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## **@Amnesty International: The Idea that Became a Movement**

The idea was simple. All over a divided world, state powers were jailing people for their beliefs. Governments were subjecting their own citizens to torture and execution. The idea: stop them.

The campaign was straightforward. Get the facts. Mobilize public opinion. Organize pressure to help the victims and their families.

It began with a newspaper appeal. Under the headline, "The Forgotten Prisoners", British lawyer Peter Benenson called for public support. The date: 28 May 1961. Within weeks, he had more than a thousand offers of help.

In its first 12 months, the fledgling organization sent four missions to make representations to governments: to Czechoslovakia, Ghana, the German Democratic Republic and Portugal. There were 210 cases "under active investigation". A greetings card campaign at the end of the year resulted in some 5,000 messages being sent to 12 prisoners in different countries.

It was the beginning of an extraordinary worldwide effort. What began as a brief campaign would soon be transformed into a growing movement: Amnesty International.

**Independent and voluntary**

Today Amnesty International is recognized as an independent, voluntary movement that works to prevent some of the gravest violations by governments of people's fundamental human rights. The main focus of its campaigning is to:

- \* free all prisoners of conscience. These are people detained anywhere for their beliefs, or because of their ethnic origin, sex, colour or language - who have not used or advocated violence;
- \* ensure fair and prompt trials for political prisoners;
- \* abolish the death penalty, torture and other cruel treatment of prisoners;
- \* end extrajudicial executions and "disappearances".

Based on small local groups of members bringing pressure to bear on behalf of victims in other countries, the movement stresses the importance of political independence and strict impartiality.

The original emphasis on building a membership organization has remained central. By working for individual victims in other countries, an international spirit has been kept alive. The message that comes through is that human rights are not limited by national frontiers or by the boundaries of race and religion.

### **Impartial and international**

Amnesty International does not support or oppose any government or political system. It is impartial. It does not necessarily support or oppose the view of the people whose rights it seeks to protect. It is concerned solely with the protection of the human rights involved in each case, regardless of the ideology of the government or the beliefs of the victims.

The movement now has more than 1,100,000 members, subscribers and donors in over 150 countries. They are to be found in Africa, Asia, the Americas, Eastern and Western Europe and the Middle East. There are over 6,000 local groups worldwide, with sections in 46 countries and territories.

Since it was launched, the movement has taken up more than 42,600 cases of known or possible prisoners of conscience. At any one time, the groups are now working on behalf of between 3,000 and 4,000 such cases. Thousands of other cases are receiving attention at the same time: political detainees held without charge or trial, people at risk of torture or execution, as well as reports that pour in of arbitrary killings and "disappearances".

Since the four missions in its first year, Amnesty International has sent over 900 delegations to countries to investigate situations at first hand, attend court proceedings or talk to the authorities. In 1990, a total of 72 delegations were sent to 49 countries, ranging from Argentina to Yugoslavia.

To counteract varying patterns of political repression, Amnesty International uses a range of different techniques. A sustained campaign can be mounted on behalf of a long-term prisoner of conscience. But where detainees are threatened with torture or death in custody or where others are at risk of being abducted or killed, the first response must be concentrated into a few hours. An "urgent action" network has been set up to guarantee rapid intervention when lives are feared to be at risk. Last year the network had volunteer coordinators in some 65 countries, ready to organize telegrams and express letters. They went into action 823 times to help victims in 90 countries.

### **Accurate and meticulous**

Amnesty International attaches great importance to impartial and accurate reporting of facts. Its activities depend on meticulous research into allegations of human rights violations. The International Secretariat in London (with a staff of 270, comprising some 40 nationalities) has a Research Department which collects and analyses information from a wide variety of sources. These include hundreds of newspapers and journals, government bulletins, transcriptions of radio broadcasts, reports from lawyers and humanitarian organizations, as well as letters from prisoners and their families. Amnesty International also sends fact-finding missions for on-the-spot investigations and to observe trials, meet prisoners and interview government officials. Amnesty International takes full responsibility for its published reports and if proved wrong on any point is prepared to issue a correction.

As expectations have grown - and more and more victims and their relatives contact Amnesty International for help - so have demands for resources. The work is costly. Much of the money is used to get direct relief to individuals and their families. Launching the more than 800 urgent action appeals in 1990 cost some £32,000 in telex bills alone. The 72 missions cost over £150,000.

The growing costs reflect the growing efforts. At the end of its first budget year, the Amnesty International accounts showed an expenditure of £6,040. In 1990 the international budget is set at some £12,000,000. But even that is a fraction of what governments spend on prison camps, secret torture centres and "death squads". The remarkable fact is that Amnesty International relies overwhelmingly on public support for its funding. Just as it relies on broad-based community support to generate international pressure for human rights, so too it depends on donations to keep it going - and independent.

## **A vast panorama**

The scale of the challenge is vast. Prisoners of conscience are believed to be held in nearly half the countries of the world. In some 50 countries political prisoners can be held without any charge or trial, often for months or even years.

In the 1990s there is evidence of systematic torture being inflicted on prisoners in one out of every three countries of the world. That adds up to more than 60 countries, with less regular or verifiable allegations received from nearly 40 more.

The death penalty is in force in 92 countries. In its last published tally, Amnesty International reported receiving details on more than 2,029 prisoners executed in 29 countries. The true totals, it said, were undoubtedly far higher.

Secrecy, censorship and intimidation make it impossible to construct a complete picture of these abuses. Some countries are virtually closed to the outside world. In many cases, there are simply no details available on individual prisoners. Often, Amnesty International itself admits that it is only scratching the surface.

In 1991 the supreme governing body of the movement, its International Council, comprising over 400 participants from 70 countries, adopted a series of far-reaching changes to Amnesty International's mandate. These were designed to extend the organization's protection to thousands of victims whose cases previously fell outside its strictly defined terms of reference.

Among the most significant of the changes was a decision to extend Amnesty International's work into cases where abuses are perpetrated by political opposition groups. In future, with precise guidelines still to be worked out, the movement will oppose hostage taking, the torture and killing of prisoners held by such groups, and other arbitrary killings for which they are responsible.

Even with this new departure, however, the central role of Amnesty International remains that of a global watchdog on violations of human rights by governments - who, after all, have specific obligations under international law to protect the rights of their citizens.

## **The results**

The attack on human rights is daunting. The response to it though has shown a growing community of conscience. From fewer than 100,000 people 15 years ago, Amnesty International has grown to more than a million. For Amnesty International what has changed is not the goal: that is still, simply, "stop it". What has changed is the energy now going into the fight for human rights. Hundreds of telegrams can be on their way within hours of receiving reports of possible torture. One government, replying to an Amnesty International appeal, said it had received 10,000 letters about a single case.

The postcards, telegrams and parcels are getting through. Letters come back, many of them smuggled out of prison or past airport censors.

The same week that a young law student was sentenced to three years' imprisonment in an Eastern European country, - he had been arrested after collecting signatures calling for the release of political prisoners - his father wrote to Amnesty International:

" I have experienced the blessing of your appeal, for you have raised your voice in defence of my son ... Amnesty International is a light in our time, particularly for those on whose eyes darkness has fallen, when the prison doors close behind them. By your selfless work this light shines on the ever-widening circle of those who need it."

Among the many other victims was a teacher in Latin America. While he was being tortured by the police they opened a telephone line between the torture chamber and the prisoner's home, forcing his wife to listen to her husband's screams. During that ordeal she died of a heart attack. The prisoner himself survived and was eventually allowed to go into exile with his children. He told us:

"They killed my wife. They would have killed me too; but you intervened and saved my life."

Of the more than 42,600 individual cases taken up since 1961, nearly 39,000 are now closed. Many of them were released ahead of schedule, others were included in general amnesties. But Amnesty International warns against measuring success by a body count. The movement does not claim credit for the release of a single prisoner. Some of the adopted prisoners served their entire terms of imprisonment before being returned to society. Some cases were closed because prisoners died or were killed in detention.

If a measure is needed for the value of Amnesty International, it is the simple fact that it is *needed*. Every day it receives new calls for help, new messages from prisons, new testimony from victims.

The movement has become a lifeline - a "conspiracy of hope", open to everyone prepared to work in defence of human dignity. It has proved that ordinary people can work together regardless of politics in an effort to halt the excesses of tyranny.

"I am free", wrote a prisoner from Benin on the day of his release. "I have just been freed this evening. I assure you that I owe my freedom to you. I survived thanks to you. It is true that one must never despair in life. This victory is completely yours, you have been untiring workers. From this moment a new page of my life has been turned."