that are set out in the Universal Declaration of Human Rights.

It has not always been easy for Amnesty International to adhere to its limited mandate, especially as the prestige of the organization has risen, and a natural desire has spread to get Amnesty International to assist in a wide variety of worthy causes. There have been strong pressures to expand its work to include other civil and political liberties such as the right to vote, the right to be free from censorship, the right to leave or return to one's own country. Even greater have been the urges to enter the field of economic and social rights. We are asked: is Amnesty International not concerned with the poor, the hungry, the unemployed, the exploited of the earth?

To all these pressures Amnesty International's response has been sympathetic but firm. We recognize the gravity of these human rights violations. We do not consider them of less priority than those inhumanities we were founded to combat. All human rights are indispensible; often they are interdependent. Without the right of freedom of expression, for example, how can the poor make their voices heard and their plight known? As has been said: if someone takes away your bread, he suppresses your freedom at the same time. But if someone suppresses your freedom, rest assured, your bread is threatened, because it no longer depends on you and your struggle, but on the pleasure of a master.

Amnesty International adheres to its limited mandate for only one reason: to be effective in what it does undertake. The simple fact is that no organization can cope effectively with all the violations of human rights that take place in the world. It cannot hope to acquire expertise and to mount effective action in too wide a sphere. To get results Amnesty International has to limit the scope of its activities, and leave the other human rights problems to other humanitarian organizations.

## FOCUS ON INDIVIDUAL PRISONERS

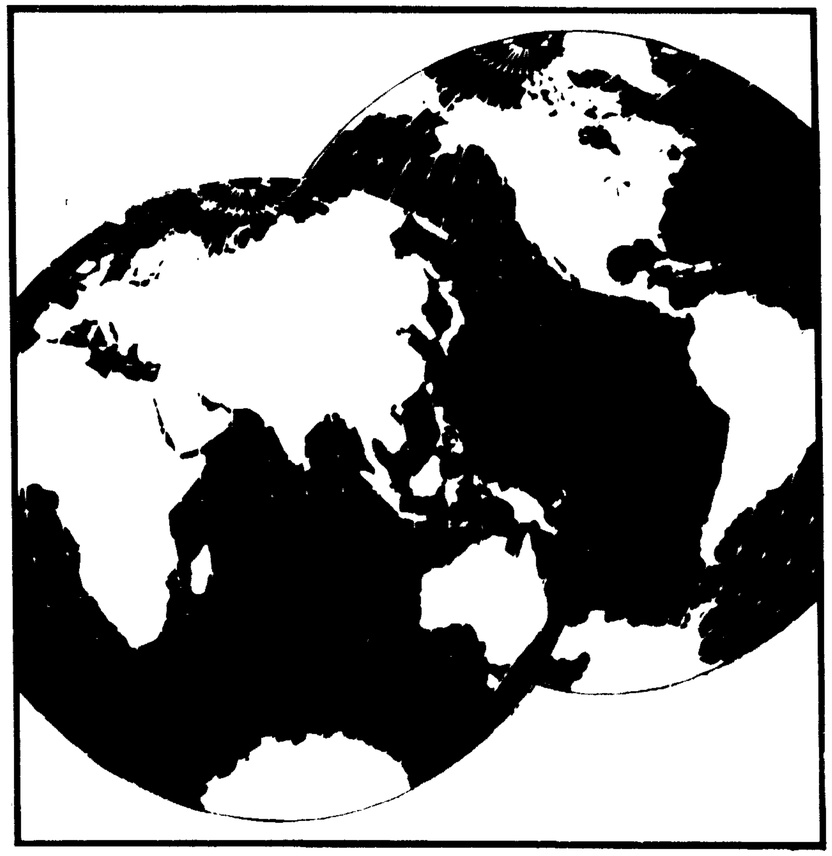
Amnesty International's basic concern has always been the individual in the cell. It was founded to help men and women detained for no other cause than their conscientiously held beliefs or racial origins. This is the fundamental reason for its existence. General information about political imprisonment and related human rights violations is not enough — we seek the names of individual prisoners and specific details about their cases. When were they arrested? Where? Were there any witnesses? Where are they being held? Are they incommunicado? Are their lives in danger? What is the state of their health? Are there any charges? What of their families? Who can give us further information? Here is the necessary starting point of Amnesty International's work.

*This Prisoner of Conscience was arrested by military intelligence agents. He was severely beaten and tortured with electric shocks over a period of about five days.*

*His complaints of torture were submitted to the Supreme Court of his country and to the United Nations Commission on Human Rights.*

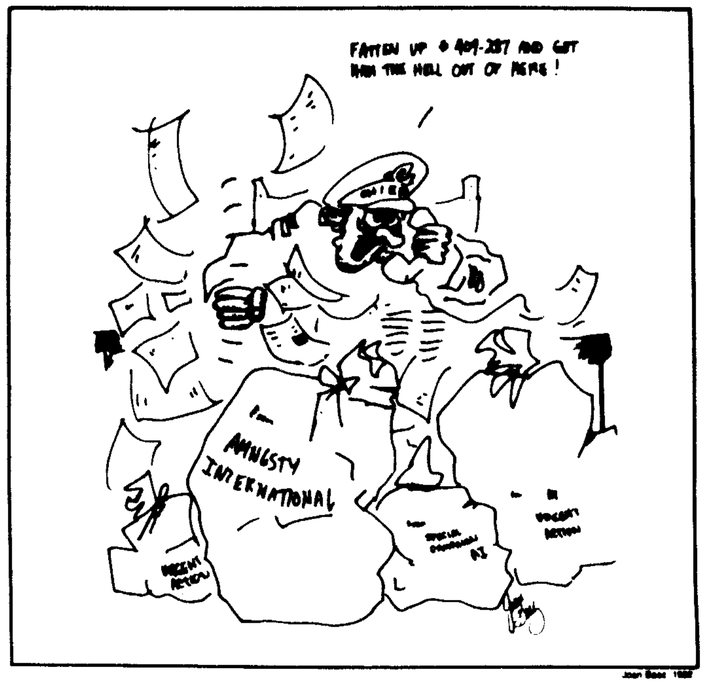


Focus on individual prisoners is also manifested in the work of local groups, the basic unit in the movement. Composed normally of five to fifteen members, the groups' main task is to take action on behalf of specific prisoners of conscience whose cases have been assigned to them. Their aim is to seek the release of these prisoners by means of direct appeals to government authorities in the countries concerned and through mobilization of public interest wherever possible.



Today Amnesty International groups exist in every region of the world — in Africa, North and South America, in Asia, Europe and in the Middle East.

Concern for individual prisoners is also reflected in the Campaign for Prisoners of the Month and Urgent Action appeals on behalf of people in danger of torture or execution. Even Amnesty International's country campaigns focus on the individual. It is from particular instances of named prisoners and their specific cases that Amnesty International reaches outward to the general problems of political imprisonment, torture and the death penalty, and to the related human rights concerns of asylum for political refugees and ratification of the International Human Rights Covenants.




*After describing Amnesty International as a "social scourge", Transkei (South Africa) Security Police Chief Colonel Martin Mgceba showed prisoner Fikile Bam a large collection of telegrams and other messages of concern about him from many parts of the world. Mr. Bam was then released unconditionally. No charges were ever brought against him and the authorities have given no reason for his detention without trial for about ten weeks.*

*Fikile Bam has passed a message to Amnesty International to express his thanks to all who appealed on his behalf.*



## ACTION GROUNDED IN FACT

Amnesty International has from the outset recognized the necessity of initiating action only when it has reliable information. Facts can be hidden or camouflaged, but they cannot be denied once exposed.

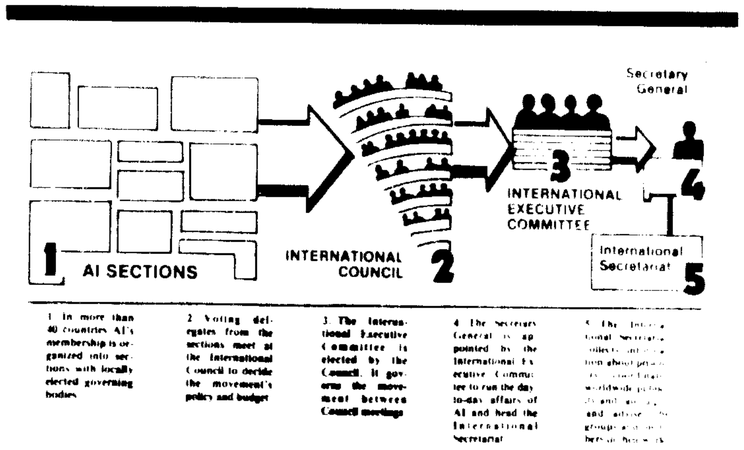
At the heart of all Amnesty International's activities is research. Amnesty International is aware that its credibility rests most of all on the reliability of its information. In order to improve fact-finding concerning human rights violations within its mandate, Amnesty International instituted a Research Department at the International Secretariat in 1971. Today this department is subdivided into five geographical regions: Africa, the Americas, Asia, Europe and the Middle East. Its instructions could be said to be: get the facts, ....double check for accuracy before taking action, .....when corroboration is not possible say 'alleged', .....where exactness is lacking lean to understatement, .....if ever an error is made, correct it straight away.

## BASED ON MEMBER PARTICIPATION

It is the conviction of Amnesty International that without the concerted action of individual men and women little will be accomplished in the field of human rights. If left solely to governments, human rights will not be protected. Individuals everywhere must concern themselves with acts of repression and take up the defence of human rights wherever they are threatened.

It may sometimes seem that Amnesty International is engaged only in diplomatic contacts with governments, testifying before the United Nations, sending high level delegations to talk with heads of state. But the fact is that this superstructure has been built on the untiring effort of thousands of individual members throughout the world. If governments today are prepared to receive and listen to our high level delegations this is precisely because they have already been subjected for months or even years to relentless pressure from groups of Amnesty International members. Day in and day out, they take pains to familiarize themselves with the facts about their prisoners and the countries to which they belong. They write letters to ministers and other officials

on behalf of these prisoners, collect signatures on petitions, lobby visiting state dignitaries, pay visits to local ambassadors and put them on the spot with polite but informed queries. Amnesty International owes its moral authority to the steadfast work of this international family of individual men and women interceding on behalf of others. This also explains why Amnesty International always seeks to expand its active membership.



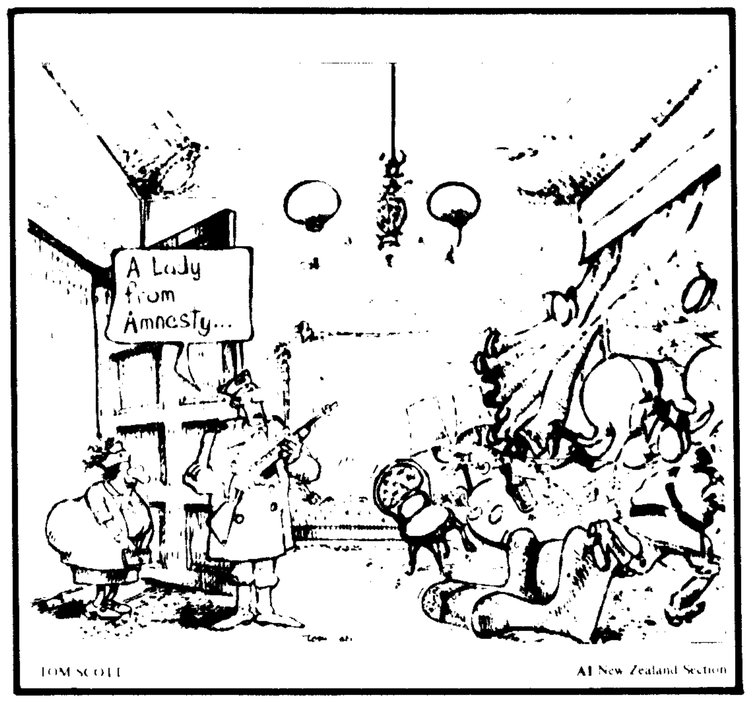

## MORAL PERSUASION

Amnesty International neither opposes nor supports any government or political system. What it opposes are violations of the specific human rights Amnesty International has undertaken to defend. Similarly, it supports those acts of governments or political bodies, whatever their orientation, which protect and promote those human rights.

Amnesty International does not seek a conflict with any government; wherever possible it seeks a dialogue. It does not urge the isolation of governments or call for military or economic sanctions against them. When we have prepared a report on a government we invite the government to comment



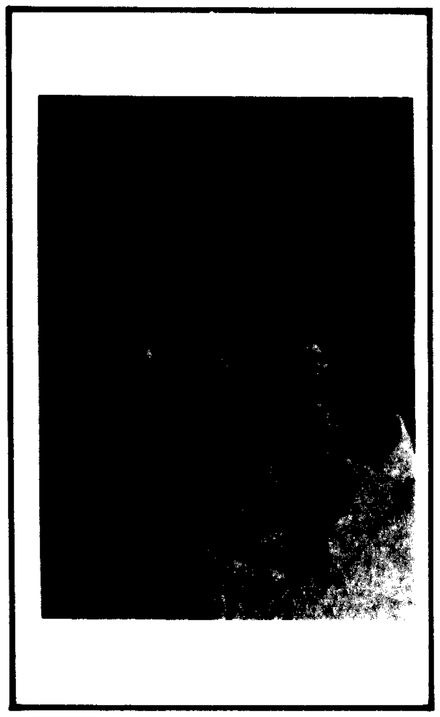
and we accompany our criticism with recommendations. Amnesty International members are instructed to use courteous and respectful language in all their appeals and letters on behalf of persons suffering deprivation of their human rights. Self-discipline is essential for members of Amnesty International.




Yet this does not mean that Amnesty International is hesitant to turn the spotlight on any government whose treatment of its citizens does not conform to international norms. However respectful our words, we will not compromise the truth.

The most powerful weapon that Amnesty International has at its disposal is public indignation. By means of an aroused public opinion Amnesty International seeks to create pressure on behalf of the victims. It believes that when enough people — both ordinary people and public figures — learn about a person in prison for his or her convictions, or one who is

undergoing torture, the result will be a public outcry to which no government will be able to turn a deaf ear. Amnesty International is similarly convinced that when enough people know all the dreadful facts about the use of the death penalty, this cruel, inhuman and degrading punishment too will vanish from the face of the earth.

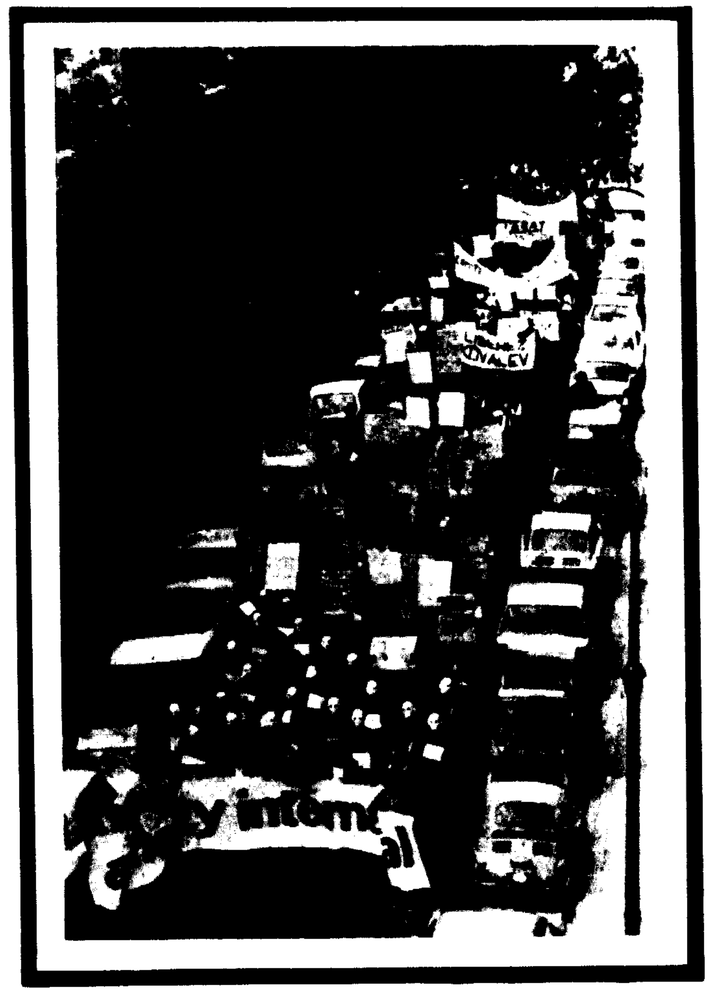


*After three years in one of Haiti's most dreaded prisons, Marc Romulus was reunited with his son, Patrice. The 34-year-old teacher had been arrested on suspicion of opposing the government. An Amnesty International group in the Federal Republic of Germany was put to work on the case. The government said he was one of a number of "unknown persons" but the Amnesty International campaign continued. It took two years for the government to admit he was in detention, although he was then described as an "unrepentant terrorist". Amnesty International continued to work on Marc Romulus' behalf. In September 1977 he was included in an amnesty for political prisoners. The man who the government at one stage said did not exist was at last reunited with his family.*

## STRICT IMPARTIALITY IN ALL WORK

In no aspect of its work is Amnesty International more vigilant that in the observance of impartiality. This was necessary when Amnesty International was a little known human rights organization, and it is all the more necessary now that it has become a worldwide human rights movement enjoying high international regard. This rise in public favour has not been without cost.





*The struggle for human rights goes on. Here, Amnesty International members pass in procession down a Paris street, led by masked figures representing jailed prisoners of conscience.*

*Constant research is needed to keep Amnesty International's information on arrests, torture and executions accurate and up-to-date and to trace sightings of prisoners as they are moved from camp to camp. But for every name that is known, there may be another 50 or another hundred that are unknown — amounting to an unacknowledged population of thousands of prisoners of conscience scattered over the globe — all incarcerated in violation of their fundamental human rights.*

Hardly a month goes by when Amnesty International is not accused of bias or favouritism. Periodically the organization gathers these comments and publishes them in a booklet called "AI in Quotes". Here, side by side for all to see, are charges from every quarter that Amnesty International is biased either against the Left or the Right, shows favouritism towards either capitalists or communists, is especially hard or soft on Western countries, socialist countries or developing countries. Sometimes our reports are branded as distortions, the only apparent purpose of which is to serve those who seek the downfall of the state. Some governments have accused us of being blind to the inhuman acts of those who struggle against them — "the separatists", "the subversives", or "the terrorists."

There is no truth in these charges. Often their resentment stems not only from instinctive defensiveness to criticism, but a failure to appreciate or to understand what constitutes Amnesty International's impartiality, and how an Amnesty International report critical of certain of their actions can still claim to be impartial. It has therefore become increasingly important that on this point we explain our position clearly, and that we do so systematically.

Put simply, wherever men and women are imprisoned for exercising the right of free expression, or are tortured or threatened with execution Amnesty International will do what it can to help them. No external considerations, whether political or religious or ideological, will be allowed to influence or to inhibit Amnesty Internatinal in the pursuit of this task. This is part of being impartical.

One way in which Amnesty International seeks to give public expression to its impartiality is by applying the principle of balance to its work. Each group in Amnesty International's worldwide network is allotted at least two prisoners, who come from countries with different political systems or who hold different political or religious beliefs. The



# AI in Quotes

...instrument of communist terrorism—*Brazil*
in a leading position among organizations which conduct anti-Soviet propaganda—*USSR*
...this imperialist body—*Ghana*
...this espionage agency—*Iran*

Amnesty International's work for human rights has consistently and inevitably brought angry reactions from all bands of the political spectrum over the years. The very impartiality of our work almost ensures criticism from all sides, however baseless such attacks as those quoted above are.

The subject of one of the following quotations is a former prisoner of conscience in the Soviet Union, the other a former prisoner of conscience in the United States. Both were adopted by Amnesty International.

Leonid Plyushch, a mathematician unjustly detained for years in a Soviet psychiatric hospital, was granted an exit visa from the USSR after a prolonged international campaign on his behalf.

**First of all I would ask the press to convey my gratitude to all those who played a part in my release... to the International Committee of Mathematicians, to Amnesty International, to the workers' syndicates of France, to the Ukrainian organisations throughout the world, to the British, French and German psychiatrists, to the committee against the use of psychiatry for criminal ends in the USSR...**

Extract from news conference given by Leonid Plyushch, Paris, 3 February 1976

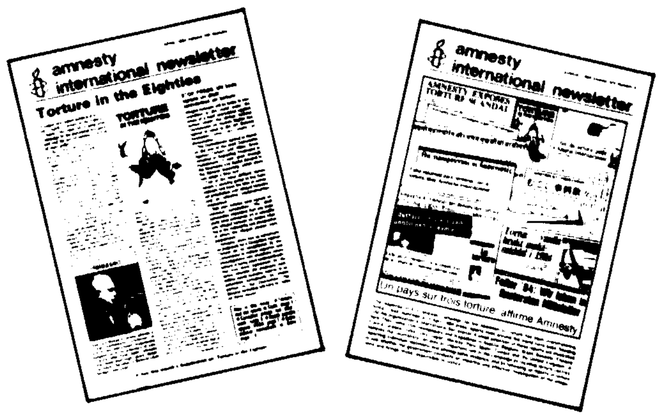
Martin Sostre was falsely convicted in the United States of selling heroin and was sentenced to 40 years' imprisonment in 1968. Many people felt he had been "framed" because of his political activities on behalf of black Americans. On 24 December 1975 Governor Hugh Carey of New York State granted him executive clemency.

**Gov. Carey's decision to grant clemency to Martin Sostre is a victory for the conscience of mankind and, more specifically, for the dedicated efforts of every human being associated with Amnesty International.**

An editorial in the *New York Post*, New York, 28 December 1975

selection of the prisoners of the month to be featured in each **Amnesty International Newsletter** adheres to a similar balancing of political and ideological persuasions. Amnesty International's news releases and country reports also, if analyzed from year to year, show the wide range of our concern. However, when Amnesty International gets a

## *Amnesty International Newsletter*




*This monthly bulletin provides a regular account of Amnesty International's work: the latest reports of fact-finding missions, details of the arrest and release of political prisoners, reliable reports of torture and executions. It also gives practical information for Amnesty International supporters: each issue includes appeals on behalf of prisoners of conscience and victims of torture around the world. The newsletter is written — without political bias — for human rights activists throughout the world. It is widely used by journalists, students, political leaders, doctors, lawyers and other professionals.*

*The newsletter frequently includes supplements and special features, highlighting particular patterns of abuses such as "Different faces of imprisonment", "Political killings by governments" and testimony by prisoners from countries in various parts of the world. It also gives details of every new publication issued by Amnesty International.*



significant amount of verifiable information about arbitrary detention, torture or executions in one country, and very little that can be verified in another, considered to be an ideological opposite, it does not refrain from reporting what it does know in order to give the appearance of being balanced. Nor does Amnesty International compare countries according to their human rights records, or single out any regime or group of regimes as the "worst human rights offenders." Even if the organization wanted to it could not make such a list. Lack of detailed information on some countries would itself be an obstacle.

An even greater problem is the variety in the techniques of repression and in their impact on different individuals. As pointed out in Amnesty International's annual report for 1980, regimes allow paramilitary groups to kidnap, torture and assassinate political activists, in others prisoners are kept in detention for years without trial. In some police stations torture is carried out with electric shocks, in others with psychological measures. In some prisons the inmates are refused all communication with their families, in others they are starved. There is absolutely no point in trying to judge which measures are categorically 'better' or 'worse' than others. Similarly, it would be a misleading exercise to grade or rank regimes. In the end, what matters is the pain and suffering the individual endures in the police station or in the cell."

### INDEPENDENCE IN POLICY AND FINANCE

Amnesty International has always been an independent organization. It is beholden to no state or group of states, to no political body, or ideological or religious group, and to no special interests. Its sole authority is its worldwide membership upon whom it depends for direction, support and finance.

Amnesty International has adopted a number of rules to help protect this independence. No member who occupies a high post with any government or political party can at the same time hold a leading position in Amnesty International. Similarly no member of the governing International Executive Committee can take part in decisions affecting his or her own

country. Nor is any staff member at the International Secretariat permitted to take decisions on his or her own country. There are also rules restricting the extent to which Amnesty International works with other national and international bodies.

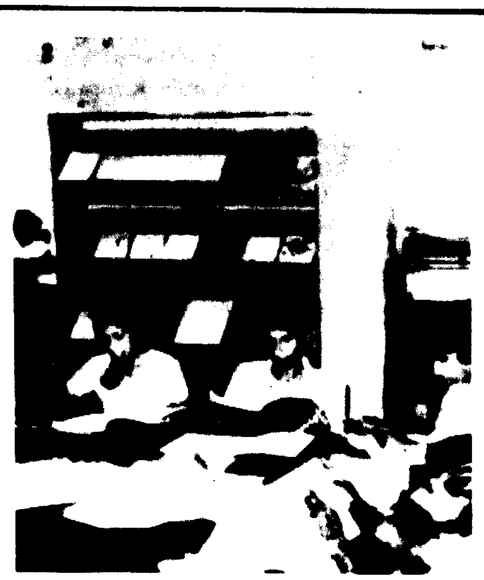
Yet another rule is that no Amnesty International section or group is allowed to work for prisoners or to issue public statements about human rights violations in its own country. That Amnesty International members are restricted in regard to work on their own countries is an aspect of the movement that is not always understood. Why is it that Amnesty International groups do not take up individual cases of human rights violations in their own country? Isn't [illegible] better placed to gather information and take action with regard to its own government than anyone else? Is it not morally wrong for individuals to concern themselves only with violations of human rights in other countries and to show no concern for what goes on in their own?

It should first of all be pointed out that no member of Amnesty International is limited in what he or she does to counter human rights violations at home so long as this is done in a personal capacity or through some other organization. Many members are in fact active in local civil liberties bodies, trade unions and political or religious organizations concerned with human rights in their own countries. It is specifically as members of Amnesty International that we are under restrictions concerning such work. This rule has been established to safegard the independence of the Amnesty International movement from pressures arising within its sections or groups either to act, or not to act, upon their



countries. It also serves to protect Amnesty International's sections or groups from being used for local political interests.

The responsiblity for collecting and evaluating information on human rights abuses is that of the Research Department at the international headquarters in London which, staffed by full time professionals, checks and cross checks its information from a diversity of sources and makes its assessments free from pressures from any quarter.



*AI's reports get worldwide coverage in the news media and have a growing readership. Below, in one Asian country, students go through the reports in the "AI corner" set up in a local public library.*

In the critical realm of finances too Amnesty International diligently guards its independence. It relies for support on the subscriptions and contributions of its worldwide membership. All donations are controlled by a stringent set of guidelines. No gift can be accepted with conditions attached that are

inconsonant with the Statutes. Nor may the international movement or any section or group receive, without special permission from Amnesty International's governing bodies, any contribution from a single source which amounts to five percent or more of its expected income for the year. This is to protect Amnesty International from becoming dependent on any one source of income or donor. Finally, Amnesty International does not accept grants from governments for its internal budget. As with other humanitarian organizations, governments may contribute to relief funds for prisoners or their families, but these funds are administered solely by Amnesty International. All groups and sections prepare annual financial reports which are available for public inspection. These regulations have a common imperative: Amnesty International must remain, and be seen to remain, wholly independent.

## COMMITMENT TO INTERNATIONAL RESPONSIBILITY

Amnesty International has from its first days been committed to the principle of international responsibility in human rights. It is not stopped by geographical or political barriers where human rights violations are concerned. It does not accept the argument that questions of human rights are entirely the affair of the nation or state concerned. Amnesty International's allegiance is instead to the vision set forth in the Universal Declaration of Human Rights of the General Assembly of the United Nations. Human rights are universal. They are the birthright of every individual. Similarly, every person has the duty to respect the human rights of others and to seek their defence wherever and whenever they are violated.

This responsibility, set forth in the Charter of the United Nations, has yet to be fully recognized by the community of nations. Honoured in word, it remains dishonoured in practice. If this principle of international responsibility for human rights is to be given more than lip service, the nations of the world have to rethink and modify one of the sacred principles of international relations: non-interference in the internal affairs of a state. Important as this principle has been and must be in political affairs, it has no place in questions of



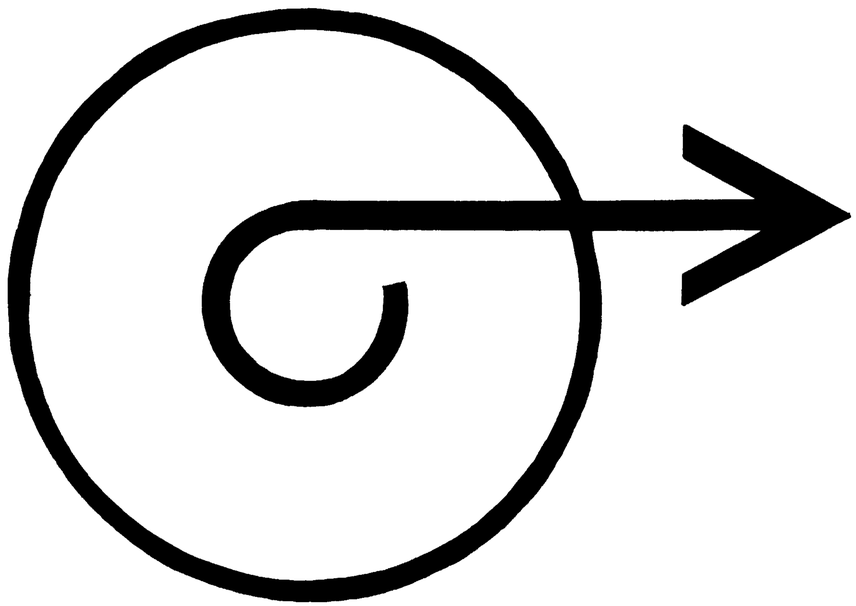
human rights. No state can claim that if it abuses its citizens this is solely its internal affair, even as no parent can claim that if he or she maltreats a child this is solely an internal family affair.

Yet governments persist in doing just this. When confronted by mounting internal concern about flagrant violations of human rights within their borders, they hasten to erect the barrier of non-interference in internal affairs. This pattern cannot be allowed to continue.

Amnesty International is resolutely committed to an international approach to human rights. It is not a federation of local civil liberties bodies, whose national affiliates and members take up human rights problems in their own states. Amnesty International was created as a forum in which its members in whatever country could discharge their international responsibility towards victims of human rights violations in other countries. The main reason for restricting Amnesty International members in regard to their own countries is, as has been said, to safeguard Amnesty International's independence of action. Another reason, and that is the relevant point here, is to show by example that human rights are an international responsibility.

In becoming part of Amnesty International we promote a new vision, the vision of international responsibility in human rights as set forth in the Universal Declaration of Human Rights. This vision knows no national borders where human rights are concerned. It sees only an international family: the human family. Few aspects of Amnesty International's work are more important than the promotion of this vision, in word and in deed. It is not until the nations of this world fully recognize and accept international responsibility in human rights that the dawn of the universal realization of human rights can begin.

Better to light a
candle
Than curse the
darkness



END OF REEL
PLEASE REWIND