

Amnesty International

East Devon Group

Annual Report for 2016

Introduction:

This has been a good year for the group, both in terms of fundraising and our writing and campaigning activities. New initiatives, such as the Branscombe Concert, proved very successful. The system of three monthly rotating Chairperson is working well, and appears to be giving better support to committee members. Ideally we still hope for a member to take on the post of Chair for the full year, and perhaps 2017 will see a volunteer to do this.

Letter Writing and Monthly Actions:

This is our key work, writing on behalf of Prisoners of Conscience, people 'disappeared', people detained for their human rights work, and many other injustices. While we do not know how many letters, cards and emails are sent by members at home, we now keep a note of those brought to meetings for group signatures.

As in other years, these cover most of the globe – including Kuwait, Ukraine, China, Morocco, Egypt, Myanmar, Peru, Saudi Arabia, Turkey, Russia, Malawi, Algeria, Honduras, Bahrain, Dominican Republic, United Arab Republic, Venezuela, Azerbaijan, USA, Iran, Oman, Angola, Malaysia, Zimbabwe, Maldives, Mauritania, Kurdish Embassy, Thailand, Japan, Brazil, Kyrgyzstan, Democratic Republic of Congo, Pakistan, Somaliland, Sudan. Some countries recur several times during the year and are written to many times – Saudi Arabia and Egypt in particular. Our secretary Angela Lambert does a huge amount of letter writing on the group's behalf, and now other members are also bringing more letters and cards to meetings for signing. Since the July meeting a notebook has been in use to record the letters sent monthly. Using this, I estimate that over 120 letters have been sent from our monthly meetings in 2016. We also discuss the cases brought each month, to learn about their situation, history and background and hopefully be better informed.

Angela Lambert reports that she has dealt with thirty Urgent Actions during the year. She also did special Monthly Actions for Malaysian Cartoonist Zunar and journalist/cartoonist Atena in Iran; these were not letters, but excellent cartoons actually drawn by Angela in support of the two prisoners. Her drawing for Atena was featured in AI Group News.

Letters have been sent during the year to the two MPs for our area, asking them to protect the Human Rights Act

Campaigns:

We participated in the long running Stop Torture Campaign, coordinated by Miranda Tinkler, which came to an end in May. Brief summer campaigns included My Body My Rights, featuring Female Genital Mutilation and Forced Marriage in Burkina Faso and Sierra Leone. The petitions for this proved very successful and popular at our summer stalls.

Several members wrote letters in support of the Refugee Campaign, and Jill Grey undertook to coordinate and keep in touch with other local groups dealing with refugees. Jill, Angela Lambert and Martin McDonagh held a separate meeting to discuss our possible contribution to the Syrian Refugee question.

Our Cases:

The group chose a few cases to concentrate on during the year, for letters and cards to be sent on a regular – more persistent – basis, both to the authorities and to the prisoner where possible. In 2016 these were:

Morocco: Wafae Charaf and Oussana Housne. Coordinated by Tony McFarlane.

USA: Albert Woodfox, coordinated by Barbara Dustan-Smith.

Saudi Arabia: Raif Badawi, coordinated by Yvonne Taylor.

When the Morocco and USA cases were released they were replaced by:

Kyrgyzstan: Azimzhan Askarov, coordinated by Martin McDonagh, via Martin's contact in Bishkek, Aida Baijumanova.

Egypt: photojournalist Shawkan, coordinated by Tony McFarlane.

Amnesty Regional Areas – Tony McFarlane keeps in touch with the North Africa coordinator, and receives regular updates on the area, and Angela Lambert with the South America Region coordinator.

Some Success Stories :

USA: Last February Albert Woodfox was released after many years in solitary confinement, and a conviction based on discredited evidence.

Egypt: student Mahmoud Mohammed Ahmed was 18 when he was imprisoned for wearing a T- shirt with the slogan "A nation without torture." Released in March.

Azerbaijan: Khadija Ismayilova, a journalist, she was released in October.

Iran: Atena Farghadani, imprisoned for her political cartoons, released in May.

Christmas Write For Rights Campaign:

Held on Dec 1st, organised by Maureen Thurlow, this is a popular event on our programme. Mulled cider and mince pies encouraged 25 members to write cards to prisoners all over the world. A total of 211 cards were sent off. Both 2016 and 2015 show fewer members than previous years attending and thus fewer cards written; on both occasions Martin McDonagh had requested AIUK to notify all members of the event, but this does not appear to have happened. We hope to remedy this in future.

Publicity:

Martin MacDonagh has given two talks, to the Methodist Guild in January and another to the Men's Forum in October, and received donations of £40 and £120

respectively. He has maintained our Group Website, an essential in today's world, and wrote an excellent article for the Sidmouth Diary, with photos. Maureen Thurlow had a very good item about the December Write for Rights event published in the Sidmouth Herald.

Fundraising:

Our two main events were the Grizzly Run on March 13th, organised by the Axe Valley Runners in Seaton, where, because we volunteer our help with Left Luggage on the day, we receive a generous donation, this year in the sum of £700. David Evans is our coordinator for this, and is to be congratulated for the kind, calm way he always organises the event.

A new departure was the Lute Concert of Baroque and Renaissance Music held in Branscombe Church on May 21st. This was a most successful event, organised by Angela Lambert, and was a sell-out providing a profit of £1195. Music was provided by Sue King, Steve Graham and Liz Pannell, with wine and baroque nibbles in the interval, and raffle run by Gina and Bruce Mallett. A Petition against Forced Marriage in Burkina Faso was circulated, getting 103 signatures – almost the entire audience.

Stalls:

Honiton Charter Day July 23rd, our stall featured Forced Marriage again, plus the imprisoned human rights activist Azimzhan Askarov in Kyrgyzstan. This is normally a fairly low key event, but resulted in 121 signatures on our petitions.

Sidmouth Folk Festival is always more popular, and we featured the same two petitions plus the new campaign 'Stand against Hate', Jorge Lazaro in Brazil, and an Egyptian case, obtaining well over 400 signatures. Both days were dry and sunny, always a bonus. The Sidmouth Unitarian Church kindly permit us to use their gardens for this event; this is a good venue opposite the Post Office, with plenty of room for Amnesty stalls and banners, as well as our book stall.

Meetings:

Meetings have maintained the normal numbers, and we have tried to introduce more interesting discussion topics so that meetings do not get too dry and boring. We still have not succeeded greatly in this. However in January Yvonne Taylor led an interesting discussion about Shaker Aamer who had just been released from Guantanamo – and whose innocence or otherwise is still disputed. In September we watched a short film entitled 'Who is to blame for the Refugee Crisis' and subsequent discussion decided that the film gave a very 'slanted' viewpoint. Thanks to Martin McDonagh for organising this. We intend to choose some more films and talks for our meetings this year. Having more dynamic and interesting meetings where we can discuss and learn is a priority.

Angela Lambert and Martin McDonagh attended the S.W. Regional Conference in February, none of our members attended the AIUK AGM in April.

Finally, a huge vote of Thanks to our marvellous committee, Angela, Martin, Gretchen, and all rotating chairs, and everyone else for their help and contributions in the past year.

Barbara Dustan-Smith