

AIUK National Conference and AGM

13-15 April 2012 – Manchester University

The theme of this year's National Conference and AGM was "The Bulletproof Conference", reflecting the strong focus on the Control Arms campaign as we move towards the final negotiations of an international Arms Trade Treaty in July.

Some highlights of the weekend were:

Keynote Speaker: The speaker originally scheduled was **Maryam Al-Khawaja**, a Bahraini human rights activist. She was unable to attend, as her father – **Abdulhadi Al-Khawaja**, also a prominent human rights activist – is into his third month of a hunger strike in prison in Bahrain and she needed to be with her family. She sent a recorded video message highlighting ongoing human rights abuses in Bahrain, including use of TEAR gas (sold by the US) as a lethal weapon against civilians. The authorities claim to have reformed, and arms sales from other states have resumed. Maryam said, *"The hope that I have is not in policy makers or governments, but in people like you."*

Mounir Atassi, a civil rights activist from Homs but currently living in Scotland, stepped in at very short notice and spoke about the situation in Syria, and in particular about the important role of the Syrian Non-Violence Movement. Non-violent activism and protest is still a huge part of the resistance movement, despite the escalation of violence between the Syrian government forces and the Free Syrian Army. While the regime knows how to deal with arms and violence, it cannot kill an idea.

Mounir urged for continued pressure to be put on the Syrian authorities through measures such as an arms embargo, asset freezes, a UN monitoring mission, international medical and journalistic responses. He maintains that arming the FSA is not the way forward, as it will only cause even more civilian casualties. The flow of weapons into Syria needs to be stopped altogether.

The Opening Ceremony: The Amnesty candle was lit by Emin Milli, a blogger and dissident from Azerbaijan who was imprisoned in 2009 on fabricated charges of hooliganism. Amnesty adopted him as a prisoner of conscience and he was conditionally released in November 2010. He spoke of the fact that freedom of expression is still a luxury in many parts of the world. When he was in prison, receiving letters from Amnesty members was *"like a candle lighting the darkness"* and he stressed the importance of also writing to family members of prisoners to provide much needed support.

He will return to Azerbaijan in September. He urged us to use the Eurovision Song Contest as an opportunity to raise awareness of human rights abuses in the country. At the moment Azerbaijan is of little interest compared to other situations in the world, but he urged us to take action now and not to wait until the situation gets even worse.

Surprise visit from Jenni Williams of WOZA: she was given a standing ovation as she made her way to the stage, and she spoke with inspirational enthusiasm and dynamism, despite being in the process of being tried for "kidnap and robbery" (fabricated charges, of course!) She explained that in 2011 harassment of WOZA activists by the authorities has increased dramatically, as a reaction to the effects of protests and revolutions in other countries. She described the work of WOZA as *"an evolution, not a revolution."*

Panel Discussion: No Arms for Atrocities

- **Nerina Cevra** – Human Rights Lawyer – Survivor Rights Coordinator at Action on Armed Violence. Highlighted that the purpose of the Arms Trade Treaty is to decrease the level of human suffering caused by the unregulated arms trade. It is therefore ultimately a humanitarian treaty
- **Jo Adamson** – UK ambassador to the Conference on Disarmament; member of the government. Involved in the ATT process since 2007. Led the UK delegation in February 2012 at the preparatory committee. Summarised UK policy as being committed to securing a robust and effective ATT, which will set standards for the arms trade and respect and uphold human rights by reducing the number of arms falling into the hands of those who abuse human rights.
- **Oliver Sprague** – AIUK Arms Programme Director. Previously worked with Oxfam on arms proliferation issues, and was involved in investigating the arms transfers that fuelled the Rwandan genocide in 1994. Since then, new and stricter laws have been put in place in the UK, in 2002, 2004 and 2008.

Campaign Action: the conference delegates were bussed into the centre of Manchester for a highly visible and audible photo action to send a message to David Cameron (who has been oddly silent on the issue) that the world needs an Arms Trade Treaty. Amnesty candles and banners were held aloft to the strains of “I’m gonna lay down my sword and shield, down by the riverside....”

Workshops: I attended the workshop entitled “*How can we ensure the UK properly protects those fleeing conflict and persecution?*” led by Mike Kaye, Advocacy Manager for Still Human Still Here. He highlighted the need to change public perceptions of asylum seekers and the asylum situation in the UK. The most effective way to do this is at the level of the local community, through actions and events that allow asylum seekers to play a role in the community, and help others to see asylum seekers as fellow human beings. A possible focus for one of our upcoming group meetings...?