



**WRITE
FOR
RIGHTS**

AMNESTY
INTERNATIONAL



FACING PRISON FOR A FACEBOOK POST

SHAHNEWAZ CHOWDHURY



BANGLADESH

WRITE FOR RIGHTS

MORE THAN 20 YEARS OF WRITING LETTERS THAT CHANGE LIVES

When just a handful of people unite behind someone, the results can be amazing.

Some 20 years ago, a small group of activists in Poland ran a 24-hour letter-writing marathon. Over the following years, the idea spread. Today, Write for Rights is the world's biggest human rights event.

From 2,326 letters in 2001 to close to 4.7 million letters, tweets, petition signatures and other actions in 2021, people the world over have used the power of their words to unite behind the idea that geography is no barrier to solidarity. Together, these individuals have helped transform the lives of more than 100 people over the years, freeing them from torture, harassment or unjust imprisonment.

This year's campaign channels this support towards people targeted for their peaceful activism, views or personal characteristics to protect their right to protest and express themselves freely. This includes women human rights defenders, trans rights activists,

artists and peaceful protesters. These individuals have variously been beaten, jailed, shot at, harassed and intimidated. Through Write for Rights, they will receive individual messages of solidarity from thousands of people across the globe. They and their families know that their situations are being brought to public attention and they are not forgotten. By acting in solidarity and ensuring that everyone – including those most discriminated against – can participate in protests equally without fear of violence, we can create a more just and equal world.

Alongside the letter-writing actions, Amnesty speaks to those who have the power to change these people's situations, such as politicians in their countries. Write for Rights also gives visibility to these injustices through public events, and garners international attention on social media.

Individuals and groups featured in the campaign in previous years report the difference that these actions make, and often describe the strength they derive from knowing that so many people care about them.

Often, there is a noticeable change in the treatment of these individuals, and of other people and groups in a similar situation, by the country's authorities. Charges may be dropped and people released from detention. People are treated more humanely, and new laws or regulations addressing the injustice are introduced.

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Amnesty Nigeria activists participate in Write for Rights 2021.

Read about the people we're fighting for:
www.amnesty.org/writeforrights

Contact the Amnesty team in your country:
www.amnesty.org/countries

Tweet your support to @Amnesty using the hashtag #W4R22

BEFORE YOU START

This **human rights education activity** can take place in a variety of online or offline settings, such as a school classroom, a community group, a family or an activist group. As a facilitator, you can adapt the activity to best suit the context and group you are working with. For example, you may want to consider what knowledge the group already has about the issues discussed, the size of your group and how to best organize the activity to allow for active participation, the physical setting of your activity, delivering it in-person or online, and any limitations. When participants want to take action on a case, discuss whether it is safe for them to do so.

The activities are all based on **participatory learning methods** in which learners are not merely presented with information; they explore, discuss, analyze and question issues relating to the cases. This methodology allows participants to:

DEVELOP key competencies and skills

FORM their own opinions, raise questions and gain a deeper understanding of the issues presented

TAKE CONTROL of their learning, and shape discussions according to their interests, abilities and concerns

HAVE THE SPACE required for them to engage emotionally and develop their own attitudes.

If you are not familiar with participatory learning methods, look at Amnesty International's **Facilitation Manual** before you start www.amnesty.org/en/documents/ACT35/020/2011/en/

Amnesty International offers online human rights education courses, including a short course about human rights defenders which introduces the **Write for Rights** campaign: <https://academy.amnesty.org/learn>

YOUR WORDS ARE POWERFUL

REUNITED WITH HIS FAMILY

On 30 June 2021, human rights defender Germain Rukuki was released after serving more than four years in prison in Burundi. He had been arrested, prosecuted and convicted simply for his human rights work.

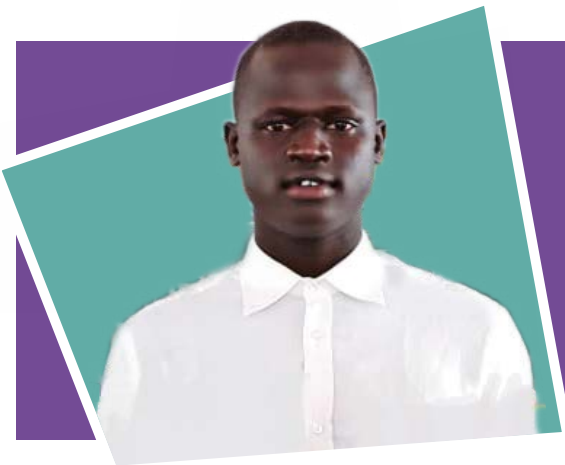
During Write for Rights 2020, supporters from around the world took more than 436,000 actions calling for Germain's freedom. Unable to leave the country following his release, Germain was finally reunited with his family in Belgium in February 2022. He said: "Write for Rights really does have a positive impact. [The] support has made me, Germain Rukuki, come out of prison even more committed to defending human rights."



© Private

FREED FROM DEATH ROW

Magai Matiop Ngong from South Sudan was just a schoolboy when he was sentenced to death on 14 November 2017 for murder. Magai recounted how he told the judge the death was an accident and that he was only 15 years old at the time. Yet Magai was tried for capital murder without any access to a lawyer. Over 700,000 actions were taken for Magai during Write for Rights 2019. In March 2022 the High Court agreed that, because he had been a child at the time, he should be released. Magai is now safely out of the country and determined more than ever to help people like him.



HUMAN RIGHTS DEFENDER FREED

Bernardo Caal Xol, a teacher and father, worked tirelessly to defend communities affected by hydroelectric projects on the Cahabón river, in northern Guatemala. In November 2018 he was sentenced to more than seven years in prison on bogus charges aimed at preventing his human rights work. During Write for Rights 2021 over half a million actions were taken for Bernardo and, in March 2022, he was released.



© Simone Dalmaso

ABOUT HUMAN RIGHTS

Human rights are the basic freedoms and protections that belong to every single one of us. They are based on principles of dignity, equality and mutual respect – regardless of age, nationality, gender, race, beliefs and personal orientations.

Your rights are about being treated fairly and treating others fairly, and having the ability to make choices about your own life. These basic human rights are universal – they belong to all of us; everybody in the world. They are inalienable – they cannot be taken away from us. And they are indivisible and interdependent – they are all of equal importance and are interrelated.

Since the atrocities committed during World War II, international human rights instruments, beginning with the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, have provided a solid framework for national, regional and international legislation designed to improve lives around the world. Human rights can be seen as laws for governments. They create obligations for governments and state officials to respect, protect and fulfil the rights of those within their jurisdiction and also abroad.

Human rights are not luxuries to be met only when practicalities allow.



Amnesty Switzerland activists participate in Write for Rights 2021.

© Amnesty International Switzerland



THE UNIVERSAL DECLARATION OF HUMAN RIGHTS (UDHR)

The UDHR was drawn up by the newly formed United Nations in the years immediately following World War II. Since its adoption on 10 December 1948, it has formed the backbone of the international human rights system. Every country in the world has agreed that they are bound by the general principles expressed within the 30 articles of this document.

The UDHR itself is, as its name suggests, a declaration. It is a declaration of intent by every government around the world that they will abide by certain standards in the treatment of individual human beings. Human rights have become part of international law: since the adoption of the UDHR, numerous other binding laws and agreements have been drawn up on the basis of its principles. It is these laws and agreements which provide the basis for organizations like Amnesty International to call on governments to refrain from the type of behaviour or treatment that the people highlighted in our Write for Rights cases have experienced.

UNIVERSAL DECLARATION OF HUMAN RIGHTS

 <p>CIVIL RIGHTS AND LIBERTIES Right to life, freedom from torture and slavery, right to non-discrimination.</p>	<p>Article 1 Freedom and equality in dignity and rights</p> <p>Article 2 Non-discrimination</p> <p>Article 3 Right to life, liberty and security of person</p> <p>Article 4 Freedom from slavery</p> <p>Article 5 Freedom from torture</p>
 <p>LEGAL RIGHTS Right to be presumed innocent, right to a fair trial, right to be free from arbitrary arrest or detention.</p>	<p>Article 6 All are protected by the law</p> <p>Article 7 All are equal before the law</p> <p>Article 8 A remedy when rights have been violated</p> <p>Article 9 No unjust detention, imprisonment or exile</p> <p>Article 10 Right to a fair trial</p> <p>Article 11 Innocent until proven guilty</p> <p>Article 14 Right to go to another country and ask for protection</p>
 <p>SOCIAL RIGHTS Right to education, to found and maintain a family, to recreation, to health care.</p>	<p>Article 12 Privacy and the right to home and family life</p> <p>Article 13 Freedom to live and travel freely within state borders</p> <p>Article 16 Right to marry and start a family</p> <p>Article 24 Right to rest and leisure</p> <p>Article 26 Right to education, including free primary education</p>
 <p>ECONOMIC RIGHTS Right to property, to work, to housing, to a pension, to an adequate standard of living.</p>	<p>Article 15 Right to a nationality</p> <p>Article 17 Right to own property and possessions</p> <p>Article 22 Right to social security</p> <p>Article 23 Right to work for a fair wage and to join a trade union</p> <p>Article 25 Right to a standard of living adequate for your health and well-being</p>
 <p>POLITICAL RIGHTS Right to participate in the government of the country, right to vote, right to peaceful assembly, freedoms of expression, belief and religion</p>	<p>Article 18 Freedom of belief (including religious belief)</p> <p>Article 19 Freedom of expression and the right to spread information</p> <p>Article 20 Freedom to join associations and meet with others in a peaceful way</p> <p>Article 21 Right to take part in the government of your country</p>
 <p>CULTURAL RIGHTS, SOLIDARITY RIGHTS Right to participate in the cultural life of the community.</p>	<p>Article 27 Right to share in your community's cultural life</p> <p>Article 28 Right to an international order where all these rights can be fully realized</p> <p>Article 29 Responsibility to respect the rights of others</p> <p>Article 30 No taking away any of these rights!</p>

ACTIVITY

RIGHT TO FREEDOM OF EXPRESSION

KEY CONCEPTS

- freedom of expression
- censorship
- internet and social media
- human rights defenders and activists
- detention

ABOUT THIS ACTIVITY

Participants will learn about the right to protest and digital censorship through the real story of Shahnewaz Chowdhury, who was arrested for raising a critical voice on social media. As part of the activity, participants are encouraged to write a letter to call for all charges against Shahnewaz Chowdhury to be dropped and to show solidarity with him.

LEARNING OUTCOMES

Participants will:

- **understand** the concept and importance of freedom of expression in the online and offline world;
- **explore** the consequences of censorship on a person's life;
- **consider** what governments should do to respect freedom of expression;
- **learn** about Amnesty International's Write for Rights campaign;
- **write** letters in support of and showing solidarity with Shahnewaz Chowdhury.

AGE: 12+

TIME NEEDED

60 minutes — you may want additional time for the **Take Action** section.

MATERIALS

- **Prison sentence cards** (page 9)
- **Handout:** Shahnewaz's story (page 11)
- **Background information** on protests and censorship (page 10)
- **Universal Declaration of Human Rights (UDHR)** simplified version (page 5)
- Paper, pens and envelopes (if sending letters)
- Optional: Template letters from www.amnesty.org/writeforrights/
- Optional: Video of Shahnewaz from www.amnesty.org/w4r-videos

PREPARATION

- Print the handouts and copies of the simplified UDHR for each participant/group.
- Read the background information on page 10 and Shahnewaz's story on page 11.
- Print one copy of the prison sentence cards (page 9) and cut out the cards.

MORE INFORMATION

- Take the Write for Rights short course at academy.amnesty.org/learn/course/external/view/elearning/145/write-for-rights-a-short-guide
- Take our Right to Protest short course at academy.amnesty.org/learn/course/external/view/elearning/201/the-right-to-protest
- Read Amnesty's briefing on the right to protest at amnesty.org/en/documents/ACT30/5856/2022/en/

IMPORTANT TO CONSIDER

- In contexts where using the word *protest* is too controversial and might put participants at risk, you may want to replace it with an alternative such as *the rights to freedom of peaceful assembly and expression*.

1. EXPRESS YOURSELF!

Ask the group to reflect on how they normally express themselves in the digital world:

- **How and where do you express yourself online?**
- **What do you share online?**

Take a variety of answers from the group and prompt them to be as specific as possible. Or, alternatively, say a couple of options out loud and ask them to raise their hands if it applies to them. Think of Facebook updates, sharing jokes, complaints or memes, writing on digital forums, sharing holiday pictures or selfies on Instagram, making TikTok videos etc.

Tell the group that we will now focus on online activism and use our written words to stand up for a cause and express what we believe in. Decide (preferably together with the participants) on up to three causes they care about in their community or the world. For example: climate change, waste and pollution, bullying in school, children's rights, sexual and reproductive rights, racism and discrimination, etc.



Hand out paper and ask each participant to write a brief fictitious Facebook post on what they believe needs to change, and what their call to action is. You can give them an example, such as 'Children have a right to play, but excessive homework and chores leaves no time for that. Sign my petition to have homework-free weeks!' or 'The river is dirty, and the municipality doesn't clean the trash there. Let's organize a protest clean-up!'. Once ready, ask participants to come forward and stick their notes on the board or wall.

Give them a few minutes to read over the different ideas. In the meantime, put one or two participants into the role of a government official and give them the instructions below, or get ready for this role yourself.

INSTRUCTIONS:

You will enter the group, and formally introduce yourself as representing the local authority. You will have cards with prison sentences. You will randomly select a few Facebook posts and hand out prison sentences. While you stick the prison cards on top of the Facebook posts, give some generic reasons, such as 'I am the government/ president/mayor, and this goes against my plans / this post is giving me a bad name / I will not tolerate criticism / I am up for re-election, and I cannot have anyone question me / you're in my way' etc. Once you have identified who is the author of the post, 'imprison' them in a designated corner or makeshift prison.

Get the group back together to reflect. Ensure to resolve any possible worry from participants, for example those whose posts were given a jail sentence, by addressing their concerns. To end the role play, ask the group to stand up and physically shake their bodies as a way to shake off and step away from the role play and come back to their own self.

Debrief by taking responses to the questions:

- **How did this exercise make you feel?**
- **Do you believe something like that could happen in real life?**

2. FEARLESS WRITING AND CENSORSHIP: SHAHNEWAZ'S STORY

 **25 MINUTES**

Explain to the group that being arrested for sharing your opinion online does happen in some countries around the world, and that we are going to explore one particular case in Bangladesh. Distribute copies of **Shahnewaz's story** (page 11) to participants. Ask different participants to read one paragraph each.

Afterwards, divide the participants into small groups and ask them to discuss Shahnewaz's story using the following questions:

- **What shocks or surprises you about Shahnewaz's story?**
- **How does his story relate to the rights to freedom of expression and freedom from censorship?**
- **What happens when governments censor or silence people like that?**
- **What should happen for Shahnewaz to receive justice?**

You can give participants a copy of the **Universal Declaration of Human Rights (UDHR)** (page 5) or use some of the **background information** (page 10) to explain further and help guide their conversation.

Bring the participants back together and ask groups to share some of their findings and discussions. Take answers from a couple of people.

If this is the first time that participants have been introduced to the UDHR, you should start by explaining what it is, using the information on page 4.



15 MINUTES

3. TAKE ACTION

Explain about Amnesty's Write for Rights campaign. Explain that Amnesty International is encouraging people to demand justice for Shahnewaz. Give examples from last year's campaign (page 3) demonstrating how successful writing letters and taking other actions can be.

If there isn't enough time for participants to take action within the time allowed, encourage them to organize how to do so afterwards or divide the actions among the groups. Encourage them to be creative.

Show participants the video of Shahnewaz which can be found here: www.amnesty.org/w4r-videos (available in English).

WRITE A LETTER

Encourage participants to write to the Bangladesh authorities using the contact information on the right.

Explain that a personal message to the officials can have the most impact. You can give the participants the following guidelines to help them write their letter:

- Tell the authorities something about yourself to make this a personal letter.
- Tell them what shocks you about the case of Shahnewaz Chowdhury.
- Tell them why you think it is important that governments respect the right to freedom of expression.
- Tell them to **immediately and unconditionally drop all charges against Shahnewaz Chowdhury.**

Minister of Justice
Law and Justice Division
Ministry of Law, Justice and
Parliamentary Affairs
Building No – 04
Bangladesh Secretariat
Dhaka – 1000
Bangladesh

Email: minister@minlaw.gov.bd

Salutation: Honourable Minister

SHOW SOLIDARITY

Encourage participants to write Shahnewaz a message of friendship and support. Tell them to write a little bit about themselves and where they are from. Cards and letters can be sent by post to the address on the right. Participants can also take a photo of their message and post it on their social media channels, tagging Shahnewaz on Twitter @Shahnewaz9

Shahnewaz speaks Bangla and English. Here is an example message:

আমরা আপনার সাথে একাত্মতা প্রকাশ করছি (We stand in solidarity with you)

Shahnewaz Chowdhury
C/O Rashid Ahmed Chowdhury
East Baraghona
Post Office: West Baraghona
Police Station: Banshkhali
Chittagong
Bangladesh



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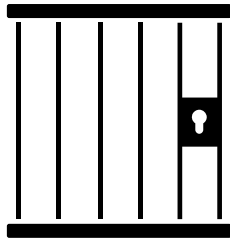
Shahnewaz Chowdhury faces many years in prison for sharing his personal opinion on Facebook.



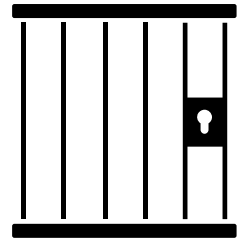
HANDOUT

PRISON SENTENCE CARDS

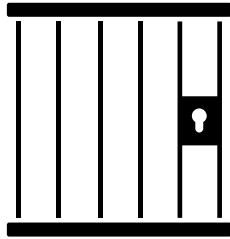
5 YEARS



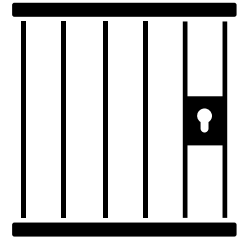
9 YEARS



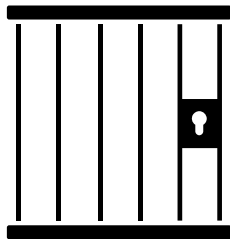
8 MONTHS



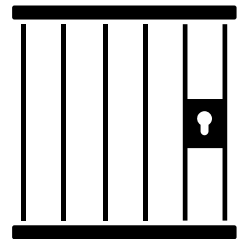
3.5 YEARS



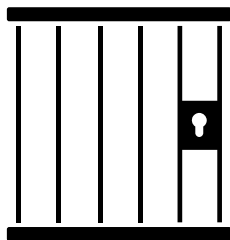
17 YEARS



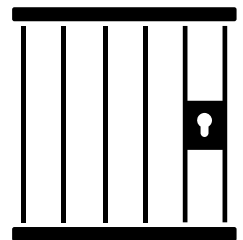
5 YEARS



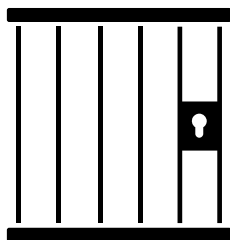
9 YEARS



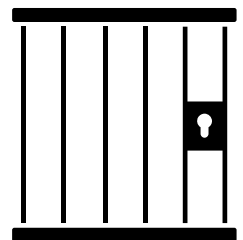
8 MONTHS



3.5 YEARS



17 YEARS



BACKGROUND INFORMATION

THE RIGHT TO PROTEST

Peaceful protest is a dynamic and public way of exercising our human rights. Throughout history, protests have allowed individuals and groups to express dissent, opinions and ideas, expose injustice and abuse, and demand accountability from those in power. Peaceful protests cover a wide spectrum of activities, from letter writing and organizing petitions, to pickets, rallies, marches and strikes. They include colourful and noisy mass demonstrations, and silent vigils, sit-ins, flash mobs and media stunts. They also include Twitter storms and online organizing to share similar slogans and messages, as well as hunger strikes, banner drops and street art. They can be individual or collective, and can take place online or offline. All these and other forms of protest are protected under the rights to freedom of expression and peaceful assembly, and sometimes other human rights as well.

In accordance with the right to freedom of expression and peaceful assembly, authorities should never prohibit a protest based on what people are protesting about. The right to freedom of expression applies to ideas of all kinds and protects the ability of people to protest even if their message might be considered offensive, shocking or disturbing. Any restriction on these human rights must be legal, proportional and necessary.

Many governments abuse their authority to stifle criticism and silence peaceful dissent by passing laws criminalizing freedom of expression. Critical speech, dissent and protest are routinely censored, punished or otherwise obstructed, online as well as offline. This is often done in the name of counterterrorism, public order, national security or religion. But respect for human rights is part of national security and public order, and the right to freedom of expression is protected under international human rights law.

CYBER-CENSORSHIP AND DIGITAL SURVEILLANCE

Access to the internet, social media, instant messaging apps and other digital technologies are expanding people's ability to protest both online and offline, by enabling people to gain access to information, distribute details about an upcoming protest, organize, and enable virtual engagement in a wide variety of ways.

Increasingly, much of the repression faced by human rights defenders and activists is digital. Around the world, governments are trying to control the internet through cyber-censorship and surveillance, whether by imposing targeted censorship or by denying access to the internet or to certain websites and messaging apps.

Digital attacks against human rights defenders, activists, journalists and civil society are on the rise. States and companies are increasingly using sophisticated targeted and mass digital tools to engage in unlawful surveillance of protesters, invade their privacy and track them down. Facial recognition technologies, often used without adequate safeguards to protect people's rights, are increasingly being used by police and security forces to monitor public spaces, including during demonstrations. Cyber-censorship is now a global phenomenon and governments are using sophisticated new technologies to silence, spy on, harass and track those expressing criticism.

In many countries it is dangerous to speak out for human rights and expose the truth. Instead of addressing pressing concerns and promoting dialogue to find solutions to injustice, abuses and discrimination, states often respond by stigmatizing and cracking down on peaceful protesters. In this context, governments are increasingly relying on digital surveillance to intimidate, harass and arrest people.



Shahnewaz Chowdhury at his home in the village of Banshkhali, Bangladesh, July 2022.

HANDOUT

SHAHNEWAZ'S STORY

A big cricket fan, Shahnewaz has been playing since childhood. He also has a passion for writing and uses the written word to speak out about the struggles faced by people in his region of Banshkhali, a low-lying coastal area in the south-east of Bangladesh, vulnerable to the impact of climate change.

A new coal-fired power plant in Shahnewaz's village was supposed to be a turning point in the region's development. But Shahnewaz was scared about the environmental destruction it would bring.

On 26 May 2021, the area was swept up by a storm. Heavy rainfall and strong winds pounded the village. Homes were destroyed. Worried about the impact of environmentally damaging projects like the new power plant, which he believed contributed to an increase in tidal surges, Shahnewaz took to Facebook to raise his concerns. Encouraging young people to speak out, Shahnewaz wrote: "the youth of Banshkhali must resist injustice and support development through fearless writing."

The following day, the power plant company filed a case against Shahnewaz, accusing him of posting false information. On 28 May 2021, he was arrested by the police for his Facebook post under Bangladesh's oppressive Digital Security Act. He was detained in inhumane conditions for 80 days, without trial. Shahnewaz was granted bail on 16 August 2021, but if he's convicted, he faces many years in prison.

"Environmental and human rights activists are not enemies of anyone. They are friends of the nature and people. Still, they face the ire of some people. For simply sharing my opinion, I have been treated like a criminal."

Shahnewaz Chowdhury



Top to bottom: Shahnewaz Chowdhury meets community members in his home village of Banshkhali, Bangladesh;

Shahnewaz in Banshkhali in July 2022;

Shahnewaz plants a tree as part of a community initiative in Banshkhali;

Aerial view of Banshkhali, July 2022.



ABOUT

AMNESTY INTERNATIONAL

Amnesty International is a global movement of more than 10 million people who take injustice personally. We are campaigning for a world where human rights are enjoyed by all.

We investigate and expose the facts, whenever and wherever abuses happen. We lobby governments as well as other powerful groups such as companies, making sure they keep their promises and respect international law. By telling the powerful stories of the people we work with, we mobilize millions of supporters around the world to campaign for change and to stand in the defence of activists on the frontline. We support people to claim their rights through education and training.

Our work protects and empowers people – from abolishing the death penalty to advancing sexual and reproductive rights, and from combating discrimination to defending refugees' and migrants' rights. We help to bring torturers to justice, change oppressive laws, and free people who have been jailed just for voicing their opinion. We speak out for anyone and everyone whose freedom or dignity are under threat.

AMNESTY INTERNATIONAL INTERNATIONAL SECRETARIAT

Peter Benenson House
1 Easton Street
London WC1X 0DW
United Kingdom

Index: POL 32/5899/2022
English, September 2022
t: +44-20-74135500
f: +44-20-79561157
e: contactus@amnesty.org
www.amnesty.org

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