**Minutes of Amnesty International Reading Group Meeting, 9th July 2020**

**Acting Chair: Anne McFarlane**

This meeting was held via Webex.

1. **Welcome and introductions**

Twelve people joined the meeting: Michael, Hilary, Peter, Anne, Jeremy, Liz, Samira, Amanda, Murat, Becca (new), Sue and Duncan

Apologies from Helen

1. **Human Rights in Thailand – Duncan Booth - Thailand & Laos Country Co-ordinator**

Duncan talked about human rights in Thailand since the coup in 2014. He described how the lèse-majesté law is being used to restrict any criticism of the monarchy and its government, even to the point of arresting someone who questioned the truth behind a story of a monarch who ruled 500 years ago. There have been numerous arrests relating to peaceful protests supporting of land rights. Political gatherings have been banned. Human rights defenders, journalists and bloggers are subject to intense scrutiny. Many people supporting democracy are seen as anti-government and have been forced into exile, but are now at risk of being extradited. Recently a number of exiles in Cambodia were found in the Mekong river with their bodies filled with concrete. Thailand has around 400 people on death row, although only one has been executed in the past 9 years.

1. **Campaign actions**

A number of actions had been sent out by email in advance of the meeting:

* Petition demanding the renewal of a life-saving UN cross-border aid mechanism that has been critical to ensuring an effective humanitarian response in north-west Syria for years
* Pride Inside: Elzbieta Podlesna, a Polish human rights defender who was arrested and has been under police investigation for a year now because of her human rights activism. Petition and solidarity action.
* Black Minds Matter – petition asking tech firms to protect mental health by managing the viral images that have been generated following the killing of George Floyd.
* Email action for a British – Iranian National, Anoosheh Ashoori, who is serving a lengthy prison sentence after a grossly unfair trial and who is being denied the urgent, specialist dental care that he needs.
* Urgent Action for Billy Wardlow, on death row in Texas.
* Email seeking the release of Kamal Hassan Ramezan Soulo, a 30-year old Syrian Kurd, enduring torture and facing execution for the last 3 years.

Cuba:

Sue provided details of an additional action for an independent journalist and prisoner of conscience Roberto Quiñones Haces, who was imprisoned on 11 September 2019 for “resistance” and “disobedience”. He remains in the Provincial Prison of Guantánamo in concerning conditions (overcrowding, poor food and water quality and lack of adequate medical attention, according to his own reports). Amnesty is calling for his immediate and unconditional release.

Death Penalty Abolition:

Liz reported that the execution of Billy Wardlow had taken place since the group email was sent out.

1. **AI Central England Regions Festival of Social Justice**

Anne gave an update on the plans for a high profile festival covering the three Amnesty Midlands regions. The strapline is “Winning hearts and minds to make a difference in the world”. The plan is to hold the event between Thursday 1 April and Sunday 16 May 2021. There will be three focal events based in Oxford, Birmingham & Nottingham, with events also being arranged at a local level by the groups. Support will be provided by AIUK HQ, and there will be a strong digital presence set up. The aims of the festival are:

* Strengthening the movement
* Building diversity
* Reaching out to new audiences
* Engaging ‘passive’ members
* Engaging a range of community & other third-party organisations
* Building lasting partnerships

It was agreed that we should be past of the festival, and it was noted that the dates would include two group meetings. One immediate suggestion was to have a Slamnesty poetry event, which is something that has been mentioned previously as a possible event.

1. **Next month’s meeting**

It had previously been suggested that we meet for an outdoor picnic for the August meeting. This still felt like a good idea and would allow for some brainstorming for the regional festival. It was agreed that if the weather was suitable, we would meet at 6pm in Palmer Park by Tutu’s café. Failing that, the meeting would be held by video conference.

1. **Planning Group**

Anne suggested that a small planning subgroup should be set up. Since the coronavirus pandemic started our opportunities for meeting together have reduced and our previous plan of events has been significantly disrupted. In order to keep the group functioning some degree of structure and forward thinking is required. The idea is that the subgroup would provide support to secretary and treasurer outside of regular meetings and to help inject a bit of energy and focus into the group in these challenging times. The group would not be tasked with organizing specific events, which would still require the input of the wider membership.

**Next meeting: 6pm Thursday 13th August –** picnic and brainstorming in Palmer Park.