

Stratford Amnesty International Group - Chair's Report 2013

Welcome to our AGM. Here is my report of Stratford Amnesty's work over the past year.

Individuals at Risk

At the heart of the Group's activities is our letter writing on behalf of individuals at risk. We held 10 monthly letter writing mornings over the year where we responded to Amnesty's urgent actions, sending over 300 letters to 19 different countries. We appealed for those wrongly imprisoned, on death row, the disappeared and those held under house arrest or tortured.

Our annual "Write for Rights" street stall was held on the Cornmarket in early December when we invited members of the public to send greetings cards to our 4 chosen cases. 130 cards with messages of support were signed and sent. A recipient wrote, "Thank you every one for being my voice and believing in me".

Early in the year the group worked on the case of Chen Guangchen, writing letters of support when he was under house arrest in China suffering from regular harassment. He eventually escaped and received asylum in the USA. The Group has also sent appeal letters on behalf of long-term cases such as Shaker Amer in Guantanamo and Hakamada Iwao who has been in prison in Japan for 47 years.

Other Campaigns

We continue to work on other Amnesty campaigns. These include: Corporate Responsibility, Arms Control, Afghan Women's Rights, and Refugee and Asylum Seekers,

We lobbied our M.P. Nadhim Zahawi and the Government on a number of Amnesty's concerns including the rights of foreign domestic workers, the raising of the daily allowance for refugees, the Justice and Security Bill, and the Arms Trade Treaty which, after 10 years, has reached its final stage. The UK has been a strong supporter of the Treaty, and there is hope that it will come to a successful conclusion this year.

On the issue of Corporate Responsibility we sent a petition to Royal Dutch Shell asking them to pay for the cleanup in the Niger Delta.

We continue to work on Women's Rights. We wrote to officials in Afghanistan asking them to ensure that the fragile gains made in women's rights are not lost.

Our work on these campaigns would not be possible without the continued support we receive from Amnesty's head office and their voluntary Country Coordinators. We are also grateful for regular contact with our MP, Nadhim Zahawi.

Monthly Meetings

The Group held 11 evening meetings this year. In addition to our campaign work we invited speakers to tell us of their experiences in the human rights field. A member of our group Abeer El-Sayed gave a moving account of her family's search for asylum in the 1970's.

We also heard about the Ethiopian Oromo people and their struggles with human rights abuses. The Guardian's Young Journalist of the Year, who attends King's High School, Warwick, came to speak on the issue of Roma and travellers' rights.

Sarah O'Grady as well as being a member of the group is also a member of Amnesty's Board and reported regularly to the Group on Amnesty's strategy titled 'Moving Closer to the Ground'.

Fundraising

2012 has once again been a successful fundraising year for the Group with the sum of £2250 being sent to Amnesty UK.

We were delighted to be invited by the SBT to participate in their annual poetry festival in July. We welcomed Jack Mapanje a Malawian poet and former prisoner of conscience who read some of his work along with actor Jane Lapotaire who chose and read poems with a human rights theme. The evening was rounded off with a performance by the Malawian Arts Theatre Group of a play based on Jack's experiences of imprisonment in Malawi.

The event raised £472, and we are grateful for the support for this event given by Felix Dennis and the Shakespeare Birthplace Trust.

Helping to steward the Rotary Club's marathon in ferocious weather raised £250. Other fundraisers included a wine and cheese party held by Kathy and James which raised £586, a Stratford street collection of £246, a Bidford Budgen's flag day (thanks to supporters Heather

and Mike Gerrard) which raised £230, and the annual carol singing in Old Town where we collected £114.46.

At our annual social in August hosted by Penny and Robert Freedman we enjoyed meeting and sharing the evening together.

Other Activities

As well as campaigning and fundraising the group has been involved in other local, regional and national Amnesty events.

Locally, we attended the Fringe Festival's art trail and welcomed refugee artists from Iran and Iraq. Last September we held a stall at the Freshers' Fair at Stratford College to meet and introduce students to Amnesty International and human rights. More recently, members attended a showing of "No" at the Picturehouse about the referendum that took place in Chile in the 1980's when Pinochet hoped to regain power.

Members have also attended two regional meetings in Malvern - a talk on the use of drones in military conflict, and a debate on the arms trade treaty. And, at a meeting in Leamington Spa, representatives of our Group heard a panel of speakers tell of the plight of refugee and asylum seekers in the West Midlands. The lack of accurate information about asylum seekers is an issue being pursued by West Midlands Amnesty Groups which we actively supported this last year.

The Group sent a representative to the national AGM, and we also supported the setting up of a letter writing group of Amnesty supporters in Chipping Campden.

Publicity and the Press

Publicising Amnesty's work and events to the local community involves writing reports for the "Club News" section of the Stratford Herald, and maintaining the Group website, Facebook page, and a twitter account. These outlets provide everyone living in the Stratford area with information about Group events and current human rights concerns, and we appreciate the work of our Press, and Publicity, Officers who have undertaken this work with enthusiasm and care.

Thanks

In conclusion, we have once again had a busy and productive year. I would like to thank all members of the committee who give their time voluntarily to take on the challenge of working for Amnesty. I would also like to thank all of you who support Stratford Amnesty in many and varied ways. We share a commitment to a world where freedom of expression and freedom from torture are valued.

There is still much work to be done but doing it together provides strength and gives hope.

I'll end with a quote by Peter Benenson, the founder of Amnesty:

“Only when the last prisoner of conscience has been freed, when the last torture chamber has been closed, when the United Nations Declaration of Human Rights is a reality for the world's people, will our work be done”.