YOUR WORDS HAVE POWER

Join our global letter-writing campaign

Business before people
A canal threatens livelihoods in Nicaragua

Welcoming refugees
Community sponsorship in Canada

Civilian catastrophe
Displaced from west Mosul, Iraq
is Amnesty’s global magazine – published four times a year – to inform, empower and inspire people worldwide to take injustice personally.
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REGULARS

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In July, the Canadian government apologized and compensated Canadian citizen, Omar Khadr, for Canada’s role in abuses he suffered over 13 years. US forces captured him in Afghanistan in 2002 when he was a 15-year-old child soldier. He was tortured and subjected to arbitrary imprisonment and unfair trials in US custody in Afghanistan and Guantánamo Bay. Further to a 2010 plea deal, in 2012 he was transferred to Canadian custody and then released on bail in 2015 on the basis of a pending appeal of his Guantánamo conviction. Until now, Canada’s government refused to stand up for his rights. But Amnesty Canada never gave up on him and thousands of Amnesty members took action on his behalf.


In Libya, University Professor Dr Salem Mohamed Beitelmal was released on 6 June. He had been abducted on his way to work and held by local militias on the outskirts of western Tripoli, capital of Libya, since 20 April. He has now returned home and joined his family. A close family member of Dr Salem Beitelmal said: “We thank you all for your actions. We believe that it is the mobilization and the actions taken that kept Dr Salem Beitelmal alive.”

http://bit.ly/2xQmHwE

In Libya, Opposition politician Adam Azim was released on 14 June after spending nearly a week in detention in Malé, capital of the Maldives. He was arrested and faced trumped-up charges after criticizing the government in a TV interview on 8 June. Adam Azim is a well-known advocate for democracy in the Maldives and a shadow minister in the opposition alliance, Maldives United Opposition.


Journalists Raimundos Oki and Lourenco Vicente Martins were cleared of criminal defamation on 1 June by a court in Dili, Timor-Leste’s capital. Prime Minister Rui Maria de Araújo filed criminal charges on 22 January 2016 against them. They had published an article in 2015 about irregularities during the tendering process for a government IT project.

http://bit.ly/2j6zNTi

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© Getty Images

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**5 NGO LEADER’S CASE CLOSED**

The criminal case against Russian rights defender Valentina Cherevatenko was closed on 19 June, yet she had not been informed and learned about the decision by accident a month later. Valentina could have been the first person to be prosecuted under the “foreign agents” law. We will continue to monitor her case as it may be reopened. Valentina said to all of you who took action: “Thank you! This is our common victory!”


**6 RELEASED AFTER ACTIONS**

Chadian activists Nadjo Kaina and Bertrand Sollo, respectively Spokesperson and Rapporteur of the Chadian citizen movement IYINA (“We are tired”), were released on 27 April after receiving a six-month suspended sentence. As part of our Urgent Action, you flooded the Chadian Minister of Security with emails and calls asking for their release. They had been arrested without charge on two separate occasions in April for preparing a protest and were held incommunicado for 18 days and then for 9 days.


**7 PASTOR, MISSIONARY AND ACTIVIST RELEASED**

In Sudan, Petr Jezek, a Czech journalist and missionary, was released in February and has since returned to the Czech Republic. Hassan A. Kodi, a pastor and Secretary General of the Sudanese Church of Christ, and Abdulmonem Abdumawla, an activist, were released on 11 May. The three releases followed a presidential pardon. Petr Jezek had been sentenced to life imprisonment and the other two men to 12 years in prison. The three had been arrested in December 2015. They were supporting the medical treatment of a student from Darfur who was hit by a petrol bomb during violent student clashes in December 2013 in Khartoum, the Sudanese capital.


**8 LABOUR ACTIVISTS RELEASED ON BAIL**

Hua Haifeng, Li Zhao, and Su Heng were released on bail on 28 June in Ganzhou, Jiangxi Province, China. They had been criminally detained while investigating labour conditions at Huajian shoe factories, which produce shoes for Ivanka Trump’s brand, among others. The three will remain under close police surveillance for the next 12 months and we’ll continue to monitor the situation.


“It was your support that allowed my family to be more determined! Thank you!”

Hua Haifeng
DETECTING TORTURE

Amnesty’s Central Africa Team used various forms of evidence to prove the widespread use of torture in Cameroon’s illegal detention sites, as well as the likely knowledge of this practice by senior Cameroonian commanders and possibly by US military personnel.

We conducted five missions in Cameroon, interviewed 200 people, attended 20 trial proceedings and reviewed court documents.

We documented 101 cases of people accused by the security forces, often with little evidence, of supporting Boko Haram. Victims were held in secret and tortured in at least 20 facilities run mainly by the military and the intelligence.

Using victims’ accounts, sketches and photos showing the scars of torture, we recorded 24 torture methods. Collaborating with IT and forensic experts and our global network of students, trained in assessing digital evidence, we analysed videos, satellite imagery and maps of detention sites drawn by victims. Thus we identified detention sites and torture locations. We collaborated with Forensic Architecture to produce a 3D model of two detention sites – a military base in Salak, and a school turned into a military base in Fotokol town. We were able to confirm the presence of US military personnel at Salak base.

FIND OUT MORE
http://bit.ly/2CamrTor

REFUGEES IN NUMBERS

22.5 M
current number of refugees worldwide

18 Y/O
more than half of all refugees are under the age of 18

84%
of refugees are hosted by developing countries

73%
of young people worldwide would welcome refugees to their country

1.7 M
refugees needed to be resettled in 2017

2.8 M+
refugees are hosted by Turkey, one of the top host countries

Ilaria Allegrozzi, Central Africa Researcher, at the report launch in Yaounde, Cameroon, 16 September 2017
BEING PERSISTENT

In the face of increasing instability, uncertainty and man-made as well as natural disasters, it is easy for the individual to feel overwhelmed and powerless.

But in times like this, it is ever more important that we come together and take action to show that we believe a more just world is possible. For the last 15 years, every December, ordinary people all around the globe have joined forces. We get out our pens and write letters and postcards, sign petitions, send emails and write social media posts as part of Amnesty’s global letter writing campaign.

We express our solidarity with human rights defenders with an empowering tool that humans have been using for thousands of years: the written word. As tyrants and dictators have learnt through history, the written word is powerful; it has authority and is persistent, qualities that we all need to share to achieve a world in which everyone’s human rights are respected. Together we need to send our messages out into the world, demanding justice and change for as long as it takes to achieve both.
FOCUS: NICARAGUA

A DIVIDING CANAL

The Nicaraguan government has made a secretive deal to build a canal in possibly one of the biggest ever construction projects. The Great Interoceanic Canal will destroy the environment and endanger the livelihoods of people. The way the project was conceived and has been carried out so far violates the human rights of communities affected by the canal. Many people are fighting back to protect their land and homes. But this can be dangerous as the authorities persecute anyone who dares to speak up against the deal.

The shores of Lake Nicaragua, with the twin peaks of Ometepe Island in the distance, near Rivas, Nicaragua, 5 June 2016
The Great Interoceanic Canal could potentially be one of the largest engineering projects on earth. It’s planned to measure approximately 275km in length and divide Nicaragua in two. It will cross a large portion of the Great Lake of Nicaragua, the largest source of drinkable water in Central America, and will link the Atlantic and Pacific Oceans.

The obscure legal framework leading to the planning of the project, without genuine consultation with all affected communities, violates a catalogue of national and international standards on human rights and might lead to the forced eviction of hundreds of families.

On 13 June 2013, the Nicaraguan congress passed a law that gave green light to the development of a canal and a number of related sub-projects – including an airport, two ports, a pipeline, a railroad track, and two free-trade areas. The law also leaves the door open to future development projects.

With its size, the canal will have a big impact on people and the land. Local civil society organizations put the number of people affected by the canal and the related building projects at nearly 120,000. The canal will put communities’ homes, livelihoods, and access to food, social networks and their very survival at risk.

“Most of the people who live here live from the land, sowing the land, raising animals, we don’t know how to do anything other than work the land. That’s why we prefer to die here. If we go to the city, what are we going to do?”

Anonymous member of one of the affected communities speaking to Amnesty
Communities living in the affected areas have told Amnesty that the government has failed to genuinely consult or properly inform them about the enterprise or provide any viable alternatives. A number of people said they only learned about the project when mainly foreign people visited the area with police and military personnel to measure their lands – without any prior agreement with them. They also complained about the lack of information about options for relocation or compensation.

Many people don’t want to put up with this treatment and the government’s big plans. At least 90 protests against the canal have taken place across the country in recent years. But those raising their voice are often targeted. Human rights activists working to highlight the possible negative impact of the canal talk about harassment and threats from the authorities.

A member of one of the communities that’ll be affected by the project told Amnesty that when she leaves home to take part in a protest, “I tell my children goodbye because I don’t know if I’m going to make it back.”

Amnesty calls on the Nicaraguan government to stop placing business before the future of the country and its people. The only way to stop the project and the destruction and enforced evictions that the project will bring is to repeal the law that backs it and to go back to the drawing board. The rights of all people who might be affected must be protected and they must have a say about their future.

Find out more
http://bit.ly/2gMPONe
Sometimes a letter can change someone’s life. That’s the premise of Write for Rights, Amnesty’s global letter-writing campaign, now in its 15th year. Every December, Amnesty supporters across the globe will write millions of letters for those whose basic human rights are being attacked. They’re people like you, continuing a long tradition of writing letters to right some of the world’s biggest wrongs by taking part in one of the biggest human rights events in the world. Write for Rights is kicking off soon, get ready for it!

This year, we’ll be sending our personal messages of support to 10 individuals and groups of human rights defenders. They’re from Bangladesh, Chad, China, Egypt, Finland, Honduras, Israel/Occupied Palestinian Territories, Jamaica, Madagascar and Turkey. Scattered around the globe, fighting for different causes, they share a vision of a fairer and freer world for us all and are united in taking action to make it a reality. They’re speaking up to authorities, defending housing rights and the environment, campaigning for the disappeared, supporting LGBTI rights, among other issues. All of them are in danger for doing this work. Most face daily harassment and open hostility, they’re beaten, detained and imprisoned; sometimes, they are even murdered.

You can show your solidarity with this year’s rights defenders in many different ways – you can write a letter, send petitions, emails, Tweets, Facebook posts, photos, and postcards. Your words really can change lives. Join us.
Right now in Turkey, 10 people who have dedicated their lives to defending the human rights of journalists, activists and other dissenting voices are themselves in danger. Among them are İdil Eser, Director of Amnesty Turkey, and Özlem Dalkıran of Avaaz and Citizens’ Assembly. Known as the Istanbul 10 they, along with Amnesty’s Taner Kılıç, are under investigation for terrorism-related crimes – an absurd attempt at choking their human rights activism.
A LETTER FROM TURKEY

THEIR DETENTION MAKES US MORE DETERMINED

“Being a human rights defender in Turkey has never been an easy task. To deal with all kinds of pressure from all directions has been the norm for activists throughout the years. But what we’re experiencing right now is unprecedented for Amnesty International. It’s the first time that both the Chair and Director of an Amnesty section are imprisoned at the same time, in the same country.

On 6 June, our Chairman Taner Kılıç was arrested. Less than a month later, in a move that has shocked the world, our Director İdil Eser was detained along with nine other human rights defenders from different NGOs. As I write, both of our colleagues are still behind bars.

İdil has devoted her entire life to the defence of human rights. But for us she’s much more than just our Director, she’s a dear friend to me and to all the team here in Turkey, and someone that we all love deeply. She’s a close and trusted friend with great human qualities, who has been my confidant and a shoulder I’ve leaned on so many times.

All the baseless accusations against İdil – which refer to the legitimate work she was doing for Amnesty – are astonishing to me. In a twist of bitter irony, her detention is in fact proof of why our work is so important and just how much human rights defenders are needed.

We’re all missing İdil very much. The violations and baseless accusations that a woman with such a big heart is facing make us feel very sad. But it also gives us great strength. Our will to fight for human rights and our faith in doing so is only growing stronger.

We hope to soon be working shoulder-to-shoulder again with our detained friends and colleagues for a world where everyone can enjoy their rights and freedoms. We won’t stop until they’re free.

I would like to thank everyone who has taken action to demand their release and for all the invaluable support, which means so much to them and to us.”

With much love and solidarity
Ruhat Sena Aksener
Campaigns and Advocacy Director,
Amnesty International Turkey
REFUSING TO LET POLICE GET AWAY WITH MURDER

SHACKELIA JACKSON, HUMAN RIGHTS DEFENDER, JAMAICA

Shackelia Jackson will not give up. When her brother, Nakiea, was shot dead by police in 2014, she took on a sluggish court system to lead a bold fight for justice for his murder. In doing so, she rallied dozens of families whose loved ones were similarly killed. In response, the police have repeatedly raided and harassed her community. But Shackelia will not be silenced.

FACING LIFE IN PRISON FOR A FACEBOOK VIDEO

MAHADINE, HUMAN RIGHTS DEFENDER, CHAD

He’s an online activist and father of seven. In September 2016, Tadjadine Mahamat Babouri, commonly known as Mahadine, posted videos on Facebook criticizing the Chadian government. Within days, he was snatched off the street, beaten and chained up for several weeks. Facing a life sentence, he is gravely ill having caught tuberculosis in prison. He needs urgent medical care. He shouldn’t lose his freedom for courageously expressing his opinion.
CONVICTED FOR PROTECTING ENDANGERED RAINFOREST

CLOVIS RAZAFIMALALA, HUMAN RIGHTS DEFENDER, MADAGASCAR

Clovis Razafimalala is doing everything he can to protect Madagascar’s vanishing rainforest. Its rosewood trees are a precious resource under threat from a corrupt network of smugglers bent on selling them off in what has become a billion-dollar illegal trade. Clovis’ courageous efforts to save this rare ruby-coloured tree have brought him unwanted attention. He has been convicted on false charges and could be jailed at any moment.

FACING CHARGES FOR SEARCHING FOR HER MISSING HUSBAND

HANAN BADR EL-DIN, HUMAN RIGHTS DEFENDER, EGYPT

When Hanan Badr el-Din’s husband disappeared in July 2013, her life changed for good. Her relentless search for him led her to others whose loved ones were taken by the Egyptian security forces. Now a leading voice exposing Egypt’s hundreds of disappeared, her latest search for information about her husband has seen her arrested on false charges which could mean five years in prison.
HOW WRITE FOR RIGHTS WORKS

People in more than 200 countries and territories take part in all kinds of letter-writing events.

They support write millions of letters, emails, tweets and petitions.

Showing solidarity with people who’ve been tortured, denied refuge and locked up for speaking out.

Putting pressure on governments, leaders and decision-makers.

Showing love and support for the people and their families.

And they help make change happen – releasing activists, convicting torturers and changing abusive laws.

YOUR WORDS HAVE CHANGED LIVES

FREED IN UZBEKISTAN
Muhammad Bekzhanov, one of the longest imprisoned journalists in the world, was freed in February 2017 after spending 17 years behind bars. Hundreds of thousands worldwide wrote for his freedom.

“Receiving your letters really comforted me when I was in prison. Thank you!”

CHARGES DROPPED IN PERU
Criminal charges against Máxima Acuña, a peasant farmer who is defying one of the world’s biggest gold mining companies, were dropped in May 2017. More than 150,000 people sent her solidarity messages.

“Keep on supporting, helping, and not just me, ok?”

RELEASED IN THE USA
Whistleblower Chelsea Manning walked free in May 2017, after her 35-year prison sentence was cut short by outgoing US President Barack Obama. More than a quarter of a million people wrote for her release.

“I wish I had the time and ability to thank each one of you for giving me a little bit of joy with each letter and card.”

Illustrations: © Rebecca Hendin

JOIN IN
Write a letter, sign a petition, send a tweet… Whatever you do for Write for Rights, your words have the power to free people from human rights abuses worldwide.

TAKE ACTION
Go to http://bit.ly/2xnmmE8 when it all kicks off on 29 November
“IS THIS THE WORK OF HUMANS?”
More than 600,000 civilians have been displaced from west Mosul, Iraq, and thousands were killed during the battle in which the Iraqi forces, backed by the US-led coalition, retook this part of the city from the armed group calling itself Islamic State (IS). All parties involved violated international law and the fighting took a terrible toll on civilians. Alia, a mother and grandmother, is one of those who fled the conflict in west Mosul. She now lives in a camp for internally displaced people (IDPs) where Razaw Salihy, Amnesty campaigner for Iraq, spoke with her.
Alia waved a fly away and put a hand on her good leg. Her left leg had thin metal pipes sticking straight out of the flesh, all connected to hold the bone in place. A few days before she escaped west Mosul with her three daughters and her grandchildren, a large piece of shrapnel had been removed from her left leg and she fled with the bandaged wounds from the operation.

She told me how she was injured. One morning in late March, Alia was having breakfast with some of her orphaned grandchildren when air strikes started. “It all happened in the blink of an eye. The front door was hit – and then dust. Dust everywhere. I screamed for the children and when I turned to get up and look for them, my left leg was dangling under me. I looked down and saw just blood.”

Alia was rushed to the hospital where she was helped by a first-aid responder. But then bombs hit the hospital, trapping her in the corridors for over five hours. She was rushed back to the house as soon as the air strikes stopped. “I saw bodies in the courtyard of the hospital, fighters, civilians, very young men. Bodies, bodies, bodies all the way home.”

Much has changed and been lost for Alia, who was already abandoned by her husband and struggled to look after her children and grandchildren under more than two years of rule by the armed group calling itself Islamic State (IS) in Mosul.

I looked at her wrist and saw a tattoo of a man’s name. “This is my husband’s name. I was going to have it removed with laser surgery but, you know… They [IS] came and nothing was normal again.” She smiled at how the notion sounded. “We had normal lives, you know. It was hard and we didn’t have much, but it was not this tragedy that you see now.”

She stared out of the tent towards the sprawling camp: “God knows what will happen to us now. What will we go back to?” Alia’s tent is in the newest annex of the seemingly endless Hamam al-Alil IDP camp, approximately 22km south of Mosul. It now hosts tens of thousands of the more than 800,000 civilians who remain displaced from Mosul and its surroundings.

Alia is one of thousands of civilians who lost much, if not all, of what they knew and owned during the military operation by Iraqi forces, backed by members of the US-led coalition, to retake west Mosul from the control of IS. Amnesty’s Iraq team travelled to northern Iraq in March and May and spoke to 151 civilians who fled from west Mosul, as well as doctors, medical workers and staff members of local and international humanitarian organizations. In its July report “At Any Cost: The Civilian Catastrophe in West Mosul”, Amnesty revealed that all parties to the conflict in the west Mosul battle committed serious violations of international humanitarian law, some of which constitute war crimes.
Civilians paid the heaviest price in this battle, and their rights were exploited and violated in ways that seem almost unprecedented in modern warfare.

Starting in October 2016, IS fighters systematically moved civilians into the zone of combat in west Mosul – forcing them to fall back with them as their territory contracted. Consequently, the areas it still controlled became increasingly crowded with civilians. IS then used these civilians as human shields and prevented them from escaping to safety, whether by booby-trapping them into their homes, welding their doors shut, or deliberately killing them to make an example of them to those trying to flee.

Iraqi and coalition forces failed to properly adapt to this horrific context. Instead, they carried out a series of indiscriminate and disproportionate attacks that caused untold harm to civilians. Iraqi forces consistently deployed explosive weapons with wide-area effects such as IRAMs (Improvised Rocket Assisted Munitions). These weapons were completely unsuitable for use in west Mosul which was crowded with civilians.

Alia and other civilians living with injuries and shrapnel wedged in their bodies count themselves lucky compared to the thousands killed in the city and the countless bodies that remain buried under the rubble to this day.

Women, men and children who, like Alia, are victims of the use of explosive and imprecise weapons, have little hope for the future. Many Mosul residents have arrived into already overcrowded camps that offer miserable conditions. It’s vital that the international community, and specifically members of the US-led coalition, urgently increase funding for humanitarian assistance to these civilians.

Amnesty has called on the Iraqi authorities and members of the US-led coalition to publicly acknowledge the devastating civilian death toll in the west Mosul battle and to highlight the need for reparation to victims of violations.

FIND OUT MORE
FOCUS: REFUGEES

SPONSORSHIP: CANADA’S WIN-WIN SOLUTION FOR WELCOMING REFUGEES
When Debbie Rix saw the tragic image of three-year-old Syrian refugee Alan Kurdi lying lifeless on a beach in Turkey, she decided it was time to take action. “In my store, the front page of our national newspaper had that picture above the fold. People kept coming in and turning the newspaper over, saying ‘I don’t want to see that’.

“I kept turning it back over and saying: ‘We have to look at this – we can’t look away’.”

The next day, Debbie put a call out through Facebook that resonated with many friends, and friends of friends, all of whom had been struck by Alan’s fate and the human cost of indifference to the plight of refugees.

A month later, their sponsorship group was 50 people strong. By August 2016, they had raised thousands of Canadian dollars and navigated a bureaucratic maze in order to welcome a family from southern Syria: Ahmed, his wife Razan, their children Aya, seven, and Raed, five, along with Ahmed’s sister Hoda, her sons Louai, 17, and Wael, 13, and grandma Khadija.

As a remarkable wave of support rippled across Canada, more and more people came forward to support refugees. More than 14,000 Syrians arrived between November 2015 and late January 2017 after being sponsored by community groups like Debbie’s.

“The amazing thing is that it actually became an election issue,” says Gloria Nazfiger, Refugee Co-ordinator with Amnesty International Canada. “Refugee issues are never election issues in Canada.

What inspires people to help complete strangers settle in their communities, and what happens next?

Four-year-old Sham Alftih (in the middle, wearing white) with pupils at Edmison Heights Elementary school, Peterborough, Canada. After fleeing Syria, Sham and her family were sponsored by local people to come to Canada in 2016. They visited the school in June 2017 to thank the children for fundraising to help bring Sham’s aunt and family over to join them.

©
"But there was such a demand on the part of Canadians to respond to a crisis. The government we currently have [led by Prime Minister Justin Trudeau] was elected in part because it made its promise to the Canadian people to respond to the demand," she explains.

Sponsors must raise approximately 27,000 Canadian dollars (US$20,000) to bring over a family of four, roughly the same as Canada’s social assistance rates. They also commit to helping the family settle into their new life over their first year in Canada.

The determination of these community groups to take action and effect change themselves is unprecedented. But it is a model that can be easily replicated elsewhere.

Canada operated a tight immigration policy until the late 1970s, when it introduced sponsorship in response to the so-called “boat people” fleeing Southeast Asia after the US war in Viet Nam. Since then, more than 288,000 so-called “newcomers” or “new Canadians” have made Canada their home – supported by hundreds of thousands of Canadians.

The system gives new arrivals a ready-made network of people they can count on for support – even friendship. “People who come through private sponsorship, it’s easy for them to adapt to the new life,” says Ahmed. “We have friends already.”

Some groups have focused their efforts on supporting refugees from other parts of the world. “We were advised that refugees from Africa, for example, who have less of a profile in the media, can take three to five years for a sponsorship,” says Catherine LeBlanc-Miller, who works in Toronto City Hall.

Catherine’s group sponsored three African men in their 20s – two from Sudan and one Somali. One of them, Mohamed Farah, recently found a job at a health clinic through his network of sponsors. “I’d just been here for two months and landed into employment. I think that wouldn’t be achieved without all the people supporting me,” Mohamed says.

He thinks other countries should follow Canada’s example of sponsorship: “This is a successful project,” he says. “It’s a unique thing. There is a proverb in my culture which says an open heart is entered but not an open door. So if you see an open door you will not enter it, but you will enter it if the person who is there has an open heart. I think having a great heart, it’s the first thing that is encouraging people to sponsor other people.”

“People who come through private sponsorship, it’s easy for them to adapt to the new life.”

Ahmed, a community-sponsored refugee from Syria
The support of sponsors has not just provided immediate relief to families in need, but helped to create strong and more vibrant communities and enriched Canada’s diversity.

The process isn’t always easy, though. Some refugees cannot speak English, or even read and write in certain cases. A new country and a new culture can also prove daunting.

“It’s not a simple thing,” says Kenzu Abdella, originally from Ethiopia and a sponsor in Peterborough – a town east of Toronto. “But at the same time it’s not a hard thing. If your heart is to be by the side of people who are suffering, in my experience, it always works out. Everybody I talk to, Canadians here, feel very fortunate to have been able to do this because they can see the future and what it can do for the country.”

Kenzu recently decided to go into business with a sponsored Syrian family, Randa and Mohammed Alftih: “This is a win-win,” he says. “You bring me over to help me, and I’m here to be a good citizen and contribute to society. Even in this business venture, I benefit, and the family benefit.”

Back in Toronto, almost a year after they arrived, Ahmed and his family are settled in a quiet suburb with tidy front gardens and family cars parked in the driveway.

The adults are learning English, the kids are in school, and Ahmed and Louai are attending a training course in hospitality at the Ritz-Carlton hotel. For Ahmed, it’s a path back to the life he knew before the war changed everything. He used to run a 300-seat restaurant that thronged with tourists until the bombing forced him to flee.

“My goal in the future is to open my own Syrian restaurant,” he says. “There are many Syrian and Arabic restaurants already in Toronto. But mine will be the best.”

Sponsorship in Canada lasts for at least 12 months, but often extends beyond that. “I know that they were looking at me like: ‘Wait, after a year we’re not going to see you again?’” says Debbie.

“I had to reassure them that no, that is not the case. This is a very close relationship and I feel part of their family, this is not going to end. We fortunately have enough money to support them for an additional six months so we will not be done even financially at the end of the year. And I expect to be invited to Aya’s wedding – I had better be! This is a lifelong relationship for me and for several others in the group. We’re all the richer for it.”
Throughout his life, Liu Xiaobo showed an unshakable determination to speak truth to power, in full knowledge of the personal cost he might have to pay.

The year 1989 marked a turning point for Liu Xiaobo’s political activism. He had returned from the US to Beijing to play an instrumental role in the pro-democracy movement. For this, he was jailed for two years. As he said later: “Merely for publishing different political views and taking part in a peaceful democracy movement, a teacher lost his lectern, a writer lost his right to publish, and a public intellectual lost the opportunity to give talks publicly.” He was again imprisoned – this time in a re-education-through-labor camp between 1996 and 1999. After that he was placed under constant police monitoring at his home in Beijing.

Undeterred, he continued to pen often scathing and provocative articles and essays about China’s political system and human rights record, turning down every opportunity to go abroad for fear that the authorities would not let him return.

In late 2008, Liu Xiaobo’s friends asked him to contribute to a manifesto now known as “Charter 08” calling for political change in China. The range of initial signatories, including prominent intellectuals and retired officials, unnerved the government. Having successfully hosted the 2008 Olympics earlier that year – for which the authorities had pledged to make progress on human rights – the government decided it could make an example of Liu Xiaobo without incurring too much international criticism.

He was detained for the last time in December 2008, held for a year before trial, and sentenced to 11 years’ imprisonment under the charge of “incitement to subvert state power” – the most severe sentence recorded under that charge at the time.

In 2010, Liu Xiaobo was awarded the Nobel Peace Prize. Instead of seizing the opportunity to correct the grave injustice it had committed, the Chinese authorities engaged in an all-out effort to impose an information blackout on his case.

They placed his wife, poet and activist Liu Xia, under house arrest, prohibited Liu Xiaobo’s lawyers from taking any initiative to seek his release, turned down every request from diplomats and international observers to visit him in prison, and scrubbed any reference to him from the heavily censored internet that Chinese citizens can access.

But it was after he was transferred to hospital with end-stage liver cancer in June that the government showed its cruelty and vindictiveness, effectively hastening his death by denying him his wish to be treated abroad. They ignored calls by the two foreign specialists who were briefly allowed to visit him in early July that Liu Xiaobo could and should be allowed to travel.

When he passed away, the authorities continued the cruel spectacle. Liu Xiaobo’s brother was ushered in front of the world’s media to show his ‘gratitude’ to the government for all they had done for his family.

Liu Xiaobo once wrote that “a calm and steady mind can look at a steel gate and see a road to freedom”. While Liu Xiaobo would never again experience that freedom, he inspired millions of people around the world to fight for human rights so that they and others can engage in a fundamental freedom: the right to speak freely and hold the powerful to account.

It is these activists that will continue the struggle and Liu Xiaobo’s wish that there be no more victims in “China’s long record of treating words as crimes”.

Liu Xiaobo, the imprisoned Nobel Peace laureate, human rights advocate, literary critic, and thorn in the side of the Chinese government, died in custody in July.
If you think back to the moment of your arrest, can you tell me what happened?

I was going to the farm when a lorry came and stopped. Three police officers were inside. They arrested me, they said I had killed somebody. I was just walking, going to the farm with my machete to work the land. Back then, I was a farmer. They took me to Ho police station, in the Volta Region, where I spent five years in prison awaiting trial. After that I spent 13 years on death row at Nsawam prison. I spent 18 years in prison in total, for something I did not know anything about, for a crime I did not commit.

What went through your mind when you were sentenced to death?

I was perplexed, but I knew that God is a merciful God, and he would let me go. I knew that I did not commit the offence.

How did you spend your days in prison?

I used to advise people about life, because prison is not a good place, it is not a place built for people. There, I used to write about life, my thoughts about life, about the things I was going through. I wrote them all. These writings are now at home with me. In prison, I also learnt to make sponges and pen cases… Prison is not a place for human beings, never, if you go there most likely you will not come out, most likely you will die.
THE DEATH PENALTY IN GHANA

As of June, 148 people were on death row in Ghana, all sentenced to death for murder. While the last executions were carried out in 1993, courts continue to condemn people to death, leaving them to languish on death row. Amnesty has serious concerns about poor prison conditions on death row in Ghana and about the fairness of the trials that led to their convictions. In its 2017 report “Locked up and forgotten”, Amnesty calls on the Ghanaian authorities to commute the death sentence of all people on death row and to abolish the death penalty for all crimes.

What do you think of the death penalty?
Oh, it is not good. It should be abolished. You see, as a human being, if you commit an offence God will forgive you. Why cannot human beings forgive each other, if God can forgive? Why? I know that God is with me, always. The government should abolish the death penalty and replace it with another form of punishment… Please keep fighting for my people to get out. God bless you.

40 YEARS ON, AMNESTY CONTINUES TO CAMPAIGN TO END THE DEATH PENALTY

Cephas’ story is one of resilience and hope. Hearing about what he went through – including what he describes as a lack of fair trial rights, being on the verge of being executed and the positive role he is currently playing within his own community – was a deeply emotional experience. It has strengthened my conviction that the death penalty is wrong and should be abolished.

This year marks the 40th anniversary of Amnesty taking up the campaign against the death penalty. In that period, the number of countries that have abolished this punishment for all crimes has risen from just 16 in 1977 to 105 today, including 19 in Africa. I believe it’s just a matter of time before the death penalty will be confined to the history books.

Nevertheless, around the world, people continue to be executed and sentenced to death every day. For 2016, Amnesty recorded at least 1,032 executions and 3,117 people who were sentenced to death, but there are many more cases that go unreported.

There is no credible evidence that the death penalty deters crime more than a term of imprisonment. Meanwhile, the death penalty is irreversible and does not leave any possibility of rehabilitation of the offender. If a mistake is made by the justice system, there is no way back. As long as justice systems remain fallible, the risk of executing the innocent can never be eliminated.

The death penalty is often discriminatory and used disproportionately against the poor and minorities. Often those executed are not those who committed the worst crimes, but those who are too poor to hire skilled lawyers to defend themselves. They also often face particularly harsh prosecutors or judges.

In the end, the death penalty violates the right to life to which every human being is entitled. It is the ultimate cruel, inhuman and degrading punishment.

By Sabrina Tucci, Amnesty Death Penalty Team
60-SECOND INTERVIEW

CONVINCING OTHERS TO CHANGE

In May, a landmark ruling by its highest court made Taiwan the first Asian country to say “yes” to same-sex marriage. Amnesty supporters from more than 40 countries joined the “Taiwan, Will You Say Yes?” campaign by sending solidarity messages. Margarita Chao, a volunteer at Amnesty Taiwan, shares her thoughts on the news.

What made you want to fight for marriage equality?
I’ve many friends belonging to the LGBTI community. It’s deeply distressing to me that two people who love each other dearly can’t be legally recognized as a couple and be confident about their relationship. Taiwanese media also report regularly about young LGBTI people being bullied and committing suicide. I believe no one should be discriminated against because of who they are and who they love, so I joined the campaign in the hope of making a change.

What’s the next step for Taiwan in your opinion?
We’ll be very happy to see friendlier attitudes towards LGBTI people. Similar to other places in Asia, the older generation in Taiwan tends to be less accepting towards the LGBTI community. We hope law-makers can give legitimacy to same-sex marriage as soon as possible by enacting relevant law.

How did it feel to receive support from all over the world?
It was encouraging, Taiwan is a small country that’s not well-recognized internationally. We didn’t expect the worldwide attention, so my colleagues and I were surprised and moved by the thousands of messages we received. We gained strength from knowing we didn’t stand alone as people from all over the world supported and followed our campaign.

What would you say to other LGBTI activists in Asia?
What happened in Taiwan is truly amazing, I’m overjoyed as my friends will finally be able to celebrate their relationships and get married legally. In Asia, the social stigma attached to the LGBTI community continues to prevail. Convincing others to change their minds takes time, but I believe change will come eventually as long as you keep speaking out, and never forget that you’ve got support from allies around the world.

FIND OUT MORE
http://bit.ly/2yIwnC

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Flag bearers in Taipei, capital of Taiwan, carry a gay rainbow at the annual pride parade, 29 October 2016
Artist Ricky Lee Gordon (right) with human rights defender Sakris Kupila (left) at the Nuart festival in Stavanger, Norway, in September. Ricky Lee Gordon painted this giant mural in celebration of Sakris, a transgender activist who is featured in our Write for Rights campaign this year. Sakris has been courageously fighting the law in his home country, Finland, to be legally recognized as a man. The process for gender recognition in Finland currently requires him to go through enforced sterilization which violates the rights of transgender persons.

FIND OUT MORE:
“WORDS CAN BE LIKE X-RAYS IF YOU USE THEM PROPERLY – THEY’LL GO THROUGH ANYTHING. YOU READ AND YOU’RE PIERCED.”

Aldous Huxley, English writer (1894–1963)