

This Year Amnesty International is Sixty!

In 1961 Peter Beneson, a British lawyer, wrote to the Observer newspaper because he was outraged that two Portuguese students were jailed just for raising a toast to freedom. In his article, *The Forgotten Prisoners*, he voiced that the global trend of imprisoning, torturing or executing people due to their political views or religious orientation was unacceptable. His call to action was reprinted in newspapers across the world and people everywhere recognised the power of unity and solidarity when tackling situations where justice and freedoms are threatened.

Today Amnesty International is a global movement of millions campaigning for human rights for everyone, everywhere. Change happens through research, advocacy and lobbying and campaigns and actions. To ensure independence Amnesty does not seek or accept money from governments or political parties for its work in documenting and campaigning against human rights abuses. Many people readily recognise Amnesty's iconic logo of a lighted candle – *it is better to light a candle than curse the darkness*

Amnesty International attempts to keep governments accountable for their actions, and remind them of the International laws and instruments by which they are bound – like the Universal Declaration of Human Rights – to keep people safe and free in their countries. One of the ways they do this is to shine a light on and generate actions to help individuals at risk - people who peacefully stand up for what they believe in but suffer human rights abuses because they speak out. Often it can be for simple, everyday actions that we, in this and many other countries, take for granted – like voicing their opinions or belonging to a particular group.

As well as focusing on people who find themselves in trouble for peacefully expressing themselves, being who they are or what they believe in and being a human rights defender, the organisation also investigates the abuses and ill-treatment that those in power often inflict upon individuals in detention. This includes torture and ill treatment, unfair trial, enforced disappearances and the death penalty.

One of the largest human rights campaigns is Amnesty's annual Write for Rights which takes place in November and December. Letters and emails to authorities responsible for human rights abuses and cards and letters of solidarity to individuals and groups affected and their families are sent and followed up by Amnesty to gauge results. There are some heart-warming successes as the story below details.

In February 2019 a peaceful movement erupted in Algeria called the Hirak. It called for political change and for more freedoms, the rule of law, and an end to corruption. In Algeria, independent press is limited, and as an independent journalist, Khaled Drareni played a crucial role in documenting police violence and arbitrary arrests during protests. But on the 27th March, Khaled was arrested and locked up after he was caught filming police officers as they approached protesters. His arrest and imprisonment are part of a broader crackdown on freedoms in the country.

The Write for Rights campaign 2020 and an online petition stated that he should not be in prison for covering a protest, and that it is crucial for the future of human rights in Algeria that he is set free. On 19 February 2021 Khaled Drareni was conditionally released! (taken from AIUK website)

Vital to the work of Amnesty are local groups of which there are around 300 across the UK. Many, like Warrington Amnesty which is celebrating its thirtieth birthday this year, are small in number but get involved in a wide range of activities from lobbying MPs, taking part in campaigns to fundraising and letter writing and emailing where AIUK have identified that such action can make a difference. Groups select to work on specific campaigns in countries that interest them and will often follow a group or individual at risk so they have a focus rather than trying to change everything at once!

Over the years the Warrington group has run stalls at many events such as carnivals and in the town centre to raise awareness of the work of Amnesty and to fundraise. We have celebrated and taken action on International Women's Day, Refugee Week and Human Rights Day. You may have seen us with a bucket in Stockton Heath or collecting at one of the larger Tescos. The Group hosted the North West Conference when this took place in Warrington and over its thirty-year history has staged many human rights protests to support prisoners of conscience and groups at risk of or suffering human rights abuses.

We will be celebrating Amnesty's sixtieth and the Groups thirtieth birthdays later in the year when outdoor events are possible. In the meantime, thank you to everyone who has supported us over the years and here are a few photos of our activities.

