

UA NEWS

~~Amnesty International Urgent Action Newsletter.....MARCH 1996.....Amnesty International Urgent Action Newsletter~~

~~*"Please act as quickly as possible. Time may be crucial in locating Professor Rossi, or even in helping to save his life..."*~~

~~The words that began the recommended action for the first ever Urgent Action. Over 22 years later, Professor Luiz Rossi (photo) transports a Latin American UA meeting back to 1973 and meets the AI researcher who developed that first UA... (pages 4-5)~~

news in brief

~~-EQUATORIAL GUINEA-~~

Felipe Ondo Obiang and Bonifacio Nguema Esono, two prisoners of conscience who were the subject of UA appeals during October and November 1995, were released along with all other remaining political prisoners in Equatorial Guinea shortly before the visit to the country of the United Nations Special Rapporteur (UA 235/95).

~~-RWANDA-~~

International pressure appeared to pay off in the case of Jean-Baptiste Barambirwa, a leading Rwandese human rights activist who "disappeared" after addressing a human rights conference in Kigali. He was released on 12 December 1995 shortly after a UA was issued on his behalf (UA 268/95).

~~-BRAZIL-~~

After 2 years of regular UA appeals for Wagner dos Santos, AI received the welcome news that he had finally been given federal protection. He has now been flown out of Brazil on the initiative of the federal government. A survivor of, and witness to, the "Candelária Massacre" in Rio de Janeiro in July 1993 in which eight street children were killed, Wagner has asked for his thanks to be relayed to all those people "who didn't even know me, but sent letters which gave me a lot of strength to confront my situation." (UAs 241/93 & 440/94)

~~-MACAU-~~

On 11 October 1995 Macau's Supreme Court rejected two extradition requests from China, for men who might face the death penalty if they had been extradited. This reversed its earlier ruling, in early 1994, when AI had issued a series of UAs to try and prevent the extraditions (EXTRA 08/94). ~~-TURKEY-~~

Lawyer and human rights activist Eren Keskin (photo, above) was released towards the end of 1995 pending retrial. She told AI: "I got cards from various parts of the world - many different places. They not only send me messages of support, but also copies of the letters they had written to the government here in Turkey. I felt very strongly the support of Amnesty International during my months in prison.

Wherever there are women suffering around the world I now feel closer to them after my prison experiences."

AI continues to call for the charges against Eren Keskin to be dropped. (UA 81/95)

~~-MEXICO-~~

Dear Amnesty friends,

One of the deepest feelings of satisfaction in these times of struggle and hope has been for me the solidarity and affection shown to me by friends both in Mexico and throughout the world. Since Friday 25 August of this year, the actions of intimidation... appear to have subsided...

Amnesty International's solidarity has protected us like a safe, friendly home, and we are grateful for that.

- Father David Fernández, human rights activist, on the receiving end of death threats in 1995 (UA 203/95).

Also in Mexico, AI has just learned that two police officers have been arrested and charged in connection with the torture and ill-treatment of Manuel Manríquez San Agustín (UA 306/94). AI continues to work for Manuel Manríquez's immediate and unconditional release.

~~-BELARUS-~~

"Dear members of Amnesty International!

I want to tell you that the decision of the Supreme Court of the Republic of Belarus and the sentence of Vitebsky court in relation to my son Igor Yurevitch Kopytin were changed to 15 years' imprisonment. A big maternal thank you to all members of Amnesty International for extending a helping hand to an unknown woman and her son who are far away, thank you for your kind hearts, for your feelings of sympathy and compassion, for your help in saving the life of my son, which means you saved my life as well.

~~....Urgent Action....Action Urgente...Acción Urgente...Urgent Action....Action Urgente.....Acción Urgente~~

I am very grateful to you all and I pray that you will be helped along your difficult and noble path. I wish you health and happiness"

S.A. Kopytin (22.1.96)
(UA 239/95)

~~YEMEN/INDIA~~

After their release from detention, several Yemeni detainees thanked members of the UA Network for their work, in an article published in the Yemeni newspaper *al-Ayyam* on 23 August 1995 (UA 194/95).

Likewise, Sheikh Mohammad Ashraf, on release after nearly three months in custody in India, asked for his thanks to be passed on to all those who had appealed on his behalf. (EXTRA 80/95)

~~PUBLICITY~~

Appeals to government officials, copied to newspapers, continue to be published in target countries, increasing the domestic pressure on the authorities to account for their actions.

The entire front page and two pages inside the 2 November 1995 issue of the Gambian newspaper, *The Point*, was taken up with copies of communications sent from members of the UA Network (UA 242/95).

In Guyana, the *Starbrook News* wrote on 7 February 1996, how "*appeals for clemency for death row inmates Noel Thomas and Abdool Salaem Yasseen have begun to arrive on the desk of President Cheddi Jagan.*" The full-page article describes in detail the particular appeals from two activists in the UK and Germany (EXTRA 16/96).

The *Trinidad Guardian* reported the arrival of appeals on behalf of Clive Smart; then AI received the news that he was not served with an execution order as earlier feared (EXTRA 13/96).

The News in Lagos, Nigeria, also continues to publish, in full, copies of appeals to the Nigerian authorities.

A weekly column in the Spanish paper *El Pais*, devoted to AI concerns, regularly covers the latest UAs (see Panama below).

~~TUNISIA~~

Two "UA" prisoners of conscience were released by presidential pardon at the end of 1995. Mohamed Kilani (EXTRA 12/95) and Hama Hammami (UA 69/94) both expressed their appreciation for the Network's efforts on their behalf. Sustained action had kept their cases in the spotlight at crucial moments during their imprisonment.

~~PANAMA~~

EXTRA 25/96 on an imminent amnesty law in Panama sparked widespread interest. *Radio Exterior*, Spanish world service radio, broadcast three times to Latin America a 25-minute interview with the AI researcher. *Radio RPC* in Panama also conducted an interview about the action. On 27 February, AI's Spanish Section met with the Panamanian ambassador to discuss the UA, and the US Embassy in Panama contacted a local human rights NGO for a copy. *El Pais*, in its weekly AI column, ran the story, giving fax and telegram addresses for appeals, as did the newspaper *Panama America* (which also included a large AI candle logo).

~~MYANMAR~~

In early February 1996, AI received the news that eight members of a dance troupe, arrested on 7 January in Mandalay, had been released (photo above shows U Pa Pa Lay, Myodaw Win Mar and U Lu Zaw).

No doubt there will have been celebrations among the dance community in Canada, who got involved in the action. First, a group of 400 choreographers in Ontario, known as "Dance Umbrella", together with the Professional Association of Canadian Theatres, sent appeals. Then Dance Umbrella asked Canada's two premiere ballerinas to also send messages.

Two comedians and two political activists associated with the troupe are still in detention in Myanmar, and UA appeals continue on their behalf. (UA 04/96) ~~TIBET~~

On 13 May 1995, Tibetan tourist guide, Gedun Rinchen (in photo below, holding "his" UA), was arrested after security forces raided his home and found documents describing the state of human rights in Tibet. He was held in solitary confinement in Lhasa until his surprise release eight months later. "*My case is insignificant compared to most people who have been arrested. They have suffered in ways which are unimaginable*", he told an AI audience on 12 October 1995. "*I was not tortured and I was released after only a very short time in prison compared to others. I feel that my release was due to international pressure brought about by you and others. Without the support that you gave on my behalf, I think I would not be here today. Please accept my deepest thanks...*" (UA 164/95).

Necessity - the mother of invention

the story of the first UA is retold to a meeting of UA coordinators in Brazil

Brazil, 9 December 1995; as Latin American Urgent Action coordinators gather in São Paulo for a regional meeting, there are three extra names on the guest list: Luiz Rossi, María José Rossi and Tracy Ulltveit-Moe. Over the next two days, the trio will transport the meeting back to a time, more than two decades ago, when their lives became inextricably linked.

São Paulo, Brazil, the night of 15 February 1973; heavily armed military police force their way into the home of Luiz Basilio Rossi, Professor of Brazilian History at São Paulo University, and without explanation, take him away into the darkness. Now, more than 20 years on, he tells the gathered UA coordinators how, *"At the time, many people were being arrested for political reasons and tortured to death or "disappeared", and I had a real fear that this would happen to me too."*

The security forces return to the house, surround it and even nail boards across the front door to prevent the professor's wife, María José, and three young daughters from telling the world what has happened. *"We couldn't get out of the house",* recalls María José, *"not even out to the street, so I had to write a note to a neighbour without the police seeing."* Via a back window and the neighbour's young daughter, the message is passed to a priest, who in turn passes it on to the Bishop of Lins.

On the other side of the world - not yet "shrunk" by computers, faxes and e-mail - a small organization called Amnesty International has for some time been receiving disturbing reports from Brazil telling of brutal state torture. The organization's existing action techniques - with their cautious concentration on prisoners of conscience (POCs) - are beginning to seem hopelessly inadequate in the face of these horror stories. Tracy Ulltveit-Moe was AI's Brazil researcher in 1973. She remembers: *"We invited one of our Brazilian contacts, who was in Paris at the time, to come to London and meet with myself and Martin Ennals, then Secretary General. We spent the entire weekend discussing the problem and concluded that what we needed was a quick action for prisoners in danger, irrespective of the POC issue. I suggested the name "URGENT ACTION", and the title stuck."* More than that - a technique which over the next 23 years and beyond would spawn millions of appeals on behalf of thousands of individuals in many countries, was born.

By now the Rossi family's smuggled message has reached London where it finds Tracy at AI. The case of the Brazilian professor abducted by the military in the middle of the night is set to become AI's first "Urgent Action". Details are typed up and, on 19 March 1973, using names selected from a "shoe box" of hand-written address cards, the UA is mailed out, requesting immediate appeals in order to save the professor from torture and possible "disappearance" or death.

Two weeks later, María José receives a telegram ordering her to come to the military police (DOPS) headquarters in Sao Paulo to "identify her husband's body". On arrival, however, she gets a glimpse of her husband alive! She is also shown a pile of letters. María José still remembers how the DOPS Director told her *"Your husband must be a more important person than we thought, because we've got all these letters from all over the world"*. She is forced to sign a letter stating that Luiz is alive and well and not being tortured, and that the international action should stop. The authorities send the fake letter to AI in London.

However, as María José now tells: *"When I got home I immediately wrote another letter to AI, telling the real story, that Luiz had been tortured, but that several hundred protest letters had arrived which I believed had saved his life."* Two decades on, she remains firmly convinced of this: *"In my opinion, the intervention of AI was fundamental in saving Luiz from further torture and worse. I got the impression from the DOPS Director that he and the authorities were feeling under great pressure from AI - pressure to produce the prisoner, to show him, because he was getting so much publicity. Moreover, we were heartened to know that people outside Brazil knew what was going on, that they cared, and that they were prepared to do something about it. It gave us great comfort and hope. I and my family felt lonely and frightened and kindness from outsiders helped enormously."*

Tracy, too, recalls the events with clarity: *"I have a very clear memory of the case -in AI they say you never forget your first prisoner! When we received María José's second letter, we were overjoyed and very emotional to think that the Urgent Action had worked and that Luiz was safe"*.

Luiz himself believes that the international appeals were crucial: *"The torturer aims to isolate you, to cut all your links with the outside world. But AI was able to break that isolation. ...Once the authorities know that other people know you're there and what's happening to you, they are forced to be more careful about how they treat you... When I saw my wife, I*

knew that my case had become public, I knew they could no longer kill me. Then the pressure on me decreased and conditions improved."

After his release, the family left Brazil and eventually settled in Belgium. When they

returned to Brazil years later, María José helped to set up an AI Health Professional's Network and was a founding member of the AI group in Brasilia where they now live.

São Paulo 10 December 1995, Human Rights Day: the latest chapter in the story of the first UA closes with Professor Rossi, by now wearing a British Section UA T-shirt, hugging everyone goodbye as he leaves the meeting: "*I am an example of your success and a symbol of the importance of continuing your work. And I will write an Urgent Action appeal anytime - how can I refuse!*"

...a network of thousands...

Since the first UA was issued in 1973, the UA Network has grown to unite some 80,000 activists in over 80 countries in a common cause: to take immediate action - currently up to 1,000 times a year - on behalf of fellow human beings facing imminent human rights violations. Although it is probably impossible to give a cause and effect analysis of the impact of most UAs - each of which can generate up to 5,000 appeals - on average there is seen to be an improvement in a third of cases. In addition, the importance of the solidarity and publicity generated by international appeals is regularly emphasised to AI by activists working at the local level in the country affected. Regular anecdotal evidence (from lawyers, family members, and even government officials), which cannot always be publicized for security reasons, also points to the effectiveness of the work of the UA Network.

...translating words into action

UAs, issued in English from London, are rapidly translated into a number of languages at different centres. In Madrid, several translators, organized by the Spanish translation unit, EDAL, receive UAs directly by e-mail. Within 24 to 48 hours, the Spanish versions are ready for distribution by e-mail and courier to the Latin American UA Network. EDAL also sends selected UAs to the Brazilian Section, where they are translated into Portuguese for action in Brazil and Portugal.

UAs are faxed immediately from London to Toulouse, France, where the UA coordinators, while running their 9,000-strong Network, translate the UAs into French and distribute them within France and francophone Africa.

Some 160 members of the Japanese UA Network are able to act immediately on the English version of UAs. Another 280 participants wait a short time for one of 50 translators to translate the UA into Japanese.

Similarly in Germany, immediate appeals are sent by those who can take action in English. Then the two UA coordinators translate every UA into German for distribution to the rest of their Network, including MPs, the Foreign Office, the Ministry for Economic Cooperation, other NGOs and journalists. The translated UA is also sent to other German-speaking groups and sections, including in Switzerland, Austria, Luxembourg and the Canary Islands.

....involving the United Nations...

At the same time as UAs are being e-mailed and faxed to the UA Network, most are also being faxed directly to the UN Centre for Human Rights in Geneva. Then the Legal and International Organizations Program in the IS, divide UAs by concern and target them to UN experts on thematic issues. These individuals or working groups work on issues such as "disappearances", arbitrary detention, extrajudicial executions, torture, elimination of violence against women, freedom of opinion and expression, racism, religious intolerance and independence of the judiciary.

Most of these experts send appeals based on UAs, and investigate the reported human rights violations. Each thematic mechanism reports annually to the Commission on Human Rights - among other things, listing all the urgent appeals they have made.governments respond...

Many governments, sensitive to their international image, respond directly to UA appeal-writers. These replies - some of which address AI's concerns, but others offering no more than diversionary propaganda - are forwarded

on to the IS in London, where they may spark follow-up action or feed into ongoing dialogue between AI and the government in question.

Some Sections involve their own governments in the continuing struggle for human rights in other countries. For example, for nearly 10 years the Australian Parliamentary Group of AI has had an agreement with their Foreign Minister whereby all UAs are referred to the Human Rights Section of the Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade for action. These UAs are sent to Australia's diplomatic posts throughout the world for inquiries to be made, after which reports are sent back to the Department, and the Parliamentary Group.

The Chilean Section, too, engage their Members of Parliament in UA work. Each week, a UA is sent to the AI Parliamentary Group (made up of 13 MPs), who then write to the government in question and the Chilean Minister of Foreign Affairs. Each week, a different MP reads a declaration to the full session of parliament during the "hora de incidencias", a time set aside at the end of each parliamentary day. That week's most urgent or most severe UA case is usually chosen.

...around-the-clock protection...

Out of UK office hours, a dedicated group of AI activists around the world allow the organization to respond to abuses on a 24-hour-a-day basis. The "Worldwide Accelerated Response Network", or WARRN, will ensure that appeals can be generated at any time the UA office in London is "asleep".

The WARRN currently consists of members, who have access to fax or e-mail, in Australia, France, UK, USA, Canada, Costa Rica, Germany, Japan, Norway, Spain, Uruguay, Brazil and Peru. The WARRN was activated 22 times during 1995.

action in 1995...

During 1995 the UA Network was asked to take action 759 times (277 UAs, 164 EXTRAs and 318 follow-ups requiring action). Several million appeals were launched on behalf of thousands of individuals around the world. Concerns included torture (141 cases), judicial execution (132), "disappearance" (60), political killing (103), refoulement or forcible exile (12), death in custody (5), corporal punishment (6), medical issues (28) and legal concerns (116), eg POCs or unfair trial.

During 1995, action was taken on cases in 90 countries (numbers in brackets = UAs, EXTRAs, Follow-ups with action): Afghanistan (0,1,1), Algeria (4,0,0), Argentina (1,0,1), Bahamas (0,3,1), Bahrain (6,0,9), Belarus (1,0,5), Bermuda (0,1,0), Bolivia (5,2,5), Bosnia-Herzegovina (0,5,6), Botswana (1,0,1), Brazil (8,0,8), Burkina Faso (1,0,1), Burundi (5,0,5), Cambodia (1,0,1), Chad (1,0,0), China (8,25,15), Colombia (35,1,16), Cote d'Ivoire (1,0,1), Croatia (1,4,1), Cuba (1,0,8), Cyprus (0,0,1), Ecuador (2,0,0), Egypt (2,2,6), El Salvador (2,0,1), Equatorial Guinea (4,1,2), Ethiopia (1,0,2), Gabon (1,0,0), Gambia (1,0,1), Georgia (1,0,3), Germany (0,2,1), Greece (1,1,0), Guatemala (18,0,5), Guinea (0,2,0), Haiti (1,0,0), Honduras (2,0,0), India (6,2,6), Indonesia/East Timor (14,4,11), Iran (8,1,7), Israel/Occupied Territories (7,2,5), Japan (1,0,1), Jordan (2,0,2), Kazakhstan (0,5,2), Kenya (2,1,5), Kuwait (1,0,2), Kyrgyzstan (0,1,1), Lebanon (0,0,1), Libya (1,0,1), Lithuania (0,1,0), Maldives (1,0,6), Mauritania (2,0,1), Mexico (11,1,7), Morocco (2,1,1), Myanmar (6,0,9), Nigeria (7,0,13), North Korea (1,0,1), Pakistan (2,1,5), Panama (1,0,0), Papua New Guinea (1,0,0), Paraguay (2,0,0), Peru (5,0,6), Philippines (1,0,1), Russia (0,2,8), Rwanda (4,0,4), Saudi Arabia (3,0,4), Sierra Leone (2,1,1), Singapore (1,7,4), South Africa (2,0,3), South Korea (3,0,2), Sri Lanka (6,1,5), Sudan (14,0,6), St Lucia (1,1,0), Swaziland (1,0,0), Syria (1,0,0), Tadjikistan (1,0,0), Taiwan (1,0,4), Tanzania (1,0,1), Thailand (1,2,1), Togo (1,0,0), Trinidad & Tobago (0,2,0), Tunisia (6,2,1), Turkey (17,51,42), Turkmenistan (1,1,2), Ukraine (0,4,4), United Arab Emirates (2,1,1), USA (4,37,7), Uzbekistan (2,3,4), Venezuela (4,2,2), Vietnam (0,0,3), Yugoslavia (1,0,9), Zaire (0,1,0)

The Urgent Action is just one of AI's action techniques, and is not suited to all cases. Moreover, the individuals or issues raised in any UA may also become the subject of longer-term campaigning by other parts of the AI movement.

on the Internet...

The Internet - thousands of computer networks connecting millions of people throughout the world - is increasingly being used for human rights activism. Documents sent by electronic mail can be sent very rapidly and to many destinations at once, making it an ideal tool for the dissemination of Urgent Actions. Some 30 branches of the UA Network - from Canada to Nepal, from Taiwan to South Africa, from Bermuda to Norway - now receive UAs by e-mail directly from the IS, with many now also able to receive photographs electronically to accompany the action. UAs are currently posted on the Internet in Spanish and English, thereby not only reaching a huge potential audience, but also allowing some branches of the UA Network, such as in the Philippines, a speedy and cheap way to retrieve UAs. E-mail and the Internet are set to become ever more accessible, giving the human rights movement the power to challenge governments faster and faster about their misdeeds. Even now, some government e-mail addresses have begun to appear on UAs. Human rights violators, beware...

Mexican Wave

a flood of official paperwork is set off by UAs on Mexico

With governments increasingly busying themselves in replying to international Urgent Action appeals (*), the Mexican authorities remain among the most prolific producers in this expanding industry. After a UA has been issued on Mexico, literally hundreds of copies of official replies are received by the UA team in London, forwarded on from members of the UA Network worldwide.

The Mexican government's response is standardized and global. The same reply on any case will be sent out from the its embassy in Bonn or Lima, as the government agency producing the reply will send it to all Mexican embassies around the world.

The *Comisión Nacional de Derechos Humanos* (CNDH), National Human Rights Commission, is the main governmental agency dealing with appeals. Even if UA participants do not send copies of their appeals directly to the

CNDH, other branches of the Mexican state will regularly forward letters to it for response. In recent months, the *Procuradurías de Justicia del Estado*, State Attorney General Offices, have begun to reply directly to UA members.

The responses contain much information on what each separate agency has done to investigate the case in question.

In general, this information is known to the Mexico research and action team, but in some rare cases, there will be some new details which may be used in a UA follow-up.

The Mexican state's human rights apparatus is sophisticated and very bureaucratic. The authorities are very sensitive to international public opinion and keen to show their commitment to protecting human rights. Indeed, the CNDH was created in 1990 to deal with, among other things, an ever-increasing international

interest in the human rights situation in Mexico. It now employs over 600 people in Mexico City and, since 1992, similar (although smaller) offices have been created in each of the 31 Mexican states and in the Federal District.

As the situation in Mexico continues to demand further UAs, network activists may wish to follow-up on official replies: If your original appeal to a Minister or other governmental agency remains unanswered by them (but you do get a reply from the

CNDH), you may write back to the authorities and:

1☞ Mention that you received a reply from the CNDH, but not from them;

2☞ Request to know what steps they are taking to address the concerns expressed in your original letter;

3☞ Request to be kept informed of new developments.

If you **DO** get a response from a Ministry or government agency, you may write back:

1☞ Thanking them for their reply;

2☞ Asking for further details on steps taken by their agency / ministry to follow up on the case and to bring human rights violators to justice;

3☞ Requesting to be kept informed.

* see *"Beware the Official Version"* & *"Dodging the Issue"* (UfA NEWS, January & September 1995).

Consuelo Morales, director of Mexican human rights group CADHAC, who received over 300 copies of appeals sent to the Mexican authorities on behalf of herself and her colleagues (UA 105/95). She later wrote that such appeals had contributed to a "noticeable decrease in hostility". At a Forum of NGOs in Mexico City in November 1995, organized by an AI delegation and attended by 41 people from 30 Mexican NGOs, many of those present said they had been threatened in the course of their work. Urgent action for such activists in Mexico looks set to continue.