



News from the Minehead Group

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Actions you can take this month:

- ✓ **Write to the Prime Minister** to express your concern about the **Police, Crime, Sentencing and Courts Bill (PCSC Bill)**. If passed in its current form it would severely damage freedom and liberty in the UK. You can find more information and send an email from the home page of the AIUK website <https://www.amnesty.org.uk/>
- ✓ **Send a letter** regarding one or more of the cases in the Spring edition of the Real Lives Supplement. One of these is **Ahmadreza Djalali**, a Swedish-Iranian doctor who has been in prison in Iran since 2016, accused of spying. He has been kept in solitary confinement without access to a lawyer, and tortured into making false confessions. He is at imminent risk of execution. See the case details sent out with this newsletter.



News from our group

Local members have continued to take the opportunity to join a variety of **on-line talks** and discussions. At our **March group meeting**, we welcomed Ben Grant from the Taunton Group, who talked about the Overseas Operations Bill. We were joined by members of other groups across the south-west – from Cornwall to Dorset - making 21 participants in all. All made possible by Zoom. Reports of this and other events are included below and overleaf.

Our next group meeting will be on **Thursday 8 April** at 1700 via Zoom. We will be considering **ideas for fund-raising and other events** later in the year, if/when Covid restrictions are eased. If you can't come to the meeting, do let us have your ideas in advance. Send them to Alison (contact details at the end).

Campaign News

Much of AIUK's current campaigning is focusing on the UK and various pieces of proposed government legislation that will reduce freedom and rights.

Human Rights (HR) in the UK

Several of us listened to a talk on 17 February about HR in the UK, given by Tim Gee, from AIUK. And Susan listened to a panel discussion on 16 March, which included the AIUK staff member who has written the AI submission to the Independent HRA Review, being undertaken by a panel of experts set up by the Government.

Alison writes: Ten years ago under David Cameron, the plan was to replace the **Human Rights Act (HRA)**, which came into force in 2000, with a British Bill of

Rights. In 2017 Teresa May also wanted to scrap the HRA. The HRA incorporates into domestic law the rights and liberties enshrined in the European Convention on Human Rights, and allows us to turn to UK courts and judges rather than the court in Strasburg if we feel our rights are not being respected by the government. At present, every new law must be in line with the HRA. If a law is implemented in a manner that undermines human rights, it can be challenged in the courts. Boris Johnson is taking a new approach and wishes to rethink our (unwritten) constitution instead. Already there are signs of seeking to undermine our rights in small ways, such as limiting the power of the courts and limiting our right to protest.

In the past, AIUK has worked on upholding human rights in other countries. So it is a change to feel the need to do so in the UK. Indeed, Tim said he foresaw the possibility that we may end up with prisoners of conscience to campaign for at home. As well as the Overseas Operations Bill (see overleaf) causing concern, another Bill is the **Sovereign Borders Bill** which is likely to make it easier to deport people, particularly asylum seekers. And the **Covert Human Intelligence ('SpyCops') Bill** will enable greater spying on activists.

Diary Dates

The Minehead Group aims to meet at least once a month. All Amnesty supporters are welcome to join us!

Thurs 8 April

Group meeting

1700 via Zoom.

Contact Alison to receive meeting link.

Sat 19 June

AIUK AGM

The meeting will be on-line again this year.

**WHAT IS THE
HUMAN RIGHTS
ACT?**

Comments made recently by the Home Secretary about the Black Lives Matter campaign and about climate change protesters are worrying. So instead of preparing a British Bill of Rights to replace the HRA, the Government is working on lots of separate bills which look as if they will limit human rights here. Many people don't know what the HRA is, nor do they understand human rights in the UK. We need to explain the importance of the Act and publicise a simple message: **SAVE OUR HRA**. This will be a key campaign probably from the autumn.

Overseas Operations Bill (OOP)

Cherry writes: Ben Grant gave a very comprehensive talk on the Bill. He explained how the OOP effectively seeks to decriminalise war crimes and torture by making it almost impossible to prosecute British soldiers for acts committed overseas more than five years ago. It puts the military above the law by creating a 'statutory presumption' (meaning a statute does not apply retrospectively) against the prosecution of international crimes, including torture, crimes against humanity, and genocide. Ben has worked with AIUK staff to oppose or at least amend the most significant aspects of the Bill. Given the slow pace of legal procedures and the trauma experienced by torture victims, five years is a short time in which to bring a case. Torture is still torture, even if it took place five years ago. The OOP represents a blatant breach of international human rights law, as confirmed by the International Criminal Court Chief Prosecutor. Ben reinforced his points with some disturbing case studies, showing how authorities had tacitly enabled atrocities and pointing out that not enough is done to address mental health issues among troops, which may lead to their committing these acts. The Bill has already passed through the House of Commons and is currently under deliberation by the Lords. The critical issue is to pass a number of proposed amendments, the most important of which relates to the ability to prosecute perpetrators of torture. There is hope that the Lords will pass this amendment, but the risk is that the Commons will then over rule it.

International Women's Day: *Susan writes* - on 8 March, AIUK hosted a webinar about women's human rights in **Poland**. The panel included Ela, Anna and Joanna who had recently been acquitted of their charges for 'offending religious beliefs'. The charges should never have been brought against them for their peaceful activism and their acquittal shows that the prosecution attempt was nothing more than an intimidation tactic by Polish authorities. Around the world Amnesty supporters took over 160k actions (in the UK around 41k). The panel also included Olivia and Mola who are young organisers from the Polish Women's strike movement. All of these brave women are on the front line of the struggle for women's rights in Poland, for LGBTIQ rights, tolerance and inclusion, in fighting for women's reproductive rights and an end to police violence.



India and Nepal *Cherry writes:*



In **India**, one of the more recently arrested BK16 prisoners, **Father Stan Swamy**, an 84-year-old Jesuit priest, marked his first 100 days in prison with a letter highlighting the situation of poor people languishing in jail who do not even know what they are charged with. He is a fine example of someone rising above his own trials to think of others. Church groups across India organised peaceful candlelight marches, processions and webinars to mark his and other activists' incarceration.

Tibetans fleeing to **Nepal** as refugees are now being forcefully sent back to China. The reason is pressure from China, which is currently investing huge sums of money into infrastructure development in Nepal. This is also bad news for Tibetans already in Nepal, many of whom have been in the country since the 1950s, when China invaded Tibet and the Dalai Lama was forced to flee. These families are increasingly made to feel unwelcome and subjected to low-level harassment. China's tactics in Tibet are not dissimilar to those employed in Xinjiang, but there has been far less international fuss about it.

How to contact the Minehead Amnesty International Local Group:

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