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AMNESTY INTERNATIONAL AND PORTUGAL: A LONG RELATIONSHIP

This year's International Council Meeting takes place in Portugal --- the country whose troubles helped inspire the birth of Amnesty International.

In November 1960, two Portuguese students were sentenced to seven years imprisonment. They were among the first Prisoners of Conscience before the term had even been coined. Their jail terms were at a time when the dictatorial Salazar regime arrested countless student protestors for political activities. At that time of the two students' sentencing, a London newspaper reported the students' imprisonment and sparked the indignation of young British lawyer Peter Benenson.

We believe that one of the students may be Ivone Lourenço, who says she remembers the messages of solidarity that poured in from around the world. Yet she modestly refuses to claim that she was one of the two students whose plight launched Amnesty international. Instead, she says "...that student is a legend without a name."

Members of Amnesty International -- Portugal have carried out careful research into the original stirrings of the worldwide movement. Looking through the archives in the Ministry of Interior, they discovered that Ivone Lourenço and another student friend were the only ones sentenced to seven years' imprisonment at that same time. Hence, Ivone Lourenco has been featured in the Opening Ceremony of this year's ICM.

It was the outrage of Peter Benenson about human rights violations in Portugal that led him to call for international action in a newspaper article some six months later. In his article, "The Forgotten Prisoners", Peter Benenson profiled eight political prisoners jailed for their religious or political beliefs. Among them was Dr Agostinho Neto, an Angolan poet and medical doctor, who later became the first president of independent Angola. The authorities cracked down on his political activities, flogging him in front of his family and repeatedly imprisoning him, sometimes for years. One of the first Amnesty International groups to be organized received three initial cases of Prisoners of Conscience to work upon: Ala Uddin al Azad, a Pakistani professor; Madame Henriette Yvonne Stahl, a Romanian novelist; and Dr Neto.

Amnesty International's first Annual Report for 1961-1962 noted that Dr Neto had been set free, but admitted that there was no concrete or tangible proof by which Amnesty International could claim success: "If a prisoner is released or a general amnesty proclaimed after some publicity about conditions in a country, we can only note the coincidence. We cannot say that Amnesty was directly responsible. In the 12 months that Amnesty has been working, however,

there have been enough coincidences to make us feel that what we are doing is having some influence.”

In the second year of existence, Amnesty sent out its first investigators to research some of the complaints that had reached the organization and to plea for the release of prisoners of conscience, such as Francisco Miguel, a Portuguese member of the Communist Party who had been imprisoned almost continuously since 1938. A delegate went to Portugal to intercede on behalf of five doctors imprisoned because of their political beliefs. He met with Cardinal Cerejeira, the head of the Catholic church in Portugal at that time, and with a close friend of Head of State António Salazar.

In 1964, another Amnesty delegation arrived in Portugal, and in 1965 an Amnesty trial observer in Portuguese-speaking Africa was taken into custody by the Portuguese Secret Police (PIDE). By 1968, some 70 prisoners of conscience in Portugal had been adopted by Amnesty. Amnesty noted that many political prisoners were held in Angola, Mozambique and Guinea-Bissau, and obtained information about Angolan prisoners held in the notorious Tarrafal Prison Camp in the Cape Verde islands.

By its fifth anniversary in 1966, Amnesty International campaigned for the release of playwright Luis Monteiro, who was held without trial for having written a play that satirised armies, although he did not mention the Portuguese army in particular. Six months later, Luis Monteiro was released. Amnesty also began a similar campaign of international protest for well-known lawyer and opposition political leader Dr Mário Soares, who had been arbitrarily arrested more than a dozen times and imprisoned in Portugal and São Tomé. He later became President of Portugal.

Since its birth in 1961, Amnesty International has come a long way. From the first prisoners in Portugal for whom Peter Benenson was driven to stand up --- to the thousands of cases we campaign for today --- the dream of freedom and justice has brought together people all over the world.

Amnesty International continues to have concerns about the human rights situation in Portugal. Throughout recent years, there has been a steady volume of substantive allegations of torture and ill-treatment, and in some cases, suspected illegal killings by law enforcement officials.

Last year, Amnesty International received a number of allegations from prisoners throughout Portugal about ill-treatment by prison officers (AI Index: EUR 01/02/98). In one case, for example, Amnesty International raised with the Portuguese Justice Minister the beating of 17-year-old Marcelino Avelino Ramos Soares, imprisoned in the south wing of Caxias prison, who had complained that on at least three separate occasions on a day in September 1997, after protesting about a refusal to allow his brother to visit him, he had been seriously beaten and racially abused by a number of prison guards, after which he was confined for three days to a punishment cell.

Other complaints recently came in to Amnesty International about fatal shootings by law enforcement officers; the use of “excessive force” by police at a farmers’ demonstration, and alleged ill-treatment of police of some participants in a Lisbon street festival.

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