



Amnesty International

INTRODUCING URGENT ACTIONS

WRITING APPEALS CAN SAVE LIVES

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The Urgent Action Network

The Urgent Action Network of Amnesty International consists of 165,000 people around the world who are outraged by injustice and prepared to act swiftly at critical moments to stop it.

For 40 years, this network has protected people from torture and ill-treatment, obtained the release of people who were wrongly – and sometimes secretly – detained, and secured access to medical treatment or legal counsel for prisoners. Sometimes it has even saved lives.

Urgent Action is based on a simple idea: when someone is in immediate danger of serious abuse, the government responsible for perpetrating or failing to prevent that abuse will receive thousands of faxes, telegrams, emails and airletters from every part of the globe. Those messages tell the authorities that the world is watching, and create pressure to stop the abuse.

The Urgent Action programme started out as a response to torture. In December 1973, Amnesty International organised the Conference for the Abolition of Torture in Paris. One of the many recommendations from that conference was to set up a programme to protect individuals in imminent danger of torture: this was established as the Urgent Action Network in 1973. In its first year, it issued 11 new cases.

Nowadays, the network tackles about 400 new cases and up to 300 updates each year, addressing not only torture but also death threats, the death penalty, 'enforced disappearance', forced repatriation, extrajudicial execution, secret detention, forced evictions and a range of other human rights violations.

To join the network, all you need is an email address and a little spare time. See page 5 for details.



The first Urgent Action

In the evening of 15 February 1973, armed police arrested Luis Basilio Rossi, Professor of Brazilian History at

Sao Paulo University. At the time, Brazil was ruled by a military government and torture of detainees in the days after arrest was common.

Professor Rossi's wife, Maria José Rossi, later spoke about what happened next. 'We couldn't get out of the house, not even to the street, so I had to write a note to a neighbour without the police seeing.' The note was passed out of the back window to the neighbour's young daughter; then passed to a priest, who passed it to the Bishop of Lins. Eventually it reached Amnesty International's headquarters in London.

After consulting several international organisations for support, Amnesty International issued its first Urgent Action on 19 March 1973, urging members to write immediately to the Brazilian authorities to ask for Professor Rossi's release. It was only after the appeal letters started arriving that Professor Rossi's relatives were able to visit him. Maria José Rossi was told by telegram to report to the military police headquarters in Sao Paulo to 'identify her husband's body'.

But when she arrived, she saw her husband was alive (although he had been tortured) and she was shown a pile of letters from Amnesty

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Urgent Action works because:

- The network is big, it's diverse and it's global. Its 150,000 members are based in more than 80 countries, from Australia to Zimbabwe, Uruguay to Thailand and from Israel to Poland. They come from all walks of life. The average number of appeals generated for an Urgent Action is about 7,000.
- The response is quick. Some appeals arrive within minutes of an Urgent Action case being distributed to activists. Appeals arrive at target destinations up to six weeks after the date of issue.

Of course, Urgent Actions don't succeed every time. And we know that often other organisations besides Amnesty International are working to build pressure on the same cases. But the evidence indicates that Urgent Actions have had a significant positive impact on governments, and have protected people from serious human rights violations.

Across the world, lawyers and activists working for human rights in their own country have asked for our help and told us that Urgent Actions really do make a difference. Most important of all, the people directly affected by human rights violations, including former prisoners and their relatives, have told us how important the Urgent Action appeals were for them.

I started writing Amnesty letters in the early 1980s. Back then, letters had to be written by hand or on a typewriter, so every copy had to be written separately and mistakes meant starting all over again. I've written letters for over 300 Urgent Actions, but I've only received two or three replies. Yet one student, who had maybe only attended my Youth Urgent Action group twice, did receive a reply to one of her letters!

It has never really mattered to me that I haven't received replies; what is important is to know that it works.

When I hear something about Amnesty on the news I always think 'I'm part of that!'

AVRIL DAWSON, UA NETWORK MEMBER, SUFFOLK

▶ supporters around the world. The police director told her: 'Your husband must be more important than we thought, because we've got all these letters from all over the world.'

Professor Rossi was eventually released on 24 October 1973. He later wrote: 'We are grateful to an innumerable amount of people, especially in Europe, for their continuing interest in our situation faced with violence that has been let loose on us. In my own name, in the name of my wife, of our children and of other Brazilians in similar situations we would like to thank all the proofs of humanity and kindness that have comforted and helped us.'

More than 20 years later, Maria José Rossi told a meeting of Amnesty Urgent Action coordinators in Brazil: 'In my opinion, the intervention of Amnesty International was fundamental in saving Luis from further torture and worse. I got the impression from the DOPS [military police] director that he and the authorities were feeling under great pressure from Amnesty International.'

How it works

Amnesty International receives information about people in imminent danger from a variety of sources. It could be a trade union in Guatemala sending an email message that some of its members have been abducted; a lawyer in Nigeria phoning to say that a student is being held incommunicado, without charge or trial; the husband of a prisoner of conscience in Syria writing to say that his wife is critically ill in prison. Then there are newspapers and radio broadcasts; political exiles and refugees with news about families and friends in their home country; and a vast network of Amnesty contacts and activists throughout the world.

All the information received is checked by researchers at Amnesty's international headquarters – the International Secretariat – particularly when it comes from sources previously unknown to the organisation. But much of the information comes from sources we already know to be credible and reliable.

Sometimes, if a person's life is in danger or they are at risk of torture, there is no time to double-check information received before issuing an appeal. At that point the researchers have to make a judgement, based on their knowledge of the country concerned and an assessment of the risks. Once the information has been checked and if the researchers believe an immediate mass response could have an impact, they formulate an Urgent Action (UA) casesheet. This gives details of the people in danger with some background information, and outlines the points to make in an appeal. It also lists addresses of the relevant authorities to write to in the country concerned, and organisations to whom copies of the appeal should be sent, including the relevant diplomatic representatives in the UK.

Amnesty International UK receives Urgent Action casesheets daily from the International Secretariat. These are emailed to UA Network members, who then write and send appeals by fax, email or airmail letter. Each casesheet is sent to about 500 network members, rather than to the entire network, so that each member receives a limited number of appeals over the year.

Abuse by perpetrator

Information – from various sources

International Secretariat – checks information and formulates casesheet, then sends it out to sections across the world

AI UK – distributes casesheets

UA Network members – take action

Perpetrators/government targets – flooded with appeal letters

Abuse stops



A definite effect

Rehab Abdel Bagi Mohamed Ali, a Sudanese X-ray technician, was arrested on her way home to Khartoum after a holiday in

Eritrea. Fearing she might be tortured or 'forcibly disappeared', Amnesty International issued an Urgent Action on her behalf.

Later, she told Amnesty: 'I was beaten and verbally abused in detention. After a few days, the guards asked me, "Do you know that your name is all over the Internet?" After that, I was treated better by the guards before being released. The appeals sent by Amnesty members definitely had an effect on my case.'



My detention conditions changed

Rebiya Kadeer, a Uighur activist and businesswoman, spent six years in prison in China, after

being convicted of 'providing secret information to foreigners' for sending newspapers to her husband in the USA. Since her release in March 2005, she has lived in exile in the USA. She continues to campaign for the rights of Uighurs in China.

Shortly after her release from prison, she said: 'I don't believe that I would be alive today without the support of Amnesty International... Thanks to the many thousands of letters written by Amnesty members, my detention conditions changed, I could see my children once a month and I received medical treatment. The support of Amnesty International gave me back my inner strength.'

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The majority of network members take action within 72 hours of receiving the casesheet.

The Urgent Actions are also sent to Amnesty activists outside the UA Network: local groups, country coordinators (volunteers with specialist knowledge who coordinate Amnesty International UK campaigning on particular countries) and specialist networks focusing on women's, children's, trade unions', and lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender (LGBT) rights.

All the Urgent Action cases are raised with the UK Foreign and Commonwealth Office, which passes them on to the relevant Desk Officer and the British embassy in the country concerned. Amnesty International UK might also issue a press release on a UA case, or send the information to relevant organisations or individuals such as the Law Society, the Trades Union Congress or Members of Parliament. This encourages action from as many sources as possible to build up the pressure to end or avert human rights violations.

When I started volunteering at Amnesty I read the Urgent Actions (at that time they were pinned up on a board) and I felt an immediate and overwhelming responsibility to do whatever I could. Perhaps that's because I have been in prison myself.

I've always been intrigued by the power of the letter and how a hand-written letter can make someone think. I do get quite a few interesting responses – one of the most memorable ones was from a Bosnian commander who wrote back and criticised me in very strong language for daring to question what he was doing. Of course I wrote back immediately.

I never did get an answer.

JOHN SMITH, UA NETWORK MEMBER, LONDON



A letter makes all the difference

Krishna Pahadi, founding chairman of the Human Rights and Peace Society in Nepal, was

arrested at the organisation's office in Kathmandu in February 2005. He was detained for five months. On his release, an official handed him a box of more than 200 letters and postcards sent by UA Network members and Amnesty supporters, and told him that hundreds more had been received. Krishna Pahadi is sure the letters helped secure his release.

He said: 'I want to give special thanks to everyone at Amnesty International. I wrote many letters for prisoners of conscience [in the past], but now I realise how important it is.'

How you can be part of the action

All you need to join the Urgent Action Network is an email address. Just let the Individuals at Risk Programme know you would like to join (contact details below). When you join the network, Amnesty International UK will:

- send you a number (specified by you) of Urgent Action casesheets each month;
- send you any updates on each Urgent Action you receive if and when we have new information;
- send you a newsletter at least twice a year.

You can ask to receive as many UA cases, or as few, as you want. In addition to this number, you will receive all subsequent updates issued on any UA case that you have received. Some have no updates, others can have many. The number of Urgent Actions you sign up for will therefore be an estimate. If you change your mind about the number of cases you can handle, just tell the Individuals at Risk Programme (details below).

You are expected to:

- send an appeal by fax, telegram, email or airmail letter as quickly as possible, and before the deadline specified in the Urgent Action, to at least one of the target addresses, with a copy to the relevant embassy or high commission in the UK;
- if possible, send a copy of your appeal to at least one of the addresses listed in the 'Copies to' section;
- send AIUK a copy of any reply to your appeal.

Help and information

For help with writing appeals, see Part 2 of this guide.

For more information about Urgent Action, see *Urgent Action: FAQs* www.amnesty.org.uk/urgent; if you don't find what you are looking for, contact the Individuals at Risk Programme (details below).

For more information about human rights in specific countries, go to www.amnesty.org

For more information about Amnesty International UK, go to www.amnesty.org.uk

Individuals at Risk Programme

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T 020 7033 1572

E iar@amnesty.org.uk



These letters work

Anwar Ibrahim, former Deputy Prime Minister of Malaysia, visited Amnesty's International Secretariat in March

2005 to talk about his six years as a prisoner of conscience. His message to appeal writers was: 'Write more.'

Anwar Ibrahim was arrested in 1998 after leading demonstrations calling for political reform. He spent six years in prison on politically motivated charges before being released in 2004. His conviction was ultimately overturned.

He told Amnesty International that he first heard about the appeals on his behalf sent by the UA Network from his wife and children. They were not allowed to bring any notes or writing materials on their monthly visits, but each memorised different sections of the UA casesheet.

He said: 'Write more and you'll affect them more. From my experience in government and in prison I can tell you that these letters work.'

Other ways to get involved

Urgent Action Network pledge scheme

If you don't have time to write appeals yourself, Amnesty International UK can send fax or telegram appeals to officials in your name. The pledge scheme is free to join.

To take part, you need to:

- be willing to have appeals written on your behalf
- have an email address so that we can let you know when we have sent an appeal on your behalf and send you a copy of the casesheet so that if you receive an official reply, you will know what it relates to
- provide us with your name and address to use in the appeals.

If you don't have an email address or are unable to have appeals sent in your name, you can still support the scheme financially.

Each telegram we send arrives within hours and, unlike an email, is guaranteed to reach the government official. But the scheme costs a lot to run – a telegram can cost up to £30 – so donations are welcome. We send over a thousand telegrams a year, thanks to the generous support of UA pledge scheme donors. For more information on the Pledge Scheme and how it works please contact the Individuals at Risk Programme; to make a donation or join Amnesty please contact the Support Care team on 020 7033 1777 or email sct@amnesty.org.uk

Join a local Amnesty group

There are 270 local Amnesty groups across the UK so there's bound to be one near you. By joining one of them you can help to:

- raise awareness about human rights in your area
- raise funds for Amnesty
- get Amnesty into your local press and radio
- lobby your MP and MEPs
- write letters to prisoners of conscience and other people whose rights are being abused, and to those responsible for their detention or abuse
- support Amnesty International's campaigns.

Find/join a local group www.amnesty.org.uk/groups

To find out what it's like to be a member of a local group, read the blog www.amnesty.org.uk/groups

Find out about student and youth groups www.amnesty.org.uk/students

Join Amnesty and receive *Amnesty* magazine which includes letter-writing actions www.amnesty.org.uk/join

To join one of our specialist Networks www.amnesty.org.uk/networks

I opt to write two UAs a month ... I still write longhand, except when an email address is given, as I understand some recipients take more notice of this format. But I always print the relevant details in large capitals, to draw the attention of the person who first opens the letters.

PAM THICKETT, UA NETWORK MEMBER, EXETER

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The reason I am still alive today

Yolanda Becerra is head of the Popular Women's Organisation (OPF) in Colombia, an organisation that

campaigns for women's rights. Because of her work, she has received death threats from paramilitary groups, and members of her family have been harassed and threatened. In 2007 she was attacked by armed men in her home. Amnesty International issued an Urgent Action calling on the Colombian authorities to protect her.

Two years later, she told Amnesty staff in Canada: 'The appeals that you send to the government tell them that the international community is watching out for human rights defenders. The messages that justice-loving people around the world have sent on my behalf in the past are the reason I am still alive today. The Colombian government pays a lot of attention to what people in other countries have to say.'



A sentence reduced

In 2009 Travis Bishop, a sergeant in the US army, was sentenced to one year's imprisonment for refusing to serve

in Afghanistan because of his religious beliefs. Amnesty International issued an Urgent Action appeal on his behalf and the authorities at the military base where he was imprisoned received hundreds of letters appealing for his release. Travis Bishop's lawyer included the letters in a clemency petition. Soon after, the one-year sentence was reduced by three months.

The lawyer commented: 'I think the letters may have made the difference. It is extremely rare to get this much time reduced from a sentence.'