

## SUTTON AMNESTY HISTORY (1975-2022)

### FOUNDED IN 1975

Amnesty International is a worldwide movement started in 1961 by a British lawyer called Peter Benenson. He was so outraged to hear of two Portuguese students jailed for raising a glass to freedom in a Lisbon bar that he started a year long "Campaign for Amnesty".

The success of this campaign grew in to the organisation we know today. An organisation committed to working impartially for the release of all POCs (Prisoners of Conscience), fair and prompt trials for all political prisoners and an end to torture, disappearances and executions. An organisation with over 10 million members in over 150 countries worldwide. A truly international organisation.

Adrian Esdaile, then Vicar of Hackbridge, founded the Sutton branch in 1975 following an appeal, with meetings being held at his vicarage.

Members from his church, together with members of the Sutton Friends group, started work on the case of Genaro Garcia Rodrigues, a Peruvian peasant leader imprisoned for demanding better working conditions. After a period of sustained letter writing to the Peruvian authorities, the group was able to help secure Genaro's release in 1979.

Other prisoners adopted by the group in those early days included Taison Ndlovu, imprisoned by the Smith regime in Rhodesia, Mourad Faili in Iraq and I. Bhardawaj from India. All were successfully released.

### JAILED FOR WANTING DEMOCRATIC REFORM

For the first few years of the Group's existence there were separate sub-groups in Hackbridge and Sutton. Margaret Appleyard, another original founder member, recalls that a new connection was established with members of St. Elphage's RC church in Wallington, resulting in all the sub-groups merging together as one in 1980.

The bigger group started to work on the case of Carmelo Lopez in Uruguay. A former Major in the army, he was imprisoned for belonging to a political party that believed in democratic government. He was finally released following a five-year campaign by the group.



The then Secretary, Joe Canning, remembers sending a newspaper article published in the Wallington Advertiser (13 January 1983) to Carmelo's wife. She replied that that it "had brought great comfort to her husband to know that people far, far away were concerned for his safety."

### EMIGRATION? NO WAY!

Meanwhile, the group was beavering away on the case of artist Gunther Pflenzel, his wife Karin and their 19-year old daughter Corinna from East Germany. The family were jailed after they applied to emigrate to West Germany in 1981. Fifteen months later, and after many appeals, the family were eventually allowed to cross the border to freedom.

## **DETENTION WITHOUT CHARGE IN PAKISTAN**

The next focus of the group was that of a former minister of the Punjab Province and a leading member of the Pakistan Peoples Party. Chaudhry Mohammad Hanif was detained without formal charge or trial in 1983, as he was about to participate in a campaign of civil disobedience to press for an end to martial law and the holding of immediate elections. After many appeals he was finally released in late 1985.

## **RELIGIOUS BELIEFS IN GREECE**

There then followed the case of a Greek Jehovah's Witness, Paschalis Vafiades, who was imprisoned for his conscientious objection on religious grounds to military service. The group enlisted the help of their MEP, James Moorhouse, on the case. After many letters a response was received from the Greek Embassy in London. In late 1987 the group learnt that Paschalis had been freed.

## **DETENTION OF JUVENILE**

Many group members were touched by the sad story of Nuksie Mononi, a 14-year old black South African who had been picked up along with hundreds of other school children in Soweto in November 1986. Nuksie was not charged or tried, and there were fears that he had been maltreated while in custody.

Although the group helped to secure Nuksie's release, a letter received from his family indicated that he has not been able to lead a normal life after the psychological trauma of ten months detention.

## **NAME CHANGING IN BULGARIA**

In 1988 the group investigated the case of an ethnic Turk called Dzumaziye Turgutova, who was living in Bulgaria. She had been imprisoned for refusing to accept a new Bulgarian name, which was being forced upon her by the Bulgarian authorities.

Members of the group applied pressure in the form of letters, petitions, the involvement of

local MP's such as Nigel Forman and also telephone calls to the Bulgarian Embassy in London, with a surprising degree of success! John Peppard met the Bulgarian Charge D'Affaires at the Embassy, who denied that the prisoner ever existed. However a complete U-turn was not far away as good news was heard from the Bulgarian authorities. Dzumaziye, her husband and son were finally set free!

## **FROM ZAMBIA WITH THANKS**

Graham Bisset and the group also took on the case of another prisoner, this time a 40-year old schoolteacher from Zambia called Faustino Lombe. Within 6 months, Faustino was set free. He later wrote, "Truly, I have derived a lot of strength, comfort and joy at the realisation that somewhere far away there are people who are thinking and praying for me. Thank you very much for everything you have done to facilitate my release. I was released on 25th May, 1988 due to the international pressure that you and through you many people applied on the system."

## **CHANGES IN HUMAN RIGHTS ABUSES**

The mid 1980's saw a dramatic change in the pattern of human rights abuses. Amnesty discovered that there was a reduction in the number of long-term prisoners of conscience cases to work on. Regimes that had previously arrested individuals had adopted other tactics such as disappearances, killings, intimidation and torture more widely.

In such cases time was often of the essence. Out of this the Amnesty Urgent Action network was born. Urgent actions involve mobilising Amnesty's thousands of supporters, who immediately write, fax or email to try and prevent someone from being tortured or ill treated, or to secure someone's release, or even to save a life.

The emphasis of human rights abuses also changed. It was acknowledged that often groups of people suffered as much as individuals. So campaigns on specific countries, groups of people or specific themes were regularly held.

## **EXPANDING GROUP**

During 1988 Sutton Amnesty began to expand, thanks to Amnesty's increased profile nationally, and to chair Graham Bisset being able to bring his campaigning experiences, learnt from his time with the Vancouver Amnesty groups. "Write-a-thons" became a regular feature in Sutton High Street, which helped increase membership.

Monthly meetings attracted around 20 to 30 active members regularly, with many more participating in our campaigns and fundraising. Because of the increased size, the group were no longer able to meet in people's homes, but instead met centrally in a public hall in Wallington, and more recently in Sutton. These monthly meetings are open to the public, and usually feature guest speakers with experience of a particular country situation.

Among the speakers visiting the group in 1990/91 were Gladys Villa-Lobos, founder member of the "Mothers of the Disappeared in El Salvador"; Carmel Bodjiardo, an ex-POC from Indonesia; a lawyer and human rights activist from Sri Lanka and also the Director of Amnesty in the UK.

A second very practical evening was held every month, where members wrote letters on behalf of individuals who were the unfortunate victims of human rights abuses. Urgent Action telexes or faxes were sent each month by the group on information supplied by the Amnesty UK Office. Members have received replies to their letters from the governments of Israel, Greece, Iraq, Bulgaria, Mexico, the Philippines, Belize, Turkey, China, Brazil, El Salvador and Guatemala, as well as many from our own in the U.K.

## **CAMPAIGNING AND MEDIA COVERAGE**

The group regularly participated in major Amnesty campaigns focussing on such countries as South Africa, Colombia, the Philippines, Cambodia, Sri Lanka, Burma, Nigeria, Kenya, China and Turkey, while we ran a continuous campaign helping individual victims in all the countries of Central America.

Our very own Central American coordinator, Jamie Coutts, was so immersed in the region's culture and politics that he eventually migrated to Nicaragua and started a coffee plantation there.

The group also participated in campaigns against torture, the death penalty, campaigns for women's and children's rights as well as establishing a permanent International Criminal Court, whilst continuing to work on the cases of individuals.

We run about half a dozen write-a-thons per year, drawing attention to these campaigns and many others. The response from the public in Sutton was very encouraging. Stories covering these campaigns and other Sutton Amnesty work appeared more regularly in local newspapers, thanks to our persistent publicity team! Even national television took an interest in what we did. In April 1990 ITV broadcast an 8-minute documentary devoted entirely to Sutton Amnesty, in its "A Time to Care" series. This programme was markedly upbeat in its message and featured John Peppard talking about the case history of Bulgarian Dzumaziye Turgutova, while Alison Moore described the Children's Action Network.

For several years, members of the group also manned the telephone lines at the BBC in connection with the Prisoners of Conscience programmes shown on BBC2.

We also forged useful links with other sympathetic organisations such as The Body Shop, Sutton Council, and local Schools and Churches who can help us in our campaigning and fundraising activities.

## **FUNDRAISING**

Our fundraising efforts also gained momentum! Each November our street collection raised over £1000. Seasonal carol singing, concerts, bake sales, car boot sales, sponsored events, a fantasy football league, quiz nights, donations and door-to-door collections all helped to fund the group's work. One member who is blind, Jane Phillips, raised over £140 by knitting a patchwork quilt!

## **REGIONAL AND NATIONAL PARTICIPATION**

Over the years, Sutton Amnesty has been well represented at the regional and national level. Ex chairpersons Graham Bisset and Colum McAndrew were both voted in as London Region representatives for lengthy periods, both also serving on the main board of the AIUK section. Alan Maloney was a member of the Standing Orders Committee at AIUK AGMs for many years.

Sutton Amnesty also submitted several AGM resolutions covering topics such as citywide and regional development to Amnesty-sponsored human rights film festivals to accuracy of IS research information.

## **PRISONERS FREED IN 1990-1991**



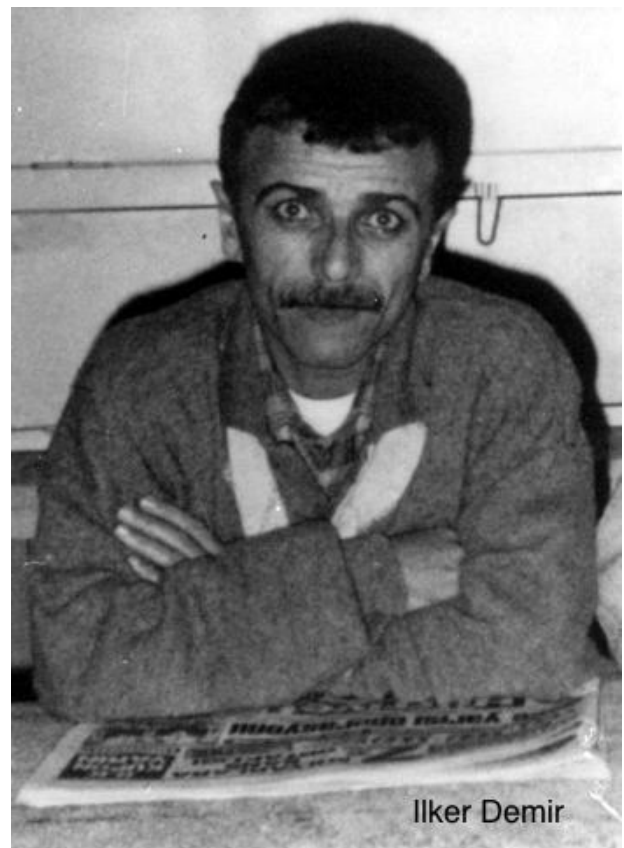
Two more cases the group had been working on were released in 1990. The year started with the good news that Yassim Ali Ashur, a Saudi religious leader, had been set free. In October, after meeting with senior diplomats in the Somalian Embassy in London, we heard of the

release of Hassan Abdullah Hassan, a 33-year old businessman from Somalia.

## **JOURNALIST ILKER DEMIR RELEASED**

However the pinnacle of our work was the case of Ilker Demir. Ilker was a Turkish journalist who had written articles in 1979 for a socialist magazine, which at that time was perfectly legal. Unfortunately for Ilker, the Turkish authorities decided to ban the articles after the military coup in 1980!

Ilker was jailed in 1984 for 42 years, was held in solitary confinement for two years and was frequently tortured. The group regularly raised Ilker's case with their MP's from Sutton and from Carshalton, as well as with their MEP, James Moorehouse. John Peppard also had appointments with senior diplomats in the Turkish Embassy. This, together with the pressure of some 20,000 letters from many Amnesty groups finally told, and Ilker was released in April 1991.



The Sutton group had considerable personal communication with Ilker and engaged in vital "aftercare" work on his behalf. The group were

lucky enough to meet him when he came to study English in London. He spoke of great hardship but also took great pleasure from his many "friends" who had written to him whilst he was in prison.

This case illustrates the real strengths of an Amnesty group: raising the public's awareness of each case through publicity and write-a-thons; pressuring government authorities through persistent letter-writing; lobbying of MP's and MEP's, and finally visits to the appropriate embassies in London.

### **DISAPPEARANCES IN SRI LANKA**

The Sutton group also tried to trace four young men from Sri Lanka, who had disappeared after being arrested in early 1990. All were Sinhalese. They were Jayasiri Bandara, aged 49, and Kahawathgodagama Ebbengegedera, aged 24 – both were village development officers. Also disappeared were Kekulawala Senaratne, a canteen employee aged 28 and Dinamitra Nissanka, a 22-year old student.



Daya Nissanka

At the same time the group tried to solve the case of Alfonso Chanfreau, a Chilean student who was abducted by the security forces in Chile in 1974 and who has not been seen since.

### **CHIEF MOSHOOD ABIOLA**

In 1997 the Group started work on trying to free Chief Moshood Abiola, a Muslim businessman and philanthropist. Abiola ran for the presidency of Nigeria in June 1993 and appeared to win the popular vote in what was considered a free and fair election. The vote was annulled by Nigeria's military leader on the basis that the election was corrupt. When Abiola rallied support to claim the presidency, he was arrested for treason by the military regime led by General Sani Abacha, and was sent to prison for four years. Sadly, the Group learnt that Abiola died in suspicious circumstances on the day that he was due to be released, on 7 July 1998.

### **COMMEMORATIVE PLAQUE**

March of 1998 saw a major event in the history of the group. In conjunction with Sutton Council a plaque was unveiled close to Peacocks in Sutton High Street by the Mayor of Sutton, to commemorate the 50th anniversary of the United Nations Universal Declaration of Human Rights. Also lending support that day were MP's Tom Brake and Paul Burstow. In a moving ceremony, chair Colum McAndrew and the group reminded locals of the names of 15 victims of human rights abuses from countries all over the world that the group had worked on over the years.

### **CORE ACTIVITIES 2004-2020**

Over the last 15 years, under the able leadership of Paul Barnard and Tessa Cornell, Sutton Amnesty participated in numerous campaigns, some of which are described below. Letter-writing remains the core activity and the group have worked on various cases from Colombia, Brazil, the Former Soviet Union, Turkey, West and Central Africa, Israel and Palestine, to name but a few. Urgent Actions continue to require a quick response from the group, a process that has been accelerated by the advent of electronic tools such as emails and online petitions. Every December the group also participates in the Write For Rights Campaign, formerly known as the Greetings Card Campaign. This is where

members are encouraged to write directly to prisoners of conscience, to give them hope and to tell them they are not forgotten.

## **GUANTANAMO BAY AND RENDITION**

2007 saw Sutton Amnesty participate in actions on human rights abuses in Guantanamo Bay and on rendition - the practice of sending a foreign criminal or terrorist suspect covertly to be interrogated in a country with less rigorous regulations for the humane treatment of prisoners. Group members dressed in orange jumpsuits drew attention to these abuses while running stalls in Sutton High Street and the Carshalton Environmental Fayre. Members also protested outside the American Embassy in London and attended the screening of a film called "Taking Liberties".

In the same year, the group also worked on the Control Arms campaign. Amnesty's aim here is to provide clear and binding guidelines to arms-selling countries on when it is OK and when it is not OK to sell or transfer arms. Amnesty is asking for any arms control treaty to include a rule that prevents the transfer of arms where there is substantial evidence that it would fuel human rights abuses.

## **KADHUM RIDHA AL-SARRAJ**

In 2009, Carshalton resident Shereen Nasser approached the Sutton Group asking for help in freeing her husband, Kadhum Ridha Al Sarraj. Mr Al-Sarraj, a salesman with medical equipment supplier Matana, had been arrested and wrongly jailed by the Iraqi government after a heart monitor he created was mistaken for a bomb. After a campaign by the Sutton Guardian, Carshalton MP Tom Brake and Sutton Amnesty, Mr Al Sarraj, an Iraqi national with a UK visa, was finally freed after 17 months imprisonment and re-united with his wife in 2010.

## **60<sup>th</sup> ANNIVERSARY OF AMNESTY**

The covid pandemic forced the group to meet online in 2020 and on into 2021. But we were still able to celebrate Amnesty's 60th anniversary by hosting a well-attended zoom reunion party with our Turkish ex POC, Ilker

Demir. Coincidentally it was the 30th anniversary of Ilker's release, and we were fortunate enough to be able to reunite with members of other Amnesty groups that helped free him.

## **HUMAN RIGHTS LAWYER JAILED IN THE UAE**

Sutton Amnesty is currently working on the case of Dr Mohammed Al-Roken, a prominent human rights lawyer and professor of constitutional law in the United Arab Emirates (UAE). Dr Al-Roken was arrested in July 2012 solely for peacefully exercising his right to freedom of expression and association, and for his work as a defence lawyer on behalf of human rights. He is serving a 10-year prison sentence in the UAE following his conviction on 2 July 2013. Dr Al-Roken has been a member of Amnesty International and linked closely to the organisation for around 20 years. For over a decade before his imprisonment, he was the organisation's main contact for work on the UAE. He is a member of the International Bar Association and has written several books on human rights, counter-terrorism laws and freedom of expression.

## **THE FUTURE?**

No one can predict how the pattern of human rights will evolve.

You may think to yourself, what can one person do against these terrible and ongoing abuses of human rights all over the world. Well, the answer seems to be quite a lot. With a small amount of time, a lot of stamps, emails and persistence, you can change someone's life. You can give them back their freedom!

Become an Amnesty activist and be part of 10 million ordinary people around the world standing up for and protecting human rights.

Why not join our Sutton group, and become a voice for the silent and oppressed? We are a diverse, friendly and active group of human rights activists, who meet regularly to campaign on, and discuss, a variety of issues. New members are always very welcome! Email us on [sutton.amnesty.uk@gmail.com](mailto:sutton.amnesty.uk@gmail.com)