



MANCHESTER AMNESTY GROUP NEWSLETTER

July 2015

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Acoustic Amnesty – Thursday 16th July!

The next Acoustic Amnesty fundraiser will again be at the beautiful Sacred Trinity church on Thursday July 16th 2015. This time the acts are all female and we are fundraising for Manchester Women's Aid as well as Manchester Amnesty.

The gig will be seated and totally silent for performances with the (well stocked!) bar in a separate room. We are returning to our roots and there will be no sound system whatsoever - totally acoustic using the natural acoustics of the venue. The acts are:

- Circle of songwriters (as featured on John Mackie's show on FAB radio international) – Little Sparrow, Tracey Browne, Raevannan Husbandes & Becca Williams. They will all be on stage together and will perform solo, duets and as an acoustic supergroup!
- Metre of performance poets – Louise Fazackerley & Rose Condo. Performing brilliantly solo.

Doors will open at 7pm and the show starts at 7.30pm prompt. Free on-street car parking is available and the venue is a stone's throw from Deansgate/Market Street in Manchester city centre.

Tickets are only £8 in advance - <http://www.wegottickets.com/event/316058>



Message from Dr Tun Aung

Burmese Prisoner of Conscience Dr Tun Aung was released earlier this year. We had worked on his case since 2013. AI have recently received this message from him:

'Greetings to all of Amnesty International, including its executives, members and supporters. I am overwhelmed by all the support and activities done by Amnesty to secure my release. I am also very grateful for Amnesty's continuing support and assistance.'

I have been following Amnesty's work for decades. I first came to know about it for its fight on the release of political prisoners of Cuba. In those days, it was almost impossible to accomplish such feats.

When I was arbitrarily arrested and sentenced, Amnesty was the first organization I thought of and I hoped in some way it will work for my release. When I first met the UN Special Rapporteur for Human Rights situation in Myanmar, Mr. Tomás Ojea Quintana, I mentioned Amnesty to him.

Later, in Sittwe and in Insein central prisons, I started receiving some letters from Amnesty International members. It was the first flicker of light in my dark days. I truly believed Amnesty will do all it can for my release. Only after my release, I was amazed to know the magnitude of Amnesty's work for my release.

I felt privileged to be part of the global letter-writing campaign in 2013-2014. All those activities are beyond my wildest imagination. The extent of the campaign and hundreds of personal letters written to me and my family made me very emotional and humbled. I owe so much to those who have bestowed such unbelievable care and support towards me and my family. I sincerely support your continuing efforts in freeing other prisoners of conscience and wrongfully imprisoned individuals across the world.

God bless all who work to relieve the suffering of the downtrodden and bless those who are fighting for justice in this world'.

Jean has sent him a personal message on behalf of the group in response.

Campaigns

Stop Torture

It was a good turnout for our walk in aid of the Stop Torture campaign on Sunday 7 June. More than 35 people gathered under the tiled map in Victoria station to join us on a walk, led by Steve Roman, around the Manchester Peace & Social Justice trail. As well as learning about the significance of key sites in our city, we raised £200 for the campaign and signed and delivered more than 40 appeal cards calling on governments to deliver justice to torture survivors in Morocco, Mexico, Uzbekistan and the Philippines.



Save the Human Rights Act

The Human Rights Act protects the fundamental rights we all have as human beings, and allows us to challenge authorities if they violate them. You might not have used it, but it's there if you need it. It is now under threat. Sign the petition NOW:

<http://savetheact.uk/#signup-form>

We have a subgroup looking at how we can campaign on this in the coming months, if you are interested contact anne.walker9@ntlworld.com.

We have been contacted by Human Rights Action, a recently formed local campaign group specifically focused on preventing the proposed changes to the Human Rights Act. They meet every second and fourth Monday of the month and are based in Manchester. They have a wide range of strategies which include increasing public awareness through events and social media campaigns, as well as organising a lobbying strategy aimed at local MPs across the country. They would like to invite anyone interested to their meeting, the next being Monday 13th July at 6:30pm at the Greenfish centre, 46-60 Oldham Street M4 1LE. Contact them at humanrightsactionmr@gmail.com or follow on facebook "Human Rights Action" and twitter, @SOHRAmcr

South America

Two cases have been assigned to the South American subgroup, which will form a focus of the future work of the group.



The first case concerns the **Yakye Axa and Sawhoyamaxa Indigenous Communities** in Paraguay. This community currently lives alongside a main highway in central Paraguay, because the land which they had inhabited for generations is now in hands of private owners. They are now unable to hunt, fish, gather honey, or do other traditional activities which are vital to their traditional way of life and have to rely now on food aid from state agencies and private institutions. Furthermore, effective healthcare is lacking, which led to many preventable deaths. In 2012 the Paraguayan authorities and a land owner reached an agreement that would allow the Yakye Axa to occupy land which is not exactly the land the community was claiming as their ancestral lands, but is located within the ancestral lands of the Enxet ethnic group, of which the community is a part. However the community are still waiting for the title of the land to be officially given to them. This might take some time as the State has to compensate the landowner and funds have to be found for this.

The second case concerns **Daniel Quintero**, from Venezuela

Daniel was a 21-year-old student when he participated in a demonstration against the government on 21 February 2014 in Maracaibo, Zulia State. Daniel Quintero told Amnesty he was tortured at three different locations after being detained on his way home by members of the Bolivarian National Guard. In March the Public Prosecutors office informed Amnesty that it had requested that the case for his complaints be closed. This would mean the end of the investigation into torture and ill-treatment suffered by Daniel, and that those responsible would not be brought to justice.



There will be letters for us to sign at the next meeting. If you are interested in this region and want to get involved with Henrike, email her at henrikegreuel@gmx.de.

Women's Rights

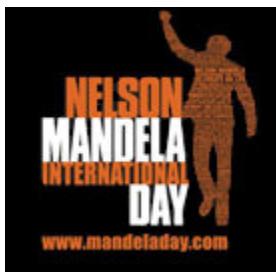
After the workshop on the My Body My Rights campaign at our last meeting, Natalie is keen to rejuvenate the subgroup to help plan our activities. This campaign covers sexual and reproductive rights e.g. access to abortion for rape victims, access to maternal medical care – see more at <http://www.amnesty.org.uk/issues/Sexual-and-reproductive-rights>.

If you are interested in this area of work, email Natalie: doddnatalie@gmail.com.

Southern Africa

We are planning a public stall on 18th July to mark International Mandela Day, a commemoration of Mandela's birthday. We will be on the steps of the Friend's Meeting House in the centre of town and hope to have a letter specifically relating to a case in South Africa for passers by to sign and AI info.

If you are able to help, let coordinator Simona know: simona.mattanza@hotmail.com



Individuals at Risk

We hold regular informal letter writing sessions at the Eighth Day Café every two months, usually the last Saturday in the month. The next one is planned for July 25th – come along and be inspired to put pen to paper on behalf of current Amnesty cases.

Next Letter Writing Session

Saturday 25th July 2-4pm

The Eighth Day Café, Oxford Road
Case sheets, pen and paper provided.
Buy your own cakes!
All Welcome.

Refugee Rights.

The new AIUK initiative, the Asylum Justice Project, is just getting off the ground and has just issued a first newsletter. It should be attached with this newsletter!

Also, note the date for our session at Manchester Literature Festival with Bidisha, on her outreach work with asylum seekers, refugees and undocumented people in London, and Gulwali Passarlay, on his journey as an unaccompanied teenager from Afghanistan to Lancashire.

Asylum and Exile

Saturday 17th October, 2pm
Cross Street Chapel
Tickets £7/£5 concessions
Booking (*not yet open*) on 0843 208 0500 or Manchesterliteraturefestival.co.uk

Burma (Myanmar)

Here are a few updates from our coordinator, Jean:

Election

The Burmese parliament has voted a resounding “No” against the motion to remove a clause in the constitution which states that anyone who has a spouse or close relative citizen who is a citizen of another country would not be allowed to stand for election as President” This means Aung Suu Shi Kyi cannot consider standing for election as her husband was a British citizen and her 2 sons carry British passports.

Media

Caught between state censorship and self-censorship, this is the situation which journalists face in Myanmar at the moment. In 2011 the law on pre-publication censorship was lifted, several imprisoned journalists were released, more space given for them to exercise a freedom of expression as they carried out their work. This resulted in the development of a vibrant and diverse media. However, during 2014, and even more rigorously in 2015 journalists have been working under the restriction of a level of self-censorship if they wanted to continue working, and remain free. 11 media workers are in prison, having been tried and convicted under the Peaceful Protest and Assembly Law which forbids holding or supporting a peaceful protest without permission from the authorities.

With the country approaching an election in November, this is the time when Myanmar needs a press able to comment freely on those in authority. However, it appears that Myanmar's authorities are intensifying restrictions on media as the country uses threats, harassment and imprisonment to stifle independent journalists and outlets. Amnesty recently issued a briefing document: '*Caught between state censorship and self-censorship: prosecution and intimidation of media workers in Myanmar*' at: <https://www.amnesty.org/en/documents/asa16/1743/2015/en/>

Religious conflict

Burma is traditionally a Buddhist country. The majority of the population are Buddhist, and Buddhist monks are held in high esteem with an interdependent relationship between authority and Buddhism. Most of Burma's neighbouring countries were also Buddhist, but over the last few centuries her closest neighbours have become Muslim, and Islam regards Buddhism as idolatrous. Today there is great fear among the Burma's Buddhist majority that they too will be swept away by the rising tide of Islam, this fear is great among the Buddhist monks.

In Rakhine state in the N.E. of the country there is a large population of Muslims, known as the Rohingya. They were originally brought into the country from Bangladesh, when Britain first took over Burma as a colony. They were not given citizenship then, and have been refused citizenship ever since, and have always been treated as second class citizens.

This explosive situation has been exacerbated recently by Pakistan's hard line Taliban faction, who have called on the oppressed Rohingya to “take up the sword and kill in the path of God”.

An additional factor is that opinions in some parts of the world are blaming Burma for the crisis of the thousands of Rohingya and Bangladeshis left stranded and slowly dying on traffickers' boats in the Andaman Sea. In protest, last month, monks and their supporters marched through Rangoon, denouncing the

blaming of Burma. They were not denying that the boat people needed help, but claiming that Burma was being unfairly blamed for the crisis - unfairly because the boat people couldn't be Burmese, since they were dark-skinned, Muslim Bengalis, in spite of the fact that the majority of the boat people have lived in Burma for generations. It appears that the Burmese government supports this Buddhist protest movement - usually protesting in Burma is risky, but on this occasion permission was readily given, streets were cleared of traffic and no policemen were on hand. In addition, the charismatic monk U Pinnyasiha, who denounces his colleague's anti-Muslim rhetoric, has been barred from preaching by the government council which is in charge of regulating monks. He ignores the ban. He continues to preach that "the way of Buddhism is saving people, helping people, giving loving kindness to all people"

More sophisticated Burmese Buddhists do not accept the rhetoric that stirs up the fear of extinction for Buddhism in Burma, but that fear is powerful, and those who preach appear to have the "silent" support of the government, and the military junta. This is an election year in Burma, Aung San Suu Kyi's party has a great deal of support. But the Burmese public have been fed for years with anti-Muslim prejudice, and have accepted it, fear that Buddhism will be extinct in the foreseeable future is great. The umbrella organization "The Organisation for the Protection of Race and Religion" known as Ma Ba Tha warned recently that if any political party "didn't support Buddhism" they would urge voters to boycott it in the election.

They claim to have members in more than half Burma's cities and could quickly mobilize a campaign against any party that was insufficiently supportive of Buddhism. This could be a great obstacle to the success of Aung San Suu Kyi's party at the end of the year.

We hope that U Pinnyasiha has the last word : "If people continue to practice three things – morality, wisdom, and intellect – the dharma, the wisdom of Buddhism will not decline. If people don't practice them, it will disappear from the world."

Lotus Action

In June, AI Sections in the Asia Pacific started the 'Lotus Flower' action in support of the refugee and migrant at sea crisis in South East Asia. The United Nations believe that there are still at least 1,500 of them still at sea.

Lotus flowers are the symbol of compassion. The plan of the Lotus flower action is to encourage members to make and hold the origami lotus flowers and take photos of themselves. AI will then put together all the photos and reach out to the key governments to urge them to continue search and rescue mission and to provide all the humanitarian assistance needed.

Children's Human Rights

No actions this month

Group News

Didsbury Festival

In June we had a stall at the marvellous and very busy Didsbury Festival. Despite the morning rain, we made £61 on the 'Egg Game' and gathered 243 signatures for our petition to save the Human Rights Act. Thanks to all who helped!

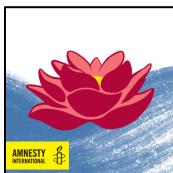


Pride Parade

We will be taking part in the Manchester Pride Parade this again year. We had hoped to have the Manchester Samba Band walking with us but, unfortunately, we have just heard that this won't be happening this year.

Being in the parade is a marvellous way to get our message seen by thousands of people and is real fun as well – so make sure that you are around on Saturday 29th August (the bank holiday weekend). Bring along your friends and family as well! Volunteers names to Laura please: laura.barsby@yahoo.co.uk.

Also, do you have one of these Amnesty black T-shirts with the white logo on the front? We need as many as possible so that all can wear one in the parade. Please let me (anne.walker9@ntlworld.com) know if you have one that we can borrow – better still bring it along to the group meeting to add to the pile!



Next Group Meeting

Normally held 2nd Wednesday each month - Cross Street Chapel 7.30pm

8th July – With a special origami action for Burma

Why not join a few of us for a pre-meeting drink/meal just after 6pm, this month we will be at Croma (1-3 Clarence St, just off Albert Square).