

AMNESTY INTERNATIONAL

Q&A

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Write for Rights 2013

-What is Write for Rights?

Write for Rights is the world's biggest annual human rights event. Every December, over a couple of weeks, hundreds of thousands of people around the world write letters to governments to demand action for certain individuals whose human rights have been abused. It is a truly global moment that unites activists all over the world. While the classic Amnesty technique of letter-writing remains at the heart of Write for Rights, activists are increasingly using other ways to put pressure on authorities and show their support to the individuals. This includes sending SMS messages, emails and faxes, tweeting support, signing petitions, sending photos, filming flashmobs – the list of creative actions is long.

-You say that it's one of the world's biggest human rights events. How big is it really?

Well, last year, activists in at least 77 countries took a record-breaking 1.9 million actions. It is very powerful to think of people in countries as diverse as Barbados, Mali, Iceland and Argentina all taking action at the same time to help the same group of people. This year we are quite sure those figures are going to be even higher. People from at least 80 countries will take part and we hope to achieve in excess of two million actions.

-Does Write for Rights create change?

Yes. A single letter to the authorities might be brushed aside. But hundreds of thousands of letters all calling for human rights change are much harder to ignore. We know from decades of campaigning that writing letters does change lives. Over the years prisoners have had their conditions improved, investigations have been opened and prisoners of conscience have even been released.

-Do you hear back from the people whose cases are included in Write for Rights?

Individuals and communities often let us know how their situation has changed, or how the solidarity they've received has made them feel. Here are just a few examples:

"Love flows across the world, and friends from all over the world have brought me incredible strength. Words cannot express the gratitude I have towards everyone. Thank you!" said Chiou Ho-shun, on death row in Taiwan since 1989.

"We as a people thank all those who have nursed this initiative. We are sure that this struggle on our behalf will yield fruit gradually. We are hopeful for the best. We are encouraged. In fact, it is this kind of

support that is helping us live on," said Chief Baribor Koottee of the Bodo community in Nigeria, which was devastated by an oil spill in 2008.

"It feels good to be with my friends again. I feel good now that I can spend time with them and my family," said Jabbar Savalan, who was pardoned and released in 2011 within days of thousands of letters from Amnesty International members arriving in Azerbaijan.

"Following a Letter Writing Marathon organized by Amnesty International and the international community's actions, [our] family was granted a second prison visit on 12 January," said Geng He, wife of imprisoned Chinese human rights lawyer Gao Zhisheng.

"I received the best Christmas present in three years since the loss of my husband Juan Almonte, with all these cards, notes and Christmas postcards. Thanks for keeping Juan present, for making him known in the entire world. I would like to thank all the persons who took time and shared my pain," said Ana Montilla, wife of human rights activist Juan Almonte Herrera, who was "disappeared" in 2009 in the Dominican Republic.

"I have been covered with an avalanche of letters and postcards. Over New Year I kept reading the hundreds of letters and postcards. I can sincerely say I haven't missed out a single one of them. It was an indescribable New Year," said Ales Bialiatski, a human rights defender imprisoned in Belarus, 2013.

-Where did the idea for Write for Rights come from?

Amnesty's first Write for Rights event took place 11 years ago in Poland, after a local group coordinator in Warsaw met a girl who told him about her experience in Africa organizing 24 hour events to write protest letters to governments. After that initial meeting they decided to write letters for 24 hours straight and then count how many they'd written.

They emailed the idea to other Polish groups and the idea became much bigger, uniting activists around the country. Once they saw the idea catching on, they emailed Amnesty offices worldwide and soon received pictures from activists around the globe writing letters – in Canada, Japan, Mongolia. And it kept growing from there.

-What are the main criteria for choosing cases?

We pick 12 cases where we think there are concrete opportunities for impact: cases where global activism can make a huge difference at the beginning of 2014. We also like to pick cases from a wide range of regions around the world, and which illustrate different human rights issues. We try to include cases in which we can send letters, tweets, emails or SMS messages to the individuals and their families as well as to the authorities.

-Give us examples of great Write for Rights activities from other sections.

Although letter-writing is the heart of the campaign, each year there are so many creative ideas it's hard to narrow it down to just a few! Last year, in France, a pop group wrote and recorded a powerful song with and for the members of the Bodo community in Nigeria. In Japan, people came together in the centre of Tokyo to make more than 1,000 lanterns to shine 'lights of hope'. In Paraguay, activists organized a bicycle race and collected signatures for a petition as they went. In Portugal, a huge concert was held to raise awareness and collect signatures. Canada's tallest structure, the CN Tower, was lit up

on 10 December, Human Rights Day. And in Poland, where it all began, all 1,000 inhabitants of the small Polish town of Bircza wrote over 15,000 letters between them in just 24 hours.

-What are your hopes for this year's Write for Rights?

Mainly we want to see two things happen. The first is to achieve concrete changes in the lives of the people whose cases we are featuring – as soon as possible. The second is to get Amnesty activists to feel connected - both with the people on whose behalf we are campaigning as well as to one another as activists around the world. We want everyone who takes part to feel the power of this global moment of creativity, protest and solidarity!