# REGIONAL ACTION ACTION NETWORKS

A guide for groups

**Amnesty International** 

This booklet is for groups involved in a Regional Action Network (RAN) to use as a guide to the practical details of participating in a RAN. It can also be used by other groups to help them decide whether or not they would like to take part in a RAN.

Groups bring to RAN work their knowledge of Amnesty International acquired in the course of their AI training and past work so no general instructions are included here. However, a summary of security guidelines is given for ease of reference.

Regional Action Networks are designed to make it possible for groups to act against abuses of human rights which are difficult to deal with by other AI techniques. Any AI concern can be dealt with by a RAN, although pre-trial detention, short-term banishment, impending floggings, large-scale arrests and "disappearances" have been the most common. When a group decides to work in a RAN it is taking on a long-term commitment, just as adoption or investigation cases are long-term projects. Instead of working over time for one individual prisoner, groups in RANs work on behalf of many people by focusing on abuses of human rights of concern to AI in a number of countries. These countries form the "Region" on which the network acts. Requests for action are made by the International Secretariat and groups in the RAN respond as promptly as they can, much in the way that groups participating in the Urgent Action scheme are ready to respond to calls for action.

By combining long-term work with prompt responses to calls for action, RANs have borrowed aspects of both adoption work and Urgent Actions. They also have features of their own which may not yet be familiar to many groups. RAN activity makes its own distinct demands on a group. This booklet describes in outline how RANs work and what a group can expect in taking on RAN work. It also gives some practical advice for running a RAN smoothly as well as a list of things that should not be done. It lists some of the tasks undertaken by the coordinator of the RAN and gives some abbreviated guidelines on security.

# A. HOW A RAN WORKS

### The network

Each Regional Action Network is made up of about 70 groups around the world (1984 figures). There are normally several groups in a section in the same network; all these groups are serviced by a RAN coordinator in the section who is the link between the RAN groups and the International Secretariat. In many smaller sections, however, there is only one group in the RAN and so no RAN coordinator is necessary.

## The "Region"

Each RAN covers a limited number of countries on which action may be requested. These countries form the "Region". By mid-1984 most countries were part of a RAN. These groupings of countries approximately follow geographical regions, but many other considerations have to be taken into account, such as: languages; the number of countries in the region; patterns of

repression; the desire for groups to work on more than one form of human rights abuse; the availability of information; and the need to make AI activities feasible, efficient and as effective as possible.

## The action

It is very important to remember that the pattern of human rights violations, and, therefore, the appropriate response from AI, varies considerably from region to region. So each RAN, in adapting to meet the needs of its region, develops its own characteristics. This booklet can describe RAN work only in general terms and you should ask your section office for specific information about any particular RAN you are considering joining.

Many violations of human rights of concern to AI cannot be dealt with by the adoption or investigation case technique which applies only to prisoners of conscience and is generally suitable only when a prisoner's situation is fairly stable. Often the mass, straightforward appeals of the Urgent Action technique are not appropriate either. In general, RANs are used when urgency is not the most important factor, or when the situation demands letters which are complex and ask detailed questions. For example, in some countries a prisoner sentenced to flogging has an automatic right of appeal, giving groups the time to write quite fully to the government and other bodies. RANs enable a controlled number of well-briefed groups to respond swiftly to such violations of human rights and to continue to work on them for a few weeks or months. Approximately eight to 10 requests for action can be expected in a year.

Most commonly RANs deal with short-term arrest, pre-trial detention, large-scale arrests, detention without charge, feared extrajudicial executions, internal banishment for a period of months, cruel punishments such as flogging or amputation, "disappearances" and the death penalty. Sometimes prisoners of conscience whose cases require concentrated action are made the subject of RAN action.

An action request is usually sent from the International Secretariat to the RAN coordinator. The RAN coordinator then distributes copies of it as quickly as possible to all the groups in the section in that RAN. Sometimes the RAN coordinator will add further information as to how you can implement the recommended actions. For example, they may give you details about how publicity is to be handled in your country if publicity is recommended. They may give addresses in your country for approaches to professional bodies and interested groups. They may have suggestions for activities when approaches to home governments are recommended. They may also enclose further background information they have collected on the target country. Sometimes optional extra activities are suggested in the action and the RAN coordinator may advise on these.

Groups report on their work to their RAN coordinator who prepares a six-monthly report of RAN work for the Research Department. At various intervals the Research Department will draw up a report on the outcome of recent RAN actions, so that groups can learn about replies others in the network may have received and see their own efforts as part of the work of an international team.

#### **B. WHAT YOU CAN EXPECT**

#### 1. The Al Mandate

As part of a RAN, you must be ready to work on every part of AI's mandate. Normally groups join a RAN after they have worked on at least one case, but it is rare for case sheet work to demand action on every aspect of AI's mandate. So it is likely that your group may at first feel that it has not had a great deal of experience in writing some of the letters required. Do not hesitate to ask your RAN coordinator or section office what training materials exist so that you can refresh your memory about areas of AI concern that you may not have worked on very often before.

Although you must be prepared to work on any part of the mandate, you may find that in practice the same types of issue recur. Unless there are sudden political changes in the countries covered by your RAN you will gradually see whether any types of human rights abuse can be regarded as typical and how to respond.

RANs give you the opportunity to write well-informed, detailed and careful letters and to tackle matters that cannot be left to straightforward large-scale appeals. You will not be expected to write basically the same letter in every action and, as your experience of the countries grows, so will the subtlety and quality of your letters.

#### 2. Working for individuals

The victims of human rights abuses are at the heart of RAN actions, just as they are in all AI's work. The people on whose behalf a RAN action takes place are virtually always named; very often some biographical details are also available. In 1983 one third of all RAN actions were on behalf of just one individual and almost all the others concerned small numbers of named people. When people have not been named it has been because either the individuals cannot be identified because it might jeopardize their safety or because there are too many of them. RAN actions have, in fact, rarely been used to respond to violatons of human rights that have occurred suddenly on a massive scale. The appropriate response to these has more often been Urgent Actions, campaigns or action at section or IS level,

Because each RAN action lasts for some weeks or months (unless further action is requested and further information becomes available) they offer few opportunities for contacting prisoners or their families. RAN groups can sometimes provide relief assistance, although this must first be discussed with the RAN coordinator. By providing the means to work for a number of people in a given region, RANs complement your group's other long-term work on behalf of individual prisoners from other regions.

### 3. The calls for action

RAN actions are only occasionally planned in advance, such as appeals for an amnesty on some special anniversary or national day. They are generally a response to recent information about human rights abuses. As a result, the flow of actions is often irregular and cannot be predicted with any accuracy. Ultimately

the flow of actions is determined by conditions in the countries involved.

Actions last for periods ranging from one to six months. The time span depends on the complexity of the situation, the scope for activity, the level of information and so on. Where more information is received after the start of a RAN action a follow up may be sent, possibly recommending further action. The average RAN action lasts two and a half to three months.

In most RANs it is estimated that there will be eight to 10 actions each year, although in some RANs the number is much higher. However, your group will probably not be asked to participate in more than 10 actions, even if more are issued.

When a steady flow of action requests is anticipated the International Secretariat may decide not to use all the groups in the network for every action. There may also be reason to believe that if fewer sections and groups participate the action will be more effective. When the whole network is not to be used, then:

(i) the action request may be sent to some participating sections for information only and to other sections for action; and/or(ii) RAN coordinators may be asked to send the request to a given number of groups for action and to the remaining RAN groups for information only. In this way participation can be arranged so that not all groups are acting at the same time. The group does not have to participate in every action and the extent of AI appeals can be controlled to a certain extent. It is therefore one of the tasks of the RAN coordinator to control the requests for action made to each group so that as far as possible groups are neither over-stretched nor under-used.

Unlike Urgent Actions, RAN action requests cannot follow a set format and be roughly the same length. This is because some are much more complicated and detailed than others. Some action requests are indeed one or two pages long. Others, more complex, may run to as many as 20 pages. Sometimes an external paper setting out most of the information is attached to the action request which is internal. You should not expect all the information in RANs to be external and should take special care to note and observe the "internal" or "external" headings.

# 4. The countries

The number of countries grouped together to form the "region" of a RAN can range from two to 14 but in practice you will only be required to act frequently on five or six. Background information on a country will usually be sent with the first few calls for action on the country, and thereafter as necessary. It is one of the important responsibilities of your group to build up a file of information on each country so that you do not need to be briefed in detail for every action, even if a country is only occasionally the focus of a RAN action,

If your group joins a well-established RAN you should receive from the RAN coordinator a collection of background materials, including copies of past RAN action requests, which generally contain a lot of useful information.

One important feature of RANs is their coverage of countries on which there has been little AI activity in the past. The RAN technique ensures that there is a network of groups prepared to act quickly on these countries should the need

arise. This helps to prevent countries being "forgotten" or neglected and is a practical demonstration of AI's impartiality. In some situations RAN actions may well be the only means by which the AI membership can take action on human rights abuses in certain countries.

#### 5. Responsibility

As one of about 70 groups in a worldwide network, you may not feel that you have the same degree of responsibility when doing RAN work as when doing case sheet work, when only one, two or three groups are normally active. But RAN work imposes just as much responsibility on a group as adoption or investigation work:

- If a situation is dealt with through a RAN it is because a certain breadth, duration and intensity of response is judged to be required; in contributing to that level of response your letters and other activities are essential.
- ii. Yours may be the only group in your section participating in an action; you represent to the authorities in the target country the concern of all AI members and others in your country. (For example, if each RAN coordinator is asked to find only one group to be active.)
- iii Yours may be one of just three or four groups worldwide taking action. (For example, if RAN coordinators in only three or four sections are asked to find one group to be active.)
- iv Where a group of people in similar circumstances is the subject of a RAN action, the International Secretariat may divide their names between the participating sections and ask each RAN coordinator to allocate one name to each group for action. Then your group would have sole responsibility for work on behalf of one individual. Many of these actions are investigations on behalf of people who have "disappeared", but this technique, which is being used increasingly, can be applied to any concern,

As with other AI techniques, human beings may be placed at risk if the information you are given in a RAN action is not handled responsibly. A summary of security guidelines is given at the end of this booklet. In addition to these points and the need to observe carefully the "internal" and "external" headings, it is important to respect time limits put on actions. Time limits are carefully chosen for strategic reasons. Information can quickly go out of date and to continue to write letters on the basis of of outdated material could be dangerous. Moreover, RAN groups cannot be serviced as intensively as groups are serviced in relation to their casework, so further details are not passed on to groups unless it is intended that there should be further action by the network. It is one of a group's responsibilities to handle information in the way recommended by the International Secretariat; to treat RAN actions as if they were Urgent Actions or case sheets would be irresponsible.

#### C. SOME PRACTICAL ADVICE

#### 1. Which RAN for the group?

When considering which RAN to join, remember that this is a long term project which will affect the balance of your group's workload. You should not choose a RAN covering a region in which you currently have a case, even though you may feel you have acquired useful knowledge of that region. You would not, for example, have two prisoner cases from the same part of the world as this would clearly be unbalanced. On rare occasions a team in the Research Department may ask a section to include in "its" RAN a specific group which has already a case in one of the countries in that RAN. This will be only because the case is likely to close soon or because the Research Department has a special reason for wanting that group in the RAN. Conversely, a group which has gained experience of certain countries through RAN work will sometimes be approached to take a case from one of the countries and to withdraw from the RAN. These are, however, the exceptions to the rule. On the other hand if you have learned about a country by having a case there which has now closed, this would be a good reason for choosing the RAN which includes that country.

Do not be put off a region because you feel you know nothing about it. You are not expected to be experts when you join. A commitment to learn while working on AI concerns is all that is required. Some RANs do demand certain language skills and this may influence your choice. You can check the precise requirements—and whether they are essential or merely advisable—with your section office. In some RANs the number of actions per year can be higher than eight to 10 and so it is best to check first with the RAN coordinator in your section to ensure that you have a workload you can handle.

## 2. Communication

Nominate one person in your group, not necessarily the secretary, to be the contact for RAN work. This person should liaise with the RAN coordinator. Tell your RAN coordinator what else your group is doing—case work, campaigning, Urgent Actions and so on—so that they can judge your capacity for RAN action.

# 3. Keeping your group informed

In the group's regular meetings those members who deal with RAN actions should report on their work. Although in practice many groups divide responsibilities between members, it is the group as a whole which is considered to be doing RAN work and all members should hear what is being done.

### 4. Working without a RAN coordinator - or as one

If your group is the only one in your section to join a certain RAN, you will deal directly with the International Secretariat. Action requests will be sent directly to the contact person in the group who should get the others working on it as

soon as possible. The Executive Assistant from the appropriate team in the Research Department will deal with queries about information sent in the actions and you should send reports on your work to them. Do not forget that many queries on general matters or on Al policy could be answered by your section office, so try asking there first.

Your group should also consider whether it could take on the task of RAN coordinator if more groups in your section join the RAN. In many sections the "RAN coordinator" is actually one of the participating groups, and as long as the work can be coped with efficiently, there is nothing wrong with this. It may be possible to get a co-group, where these have been established, to take on the additional task of coordinating the RAN. In some sections co-groups can receive financial assistance for their work which may be useful for RAN work too.

#### 5. Holidays and temporary changes

Inform your RAN coordinator as far in advance as possible if the contact person and address is going to be changed, even if temporarily for holidays. Sometimes a group needs to withdraw from RAN activity for a few months because it has become overstretched: tell the RAN coordinator. If the group will remain active but the contact person needs a break, make sure that another person in the group can take over in the meantime and inform the RAN coordinator of their name and address.

### 6. Leaving a RAN

If the group decides to stop working in the RAN—and after three or four years you may want a fresh challenge—you must tell your RAN coordinator. You must not simply stop responding to the action requests, as another group has to be found to take your place in the RAN and maintain the number of active groups. This is important for two reasons; first, the Research Department needs to know how many groups they can rely on to take action in order to plan the size and spread of the activity. Second, since a limited number of groups from each section may be in a given RAN (the number is the same for every section but varies from RAN to RAN) it follows that RAN "places" are limited. If a group stops responding and does not tell their RAN coordinator their place is "wasted".

The RAN coordinator will inform the International Secretariat (Campaign and Membership Department) which groups leave and join the RAN so that this can be recorded on the group's record card—much in the way that case closures are noted on group cards.

## 7. Reporting

You will have to send reports of your RAN activities to your RAN coordinator on an action-by-action basis every six months. A standard form has been devised and you can get these from your section office. Note your activities as you carry them out and write a report on each action as soon as you have finished it. It will otherwise be very difficult to remember at the end of six months all the activities undertaken, the number of letters written and so on. RAN

work can be quite demanding and you will probably have done more than you realize.

#### 8. Replies

Always send copies of any replies you receive from the target country immediately to the appropriate team in the Research Department and to your RAN coordinator.

#### 9. Other Activities

The recommended actions will give you a detailed framework for action and you will be able to implement the suggestions in the way that best suits your resources and conditions in your country. For example, it will be up to you to decide how best you can implement a suggestion to approach students associations to encourage them to write appeals. However, you should make sure that you do not infringe the instructions in the action. To continue the example, you might be asked only to publicize the information to students associations but not to suggest that they write appeals in their own name. Also, although the information in the action might give you lots of detail, you should not take action on matters which fall outside Al's areas of concern.

If you want to take any type of action which was not suggested you must first consult any country background papers and your RAN coordinator. Many RAN actions give guidance on what to do if you have spare time and energy by including some suggestions for "optional extra" activities. If you have an idea for another type of activity, pass it on to the International Secretariat through your RAN coordinator even if it isn't advisable in the action on which you are working. This feedback will help the International Secretariat in preparing future actions.

In some RANs no activities are desired beyond what is recommended. Very often in such cases you will find that the actions are very precisely described and the content of letters to be written is explained carefully. It will be clear that these are more sensitive cases. When you join a RAN – or if at any time you are in doubt as to how to treat the recommendations – check with your RAN coordinator or section for advice.

## 10. Publicity

In RAN actions, as in other AI work, publicity can be an excellent way of exerting pressure on those who abuse human rights. But sometimes publicity will not be advisable. Each action request will state clearly whether or not publicity is desired.

When publicity is requested, you can approach your *local* press, radio and television stations but ensure that your publicity work follows section procedures. Unless your group is the only group in the section in the RAN, you must check with your RAN coordinator before approaching the specialist press or national news media, as this will avoid duplication of effort and confusion. Generally the RAN coordinator will inform you, when sending you the action request, about arrangements for national publicity. They may allocate

responsibility for all publicity work for a given action to one group, or they may divide the work between the groups.

Remember that you do not have as much time for publicity with a RAN action as you do with a case or during a campaign, so try to establish sympathetic media contacts who would be prepared to help at short notice. Remember also to send copies of all publicity you obtain to the appropriate officials in the country concerned.

#### 11. Target sector work

The professions, trade unions, and other groups with special interests, skills or influence may be approached for support in RAN actions. This is referred to as "target sector" work. When target sector approaches are recommended, your RAN coordinator should tell you how these are to be organized in your section. The responsibility for each sector may be given to a different group, so that one group would approach students and another would approach lawyers, for example. Responsibility can also be shared on a regional basis or in any other way that seems useful.

Remember that RAN actions only last a few weeks or months and you will not normally have a great deal of time for extensive target sector work. So do not be too ambitious at first. However, contacts made in connection with one action can prove useful in later actions and you should aim to build up a body of useful and sympathetic contacts.

Generally, action requests will state which target sectors you should approach and what you should ask them to do.

### 12. Between RAN actions

Owing to the irregular flow of RAN actions you may find that there are periods between RAN actions when you do not have any immediate work in hand. There are plenty of things you can do at such times to promote your RAN work and make it more efficient and effective. You can build up target sector and news media contacts; educate these contacts in effective letter-writing; train new group members in RAN activity; provide external background information to bodies and journals which may be interested in some of the countries of the region (even though you have not yet needed to contact them as a target sector); through your RAN coordinator contact other groups in your section in the same RAN to explore the possibilities for joint activities. It is a good idea to tell your RAN coordinator about what you do between actions so that these ideas can be passed on to other RAN groups in your section.

### 13. Records and filing

Establish a simple filing system with at least one file for each country. As new members join the group and eventually take over various responsibilities, it is important that these files should be organized clearly so that they can be passed on to and used fully by others in the group.

#### D. WHAT YOU SHOULD NOT DO

- 1. You should avoid giving the false impression that AI works against specific governments or political systems. Therefore, do not mention the existence of the RAN in letters to the authorities, other letters written as part of a RAN action, in publicity material or in any other way which might give this impression.
- 2. Do not take action when you receive a copy of a RAN action sent to you marked "for information only".
- 3. Do not choose to work on only one or two of the countries included in the RAN. If you did, the flow of actions to you would probably be extremely erratic and your activities could give a misleading picture to a non-Al member.
- 4. Do not use internal material sent in a RAN action as if it were external. This can easily be done by accident as the status of the information may vary from action to action. Please take care.
- 5. Do not send group reports to the International Secretariat if you have a RAN coordinator.
- 6. Do not treat RAN actions as cases to be dealt with on a long-term basis, unless the International Secretariat specifically requests you to continue work on it after the original deadline, or unless it is allocated to you through the proper channels as an adoption or investigation case.

### E. WHAT YOU CAN EXPECT FROM YOUR RAN COORDINATOR

The RAN coordinator will pass to you all RAN action requests, indicating whether you are receiving them for information only or whether you are to take action on them. If you let the RAN coordinator know what the rest of your workload is like, the coordinator may be able to indicate a minimum and a maximum program of work on the actions so that you do not have too many demands made of you at once. If you let the coordinator know exactly what else you are doing, and what you think your capacity is for more work, this will help the coordinator to decide when to send you RAN requests "for information only" and when "for action" if a limited number of groups is to take part. The RAN coordinator should also give you ideas for action you can take in your own country – such as the names of sympathetic members of parliament you can write to – and details of what your group can do in target sector and publicity work.

They may regularly send you information about the countries included in the RAN clipped from newspapers, specialist magazines and so forth. Some RAN coordinators manage to put this sort of information into bulletin form. Most monitor the news media themselves. RAN coordinators should build up a file of useful (not all!) information on each country, including past RAN actions and up-to-date address lists. A copy of the entries in this file can be given to new groups joining the RAN as part of their introduction to its concerns and work.

RAN coordinators are also involved in training groups to do RAN work and are sometimes able to visit one of a group's regular meetings to talk about the AI concerns dealt with in the network and what work has been done. Since each RAN has its own characteristics this is especially valuable when groups are considering joining or are new to the network.

The RAN coordinator is the link between your group and the International Secretariat and all your queries should be addressed to the coordinator in the first instance. They will remind you if you forget to send them your six-monthly reports of your activities and they summarize all the groups' reports to make twice yearly reports to the Research Department. In some sections the section office asks the RAN coordinators to send a copy of the report to the office also.

RAN coordinators work closely with the person in the section responsible for allocating cases; they inform them as groups join or leave the RAN. They also pass this information to the Campaign and Membership Department of the International Secretariat for noting on groups' record cards.

It is essential that the RAN coordinator works closely with any relevant country coordinators. Very often a RAN coordinator will also act as a country coordinator for one of the countries included in the RAN. This should not cause any problems provided (i) they give the same attention to each RAN country and do not concentrate only on the country for which they are the coordinator; and (ii) they keep in regular contact with the country coordinators for other countries included in the RAN. As part of this contact, for example, country coordinators should ensure that RAN coordinators have immediate access to press material sent to them by the International Secretariat.

### F. SOME BRIEF SECURITY GUIDELINES

RAN actions often contain sensitive material. Human beings may be placed at risk if the material is not handled responsibly. Please treat all information very carefully.

You should always keep all information about RAN actions in a secure place such as a locked filing cabinet.

If any action request or other RAN material is lost or stolen, immediately inform both your section office and the International Secretariat (Research Department).

Please do not give a copy of a RAN action marked "internal" to any person who is not a member of the group.

If you wish to give information to other persons, organizations or journalists use only the parts of the action which are marked "external".

Please take care when working with and receiving information from political refugees or exile organizations. Their help can often benefit your work and they may have suggestions for action. But remember that working with such groups has sometimes caused problems. Before taking any action not suggested in the recommended actions, consult first your RAN coordinator.

# G. THE GROWTH OF THE NETWORKS

The first network of groups which undertook to work for a region was created in

1977 as a response to human rights violations in Central America. In the years that followed the technique began to be used for other regions as the advantages of a network of groups ready to respond to calls for action on a specific region became apparent. As RANs evolved and the technique was refined, it became clear that RANs provide a means for dealing, in a wide variety of ways, with *all* violations of human rights of concern to AI especially in circumstances which would otherwise have made it difficult to respond.

The most rapid development of the technique came in 1983 when six new RANs were established. These, together with two further RANs launched in 1984, brought the number of RANs in existence by the end of that year to 15, with a total participation of nearly 1000 groups.

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