
AMNESTY INTERNATIONAL NEWS SERVICE 249/94

TO: PRESS OFFICERS
FROM: IS PRESS OFFICE
DATE: 2 NOVEMBER 1994

AI INDEX: NWS 11/249/94
DISTR: SC/PO
NO OF WORDS:572

INTERNAL

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INTERNATIONAL NEWS RELEASES

APEC - 3 November - SEE NEWS SERVICE 243 AND NEWS SERVICE 212/94

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Iraq - 29 November - SEE NEWS SERVICE 212/94

TARGETED AND LIMITED NEWS RELEASES

Nigeria - 11 November - SEE NEWS SERVICE 248/94

News Service 249/94

AI INDEX: AMR 51/WU 16/94
2 NOVEMBER 1994

AMNESTY INTERNATIONAL SEEKS FURTHER INFORMATION ON "FOOD NOT BOMBS" ACTIVISTS
ARRESTED IN SAN FRANCISCO, USA

Amnesty International is concerned that members of a group distributing free food and advice to poor and homeless people in San Francisco have been repeatedly harassed and arrested by the city authorities over a period of six years, one is imprisoned and others are awaiting trial.

"While the charges against Food Not Bombs activists have been criminal ones, Amnesty International is concerned that the law may have been used to harass and arrest these people because their work with homeless people is unpopular with the City administration," Amnesty International said. The organization is seeking further information on the cases from city authorities in San Francisco.

Keith McHenry, a leader of the group, whose trial has been repeatedly postponed and which is now due to begin on 7 November, is reportedly accused of assaults where the alleged victims and witnesses were all employees in City Hall, several of whom have been key figures in opposing the actions of Food Not Bombs.

Since 1988, Mr McHenry has been arrested more than 90 times in connection with his activity providing a free food service to homeless people and distributing literature prepared by Food Not Bombs on housing, peace and social justice issues.

He has frequently been arrested by the police on charges that were then dropped; his phone was wiretapped at one point; he was allegedly beaten on several occasions by police, and was reportedly pushed down a flight of stairs at City Hall while handcuffed behind his back in March 1991.

Since September last year, several Food Not Bombs activists have been arrested, charged and, in one case, convicted in connection with their activities. Some 20 activists are reportedly still awaiting trial on felony charges connected with their food and information distribution to the homeless. Reports allege some have been ill-treated by police while being arrested, and that some individuals have been beaten while in custody.

In February, Robert Kahn was convicted of violating a 1989 court injunction which forbids Food Not Bombs from distributing food in public places without a permit from the Health Department. The group had a permit until 1990 when the Recreation and Parks Department abolished the process under which a permit to serve free food could be obtained. Amnesty International is concerned

that this measure may have been motivated by political rather than health reasons.

The right to peaceful expression, assembly and dissemination of information is recognized under the US Constitution. These are also fundamental freedoms enshrined in international human rights standards.

Amnesty International is concerned that the Food Not Bombs activists may have been targeted on account of their beliefs and effectively prohibited from exercising their right to freedom of expression, assembly and the right to impart information.

"If this were found to be the case, the City of San Francisco would be in breach of international law and those imprisoned would be prisoners of conscience who should be immediately and unconditionally released", Amnesty International said.

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