**Amnesty International Blackheath and Greenwich Group**

**Co-chairs review of 2022**

**Overview**

2022 must surely be recorded as a year of dramatic evolution for the group. The AGM in January, mindful of Covid-19, was online. Our long serving and industrious chair, Rachel, decided to step down. No one felt ready to take on the task on their own, so we adopted a rotation of four co-chairs. Angela, Brigitte, Graham and Marcia (replaced by Anne F) volunteered. Fortunately, David Wi chose to continue as secretary providing vital continuity. Our first monthly meeting in person occurred only in July but we continued to attract significant guest speakers to meetings throughout the year.

By April/May, our activists were cautiously meeting up to write letters and to prepare for a full-on book sale in June where we were able to joyously welcome Anoosheh Ashoori at the campaign desk. Of course, we did not manage to sell all the stock so planned for a November sale but also took the truly momentous decision that this would be the final AIBG book sale!

**Group Meetings and speakers**

At the March meeting, via Teams, we welcomed Sara Rydkvist, Amnesty International UK’s Human Rights Defenders (HRD’s) Campaign Manager. She came to talk about the BRAVE Campaign which was set up in 2017 to highlight HRDs at risk. AIBG worked on cases in Chile and Hondurus. The campaign was about to end, although AI will continue to help protect HRDs through Individuals at Risk actions.

In April, Ulrike Schmidt gave a wide-ranging talk on Human Rights in Central and Eastern Europe. Her illustrated talk focussed on two topics, Poland and secondly Refugees and fortress Europe.

In May, we welcomed Keith Vanloen, an ex AIBG member. Keith used an AI video “Is Israel committing the crime of Apartheid?” to support his views on the repression of Palestinians by the Israeli government.

In November, Tigony Phillips gave an informative and illustrated talk on Human rights in West and Central Africa focussing on Cameroon and Central African Republic (CAR).

The December Meeting maintained the tradition of providing an abundance of seasonal refreshments as well as a serious presentation by Daren Nair on ‘Hostage Diplomacy’ or the state sponsored hostage taking for political aims. He listed countries such as Iran, Venezuela, Myanmar, India and Russia.

As always, the meetings were summarised in news letters produced by a rota of unsung heros; Anne F, Brigitte, Graham, Melanie and Roger.

**AIUK meetings**

We did not participate in the 2022 AIUK AGM but have resolved to at least attend in 2023 if not submit a motion. A working party has been set up to consider this. We did send a delegate to the Launch of the AIUK Anti-racism network at the Human Rights Action Centre in London.

**Campaigning**

On the 8th of January, a masked group from AIBG joined a very well organised ‘Close Guantanamo’ march from Westminster to Trafalgar Square. Our group contacts for country/regional campaigns in Central America (Roger), Central & Eastern Europe (Brigitte), China (Angela), Iran (Graham), and West & Central Africa (Geoff) kept us informed and supplied with letters. Our super Book Sale Campaign desk team Angela, Brigitte et al) focussed in June on Morad Tahbaz for the AI ‘No One Left Behind’ campaign and in November on ‘Write for Rights’. It is noteworthy that AIUK no longer seems to produce much campaign material so both displays were produced by the AIBG team. The loss of the campaigning platform at the book sale will be sadly missed next year.

**Letter writing**

Early in the year, letters were circulated online and posted by individuals but as the Covid 19 threat reduced during spring we returned to meeting up in Greenwich pubs on the 4th Tuesday evening of each month.

**Book Sales**

This was the 48th Year of AIBG book sales. For various reasons, the volume of books collected was somewhat less than in previous years but despite this, both the June and November sales were a financial and public success enabling substantial donations to AIUK. Even the Refreshment team led by Freya made a mouth-watering profit with the introduction of ‘real’ coffee! Another innovation in the refreshment area was a photo-filled wall display by Graham of the previous sales and campaigns by AIBG to celebrate this final event.

So why decide to stop? The short answer is that the long and physically demanding preparation for the sales was falling on an ever-smaller core. We know that there were several stalwarts in this group, but it can be said that it is unlikely that the sales would have happened at all if not for the efforts of Ann H, Brigitte and Geoff. The demise of the sale was predicted by Ken (president), several years earlier and when it was debated in the September meeting, the vote to make November our final book sale was unopposed. Apart from saying farewell to the sales in the Church of the Ascension, two other cherished traditions will stop; sorting and pricing books in Geoff & Lisa’s spacious garage and the scrumptious Book Sale lunches at Claude and Roger’s house!

**Summer social**

At the end of August, we had a lovely afternoon picnic in the Old Royal Observatory Garden in Greenwich Park.

**Looking forward Thanks**

All of us probably have some regrets about stopping the book sale but these will fade if we as a group can repurpose all that energy and time consumed by the sale. It offers us the opportunity at to set new priorities for activism, campaigns, and relations within AIUK.

There is a tendency to think of AIBG as the members that turn up to meetings, but this is a mistake because it ignores an important set that keep informed via newsletters and participate at various activities like the book sale. Hopefully they will continue to take opportunities to support AIBG and accept this vote of thanks along with all the other members that have contributed to the function of the group this year.