



# Amnesty International Reading Group NEWSLETTER

September / October 2014

## PROTECT THE HUMAN

*We are ordinary people from across the world standing up for humanity and human rights. Our purpose is to protect individuals wherever justice, fairness, freedom and truth are denied.*

### PREVIOUS EVENTS

Our July meeting was devoted to the **Stop Torture** campaign in preparation for WOMAD, (see below for a report on that highly successful event), and in August we had a letter-writing session.

At the September meeting we were given a very informative talk by Maggie Towse, the AIUK country co-ordinator for **Zimbabwe**, about the post-election situation in that country. Scroll down for more details.

### WOMAD Festival 2014 Stop Torture Campaign



The Reading group with volunteers from across the UK once again brought Amnesty to Womad, and it was a huge success. The weather was great, the music, dancing and food were excellent, and festival goers were very willing to take part in the Stop Torture campaign action. As well as signing over 1000 postcards seeking justice for torture victims, Womadlers had lots of fun colouring in over 300 little mini-me figures to stick on big placards declaring: *We're Standing Together to Stop Torture*. £447 was raised in donations and 6 new members joined Amnesty at the stall.

With more helpers we could do even better, so come and be part of Team Amnesty at Womad next year - Charlton Park, 24 - 26th July 2015. Contact Sue Bingham - [s.bingham748@btinternet.com](mailto:s.bingham748@btinternet.com)

## Reading PRIDE 30 August

A big thank you to the small but dedicated team of volunteers that covered Reading Pride this year – Helen, Iona, Michael, Simon and Anne. Once again we had good weather and a great time at what is becoming one of our favourite events of the year. We got 124 cards signed in support of Ihar Tsikhanyuk, a Belarusian drag performer who was arrested, beaten and threatened after trying to set up an LGBTI NGO. Another 10 cards were signed for a Bahraini prisoner of conscience and a few more signatures were added to our petition to free Filep Karma.



## FORTHCOMING EVENTS



**Weds 1<sup>st</sup> October** : We invite you to a concert of Classical and Arabic music performed by the talented young Palestinian group the **Galilee Quartet**, pictured above, followed by a Q/A session with Omar Sa'ad, a member of the quartet who is a conscientious objector to Israeli military service, (see <http://www.amnesty.org.uk/blogs/country-specialists/omar-saad-and-conscientious-objectors-imprisoned-israel-refusing-bear-arms> for more details).  
7.30 pm at St Nicolas Church, Sutcliffe Avenue, Earley, Reading RG6 7JN. Free admission - donations welcome.

**Thurs 9<sup>th</sup> October:** next group meeting with **Benny Wenda**, an exiled leader of the movement for independence for **West Papua** and by now an old friend of the Reading group, will bring us up to date with



*Benny speaking in the Houses of Parliament, October 2008.*



*Filep Karma in hospital*

developments in his homeland and tell us the latest news about our adopted Prisoner of Conscience **Filep Karma**

**NB:** At the same meeting we will also be discussing how to fill the currently vacant roles of Group Treasurer and Media Officer.

Please make a special effort to attend! 8pm, RISC.

**Thurs 30<sup>th</sup> October:** We will be screening **Afghan Star** at RISC, starting at 8pm. After 30 years of war and Taliban rule, Pop Idol has come to Afghanistan. This film follows four contestants who risk all to become the nation's favourite singer. The screening will be followed by a discussion with the AIUK country coordinator for Afghanistan. Free admission - donations welcome.

**Sat 7 March 2015: Barn Dance** at the Warehouse, Cumberland Road, Reading – live music provided by The Scampering Rogues. Further details nearer the time, but do save the date - it will be a great evening!

## **NEWS**

### **Zimbabwe**

Maggie entitled her talk: **Zimbabwe – where now?** - a question easier to ask than to answer, unfortunately, as the situation in that country is so grim. Although we can celebrate the fact that there was no repetition last year of the dreadful violence that marred the 2008 elections, there remains a big question mark over the fairness of the poll, in which Robert Mugabe won a landslide majority. As a result of his re-election, he now enjoys greatly enhanced status within Africa and has been elected Vice-Chair of SADC, the Southern Africa Development Community, and Vice-President of the African Union. Moreover, many Western nations have dropped most of their sanctions against Zimbabwe.

Internally, however, things are dire. While ZANU-PF and the MDC are each busy tearing themselves apart in bitter internal conflicts, there are major corruption scandals rocking the country, power outages for up to 16 hours a day, little foreign investment, firms closing down and many employees not getting paid. 2.2 million people are in need of food aid, the trade union movement has collapsed, there is no cash for the education of

thousands of children and conditions in prisons are so bad that some inmates have starved to death. There has been virtually no progress in enacting the new constitution which, if implemented, would improve the human rights situation in Zimbabwe. The press and media have little freedom, there has been no reform of the police and repressive laws are still in force to curtail people's freedom of expression and assembly. Despite a statement from the Minister of Justice, (one of the strong contenders to succeed Mugabe), saying that he is in favour of abolishing the death penalty, nothing has been done in that direction either.

However, despite all this there is very little information coming out of Zimbabwe at the moment about internal attitudes. Daily life is so difficult that people have to concentrate on mere survival and have little energy left to engage in protest. WOZA, (Women of Zimbabwe Arise) is a human rights organisation which has very close ties with AI; they used to march every month but have only done so twice since the election and have each time met with police wielding batons. These extremely courageous women report that they feel that Zimbabwe has gone back at least ten years in terms of building democracy; most of civil society has lost heart and is licking its wounds.

In these extremely difficult conditions, what is AI doing? Whereas in the run-up to the election Amnesty was campaigning proactively for it to be free, fair and non-violent, now we have had to return mainly to reactive ways of working. However, there is an Amnesty Section in Zimbabwe and an International Secretariat researcher based in Johannesburg is working with them to push the government to abolish the death penalty, enact the new constitution and ratify the Convention against Torture.

At the moment there is little news about Zimbabwe in our media, so we are in danger of not giving it much attention. But Maggie ended her talk with a heartfelt plea from WOZA - ***Don't forget us!***

## **Cuba**

The Ladies in White (Damas de Blanco) continue to suffer arrests and harassment by the security forces every Sunday during their peaceful marches to mass.

This movement was formed by a group of women relatives of 75 prisoners of conscience who were imprisoned in 2003. All have since been released and the Ladies in White now campaign for the release of other political prisoners and to lift restrictions on fundamental freedoms in Cuba.



Image: © AP Photo/Javier Galeano

Please write a letter (scroll down for a model) urging the Cuban authorities to take all necessary measures to put an end to all acts of harassment and intimidation against the Ladies in White and other activists in Cuba, and ensure they can all exercise their peaceful human rights activities free from fear and reprisals:

More news - the EU and Cuba have just had a second round of talks with the aim of establishing a new bilateral agreement. Even though human rights are supposed to be at the heart of the talks, they were not

included in this round which is concentrating on trade. Sue Bingham, the AIUK Country Co-ordinator for Cuba, is investigating how we can bring pressure to bear on the EU delegation to ensure that they are included in the next round in December.

### **Death Penalty - Japan**

We continue to campaign on behalf of **Hakamada Iwao**, a Japanese man who holds the unenviable record of having spent the longest recorded time on death row – 46 years! He was found guilty in 1968 of having set fire to a factory, resulting in the death of a family of four, including Hakamada's boss. Amnesty has worked vigorously to save him from execution, pointing out the many troubling elements in his trial and conviction:-

- No physical evidence connected him to the crime
- Police interrogated him for 12 hours a day for 20 days until he agreed to sign a confession of guilt
- No lawyer was present when Hakamada signed his confession
- Hakamada later retracted his confession
- He says that police beat and threatened him into confessing
- His confession was the sole basis of Hakamada's death sentence
- Of 45 documents presented by the prosecution as signed confessions by Hakamada, only one was accepted by the judges as being legitimately signed by Hakamada in free will; the other 44 were dismissed.

Earlier this year we were thrilled to learn that the frail 78 year-old had been released pending a retrial. His mental and physical health have been shattered by the decades he spent in solitary confinement, never knowing if he was living his last day, since in Japan those sentenced to death may have only a few minutes' warning of when the execution is to be carried out. However, now, we hoped, there was a chance for him to obtain a fair trial for the 1996 crime and end his days in dignity. So it was dismaying to hear that the prosecution is appealing against the retrial; given his age and his poor health, the lengthy appeal process could deny him from reaching a retrial and receiving the justice he deserves.

Go to <http://www.amnesty.org.uk/issues/Death-penalty> to sign the on-line petition urging the prosecution to drop their appeal.



*Hakamada pictured earlier this year holding one of the many photo actions taken by Amnesty groups around the world on his behalf.*

### **ACTIONS**

Please sign the petition for Hakamada and scroll down for a model letter to **Cuba** and also one to **Mexico**, as part of the **Stop Torture** campaign.

**Don't forget to keep up to date with our group's news, frequently updated with photos and updates:**

- Website = <http://www2.amnesty.org.uk/groups/reading>
- Facebook page –search for Reading Amnesty International – Town Group = <http://www.facebook.com/groups/187525074719402>
- twitter = @amnestyreading
- Our prisoner of conscience has a website where you can keep up-to-date with latest developments - [www.freefilekarma.org](http://www.freefilekarma.org)
- And a facebook page - <https://www.facebook.com/groups/253959534694499/>

**MEETINGS:** second Thursday of each month at 8pm. All are welcome. **All upstairs at RISC, 35-39 London Street, Reading, RG1 4PS**

**ALSO:** We raise funds for Amnesty International, and can provide speakers about Amnesty and human rights issues for local organisations: contact our secretary Anne McFarlane, [ammcf@o2.co.uk](mailto:ammcf@o2.co.uk).  
Amnesty Reading Newsletter editor Helen Ball- email: [helenball03@yahoo.co.uk](mailto:helenball03@yahoo.co.uk)

From:

To: Raúl Castro Ruz  
Presidente de la República de Cuba  
La Habana  
Cuba

Date:

Dear President

I am dismayed by the ongoing short-term and arbitrary detention, acts of repudiation and intimidation faced by the Ladies in White, because of their peaceful calls for the release of all political prisoners and for the lifting of restrictions on fundamental civil and political rights in Cuba.

I urge you to

- stop all forms of harassment and intimidation against the Ladies in White and other human rights activists, and publicly recognize the legitimacy and importance of their role in society
- immediately and unconditionally release anyone in Cuba detained solely for the peaceful exercise of the right to freedom of opinion, expression, association or assembly.

Yours sincerely

copies to:

Her Excellency Mrs Esther Gloria Armenteros Cárdenas  
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London WC1 6PA  
Fax: 020 7836 2602 email: [secembajador@uk.embacuba.cu](mailto:secembajador@uk.embacuba.cu)  
web: <http://www.cubadiplomatica.cu>

Lic. Enrique Peña Nieto  
Presidente  
Residencia Oficial de los Pino  
Casa Miguel Alemán  
Col. San Miguel Chapultepec  
CP 11850  
México DF  
Mexico

Dear President

### **Prevalence of torture in Mexico**

I write to express my concern at the widespread and persistent use of torture and other ill-treatment in Mexico, as highlighted in the recent report by Amnesty International. I cite in particular the case of Claudia Medina Tamariz, beaten, sexually assaulted and given electric shocks in a naval base where she had been taken by marines who accused her of being a member of a violent gang. She is still waiting for those responsible for the horrific treatment she received to be brought to account.

Unfortunately her story is only one of many other horrifying cases where impunity has prevailed. By last year, only seven convictions for torture had ever been recorded at federal level and at state level a mere five.

The Amnesty report *Out of control: Torture and other ill-treatment in Mexico* puts forward a number of recommendations that I urge you to consider and implement. The first step would be to make a public acknowledgement of the scale of the problem and to take measures to strengthen the investigation of allegations of torture and other ill-treatment.

To this end I call of you to urge the Federal Attorney General to

- Ensure that medical examinations of torture claims are conducted in line with international standards such as the Istanbul Protocol;
- Ensure that independent medical experts can examine detainees at the earliest opportunity and that their medical legal evaluations are considered as evidence by judges and prosecutors;
- Launch an immediate, independent and thorough investigation into any allegation of torture or ill-treatment.

Yours respectfully