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how
to
help
prisoners
of
conscience

amnesty international



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a handbook
for groups

FROM THE UNIVERSAL
DECLARATION OF
HUMAN RIGHTS,
PROCLAIMED AT THE
UNITED NATIONS,
10 DECEMBER, 1948:

Article 18

'Everyone has the right to freedom of thought, conscience and religion; this right includes freedom to change his religion or belief, and freedom, either alone or in community with others and in public or in private, to manifest his religion or belief in teaching, practice, worship and observance.'

Article 19

'Everyone has the right to freedom of opinion and expression; this right includes freedom to hold opinions without interference and to seek, receive and impart information and ideas through any media and regardless of frontiers.'

HUMAN RIGHTS DAY is celebrated every year on 10th December. This day marks the anniversary of the signing in 1948 of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights and is an annual remembrance of all who suffer imprisonment because of their political and religious beliefs.

AMNESTY INTERNATIONAL is an international non-governmental organisation with consultative status at the United Nations and the Council of Europe.

WHAT IS A PRISONER
OF CONSCIENCE?

Amnesty works for the release and relief of "prisoners of conscience" throughout the world. We have evolved a definition of a prisoner of conscience as:

"Any person who is restrained by imprisonment from the expression of his honestly held political, religious or racial views because these views are unacceptable to his government."

To this definition is added the important rider:

"provided always that he has not used or advocated the use of violence."

WHAT IS AN AMNESTY
GROUP?

There are over 550 Amnesty Groups around the world. Each is formed to work for the release of three prisoners of conscience and the relief of hardship among their families. The number of people in a Group varies, but is usually not less than six. Some Groups have over 50 members. Each Group 'adopts' a minimum of three prisoners.

'ADOPTING' A
PRISONER

We believe strongly that the adoption of prisoners by Groups is the most effective way of bringing about their release. Even though it may take time to succeed, its value is immediately apparent in the mind of the prisoner when he knows that people are meeting together to help him.

HOW GROUPS ENSURE
IMPARTIALITY

In order to underline Amnesty's independence and impartiality, the three prisoners adopted by each Group will be selected according to the availability and urgency of cases and with regard to covering varying ideological and geographical divisions.

HOW TO APPEAL TO
GOVERNMENTS

Pressure can be brought on a government directly and indirectly.

Direct Pressure

- a) Write to the embassy of the government concerned. If possible, discuss the case there. (If you do not at first receive a reply, go on writing or telephoning. If you cannot get an appointment, visit the embassy and insist on seeing someone in authority).
- b) Write to the government concerned. Since letters do not always pass through the barrage of secretaries, it is best to write to every Minister or official who is likely to be involved. Here is a suggested list:

The Prime Minister
The Minister of the Interior
The Minister of Justice
The Chief Prosecutor (Attorney-General)
The Minister of Foreign Trade
The Secretary of the Party (in a one-party state)

Indirect Pressure

- a) Secure the interest of any international organisation which is, or should be concerned with the particular prisoner. Most prisoners have a trade or profession and these usually have an international organisation. One of their functions is to protect their own members - steelworkers, schoolteachers, journalists, as the case may be.
- b) Write to people who have a commercial or cultural link with the prisoner's country, and make your letter known to their local newspapers. Most business and cultural concerns have press-cutting services, and are even more sensitive than governments about their image.

- c) Keep up regular publicity in your local newspapers about what you are doing to help your prisoners. Local newspapers are seen by most governments through their press-cutting services. Information received by a Government about a local campaign to help a prisoner is often more embarrassing than any other form of publicity. It proves that the Amnesty movement is widespread.
- d) Seek the support of someone of influence to back your appeals. Of course people of world renown receive dozens of requests every day, so it is no use just writing a letter and hoping for the best. You must try to get an introduction and, best of all, a personal interview. There is no doubt that such intervention with a Minister or important personality carries more weight than a petition of unknown names.

TRAVELLING ABROAD

Visits to a prisoner's country can be a valuable part of Amnesty's work. By and large, they fall into three categories:

The Official Delegate

A delegate may be sent on the initiative of the International Secretariat. In such instances, Groups with prisoners in the country concerned will be informed and the visit undertaken in full consultation with them.

The Unofficial Delegate

A Group member visiting a country as a delegate of another organisation may well be able to undertake an assignment on Amnesty's behalf also. When such an opportunity occurs, the member is asked to consult with the Secretariat which will provide a full briefing and details of what can be usefully done.

The Private Visitor

Group members on holiday or business trips to countries where there are adopted prisoners of conscience, may also find time to act on Amnesty's behalf. Before any such visit takes place, the member is urged to consult fully with the Secretariat: informal visits require careful preparation, just as much as official ones. Even so, the visitor will possibly be subjected to obstruction and delay. He must not be put off by this. He will be thinking of the prisoner as if he were a member of his family; and he will show the same courage and resourcefulness in breaking the official wall of obstruction as if he were trying to rescue his brother.

Before embarking on a mission of this kind, it is important to publicise the fact in the local press. Even if the mission subsequently proves to be unsuccessful, the publicity created and the pressure exerted may well be sufficient to discourage the government concerned from making other arrests.

WRITING LETTERS

To The Authorities

Write to embassies and governments in your own language, in English or in French. Some embassies and official departments have facilities for translation. What is important is that you should not mistakenly give the impression that you are an exile from that country or are working on behalf of or through exiles.

It is always best to say quite openly that you are writing as a Group of Amnesty International; use official notepaper unless otherwise instructed. Be careful to stress the word "International" in your letter because this distinguishes us from the various national amnesty movements that sometimes have a political character and may thus be suspected by the governments concerned.

To The Prisoner

If you can write in his or her own language, so much the better, even if it is only a few words of good wishes at the end of the letter. But if you write in the prisoner's language throughout, be careful to explain your nationality. As stated above, do not allow yourself to be mistaken for an exile of that country. If you cannot write in the prisoner's language, write in English; there is usually someone in every prison who can speak some English.

You may well want to send parcels to your prisoners. Every prisoner would welcome one but there are many countries where gift-parcels are either not allowed or can only be brought by relatives. If you want to help, much the most effective way is by sending money to a relative who can buy on the spot something the prisoner really does need. This saves heavy postage and possible customs dues which the prisoner cannot pay.

It is both inspiring and an effective means of protest to launch a campaign to get a regular parcel to your adopted prisoner. If you are in doubt, write to the following organisations or individuals, asking whether they will deliver or accept parcels and, if not, whether they can recommend any way of sending a parcel. You may receive no reply to these letters but they will each have their effect:

The Director of Prisons,
c/o Ministry of the Interior

The Prison Governor

The Prison Chaplain (where appropriate)

The Chairman of the Red Cross
or Red Crescent Society in the prisoner's
country. (National branches only.
Do not make enquiries at the British
Red Cross; there is no co-ordinated system
between them and other national branches).

The Chief Postmaster

When sending a parcel, always try to include an international reply postage coupon. The prisoner, assuming he is allowed to write to you, may not be able to afford the postage.

What you send in the parcel may depend on information you can obtain from the authorities listed above. Conditions may vary in different countries; if you can get no information, the best thing to send is cigarettes.

It is sometimes thought that the International Committee of the Red Cross can send parcels. In fact the International Red Cross is limited by its constitution to helping victims of war and civil war. If your prisoner has been arrested in the aftermath of a civil war, it is just possible that the Red Cross will be able to deliver the parcel. For details, write to: C.I.C.R., Geneva, Switzerland.

To The Prisoner's Family

It is best to write in the relative's own language; if you cannot, use English or French, whichever you think the most appropriate. But before writing to relatives, ensure that you are not placing them in danger. Do not forget to emphasise in your letter that you are acting solely from humanitarian motives and are not connected with any exile group. It is important that any letter you write should not be open to any mis-interpretation.

If a Group takes a few important precautions, many relatives will be only too happy to receive letters and material help from you. For example, in some countries, it is unwise to write more than an open postcard, with a message such as: "Would you like me to send you a food parcel for the next few months, or is there something else I can do for you?" Postcards containing greetings only may escape censorship altogether in some countries. Again, do not initially use Amnesty International notepaper but write as an individual concerned with their problems. If the family indicates it is happy to correspond with you, you can mention in the body of your next letter that you are an Amnesty Group.

It is important to remember that, even though they may not be in any danger, relatives of prisoners are almost always nervous and may think they are being watched. This is a natural reaction. Do not press for a reply. If it is safe to send one, it will be sent when the suitable occasion arises. Certainly no visit should be made unless you receive a letter indicating that it would be acceptable; even then you must first consult the International Secretariat.

Sending material help to prisoners' families is another aspect of Group work that is of great value. Not every prisoner has a family; not every family will be in need. But when it comes to a Group's notice that the family does need help, then it is their duty to do something about it.

Groups in different countries will have their own distinctive ways of raising funds for this work. It is increasingly necessary, however, that the problem of fund-raising is taken seriously by all Groups - both to support the International Secretariat and to help relieve the hardship of their prisoners' families. (See the booklet: How To Raise Funds For Amnesty, or write for guidance from the Appeals Department).

Groups can provide many of the necessities: food, clothes, medical supplies, children's toys, school fees, rent, fares to visit the prisoner. The best and quickest way of sending money is by banker's draft, to the credit of the prisoner's family at a bank as near to them as possible. Money drafts save the expense and the delays of postage and they overcome trouble with customs and import quotas. The only gifts actually worth sending by post are medical supplies unobtainable in the prisoner's country, and token presents.

Some countries have limitations on the amount of money it is permissible to send abroad; Groups are advised to make enquiries on this point.

CAN A GROUP ENDANGER A PRISONER?

In 95% of cases, definitely not. On the contrary, even when pressure from a Group cannot secure a prisoner's release it often leads to an improvement in his prison conditions and treatment. Governments are concerned about foreign public opinion and sometimes have cases specially reviewed. However, if there is any possibility that your Group's work on behalf of a prisoner might lead to reprisals by prison authorities you will be warned by the Secretariat. You will still be able to help by, for example, sending money to the prisoner's family.

HOW ARE PRISONERS SELECTED FOR GROUP ADOPTION?

Information about prisoners reaches the Investigation Bureau in many ways. The principal world newspapers are scanned and broadcasts monitored. International organisations keep in touch over cases of any of their members arrested. Exile organisations and Groups supply a steady stream of reports. Further news comes from visits to the Secretariat by prisoners' friends and relatives, and from letters written by prisoners - perhaps smuggled out of prison. Whenever it can be afforded, Amnesty sends investigators to countries to find out the names and personal details of prisoners, to investigate prison conditions and to report on human rights in general.

Not every political or religious prisoner is selected for Group adoption. Amnesty must be reasonably sure that the prisoner has not engaged in acts of violence. Sometimes this is not easy to ascertain, but increasing experience in the workings of the judicial systems of different countries has helped in the assessment of cases. A good rule of thumb is that an accusation of violence is not accepted unless the accused is brought to trial publicly and allowed proper facilities to defend himself.

Amnesty is frequently asked to intervene on behalf of those charged with espionage, or with crimes committed during a war or civil war. While sentences for these offences are sometimes shamefully heavy, the offences themselves do not come within our terms of reference; we can only take up these cases when we are fairly certain that the charge of espionage is completely fraudulent.

IF A PRISONER IS
FOUND TO HAVE
COMMITTED VIOLENCE

As stated above, every effort is made to ensure that Amnesty does not adopt as prisoners of conscience those who have committed violence. It rarely happens that a mistake is made but if it emerges from your enquiries that a prisoner has committed or incited to violence, you are asked to let the Investigation Bureau know immediately, returning any documents and letters you have received indicating the offence.

FINDING OUT MORE
ABOUT THE PRISONER

Groups are given all the reliable information available. It is extremely difficult to get accurate news, particularly about where a prisoner is jailed. With each prisoner's case sheet, there is sent either the name of some person or organisation with special knowledge of the country, who may possibly be able to give additional information. Please send an international reply coupon when writing to this source and do not be disappointed if there is a long delay before you receive a reply.

If neither a friendly contact nor an organisation is supplied, you will be given addresses of government officials only. Write to these in any event, always using Amnesty-headed note-paper. Governments do not often reply but embassies usually do. Although your letters may appear to be ignored, we have first-hand evidence that they will not go unheeded.

CAN A GOVERNMENT
EVER RIGHTFULLY
IMPRISON ITS
OPPONENTS?

In a period of genuine emergency, when the life of a nation is threatened, Amnesty exceptionally recognises the right of a government to detain opponents administratively for a period not exceeding twelve months, provided that they are given the rights and treatment accorded to Officer Prisoners-of-War.

CAN A GROUP
ACTUALLY GET A MAN
OUT OF PRISON?

There are countless instances to prove that Groups have been able to bring decisive pressure on a government: almost every week sees the release of an adopted prisoner. But it is clear that these releases resulted not from wishful thinking but hard work and an abiding sense of personal concern. A single letter sent off into the blue will probably achieve nothing. What does bring results is a burning sense of commitment translated into consistent, effective action.

This is communicated to others. A government, however powerful, must pay attention to a determined group of people who endanger its international standing and perhaps even its trading connections. Since a government cannot eradicate an Amnesty Group and cannot discredit it for political bias (since it cares equally for prisoners of differing opinions) it is more likely to appease it in the end.

The success of a Group depends, quite frankly, on how much of a nuisance it can make of itself. This does not mean throwing stones through embassy windows or writing insulting letters. It means building up a climate of opinion which supports the effort to bring about the release of your prisoners. It means securing the support of every shade of local opinion. It means making your prisoners familiar names. Until they are released, they should be a challenge to the conscience of your whole locality.

Persecution is just another disease. What a doctor is thinking when called to fight the spread of typhoid is that even if his patient dies, he is still saving countless others from the spread of the epidemic. Amnesty International sets itself the task of helping to cure the disease of persecution and our success lies in preventing more men being imprisoned, flogged, tortured, killed, men who have committed no crime beyond following the dictates of their conscience.

THE LINK BETWEEN
PRISONER AND GROUP

The essence of a Group's work is to do everything possible to release its prisoners. Everything must be subordinated to that task.

Our experience is that, if a Group is organised too formally, this tends to inhibit action. Further, the more personal the link between the Group and its prisoners, the more determined it will be to leave no stone unturned in his interest.

So avoid formality - but do be efficient. Although a Group has a collective responsibility, it nevertheless requires Officers to undertake particular tasks. Individual members need to be appointed: to be Treasurer and Secretary; to write to embassies and governments; to contact international organisations; to look after publicity and press relations; to raise money; to be responsible for sending parcels ... These, of course, are suggestions for your Group to consider. You must work out the exact system that suits your members best.

THE LINK BETWEEN
GROUP AND
SECRETARIAT

The Groups and the Secretariat are inter-dependent: we will inform Groups as soon as we have fresh information about their prisoners; we expect Groups to keep us informed in the same way. Even more important, whilst the Secretariat provides the information - the Group's life-blood - the Groups must provide the Secretariat with the money to keep it in action.

The Group's specific obligations are two-fold: to ensure that a quarterly progress report is sent to the Secretariat without fail; and to ensure that the minimum financial contribution of £30 is sent every year. Groups are urged to send more if they can, in the knowledge that the best safeguard for their prisoners is a financially secure Secretariat. At a time of swift expansion to meet the growing demands made upon it, this is becoming an increasingly important factor in the development of the whole international movement.

It sometimes happens that a Group, either temporarily or permanently, is unable to continue working on behalf of its adopted prisoners. When this happens, it is vital that the Secretariat is notified immediately. Otherwise it is assumed that the prisoners and their families are being looked after when in fact nothing is being done for them. When the Secretariat knows that a Group has closed down, it will arrange for its prisoners to be re-adopted by other Groups.

FINALLY...
WHEN YOU HAVE DONE ALL YOU CAN,
AND YOUR PRISONER IS RELEASED...

Do not forget the prisoner who, through your efforts, has been released. It may be a long time before he can find work again; he may have to bear the scars of his ordeal for ever. Keep in touch with him; always sustain the link of friendly correspondence.

AMNESTY INTERNATIONAL offers a unique and practical way of overcoming the barriers that separate man from man, by people of good will working together to defend the fundamental rights of all men.