# Amnesty International South East Regional conference on 7th February 2015 at Chichester

# Report

## General

About 60 people travelled to the far South West corner of the region for the regional conference. It was hosted by the Bognor Regis, Chichester and District local group. The group decided to provide drinks and cakes but not lunch. Instead they sited it a church hall complex very near a street with lots of great cafes. The kitchen was small but sufficient for teas and coffees, so the arrangement worked well. It was also near the railway station and car parks. The only disadvantage was that it was upstairs, which a few people found difficult.

We were honoured to have five members of AIUK staff, including three giving workshops and Sam Strudwick with an overview of Amnesty, as discussed below, and Gemma Hoskins and Yvonne Heaton who, as fairly recent recruits, wanted to experience a regional conference. The conference consisted of four sections as below.

## Celia Ouellette from Reprieve

Celia is a Staff Attorney on Reprieve’s Death Penalty Team. She works on Reprieve’s cases of British and EU nationals facing the death penalty in the US. There are about 40 of these people and she looks after about seven of them. Her talk was entitled “Who is a Client on Death Row in the US?” The case she described is of a man she called Tyler, who had an appalling childhood. Celia described her examination of the development of this man from the age of four by comparison using words and pictures with her normal but privileged life. He was badly abused and then rejected by both parents. Since the case is in a pre-trial state she could not go into great detail, but extremely interesting and worrying information came out from the discussion afterwards. The whole process of jury selection appears highly biased to British eyes. To me it was even worse to realise that the jurors have to agree to the possibility to the death penalty, which badly distorts the results. The jurors have to decide whether the accused is a danger to society and whether the aggravating circumstances outweigh the mitigating ones. The complete indifference to the accused by the defending attorneys is terrible. We also discussed cases which partly depend on the question of the guilt of a “non-trigger man”. This occurs when the defendant in a trial did not shoot anyone but was with an accomplice to another who did shoot. In one case the non-trigger was confirmed by three people who survived the shooting. Many people signed up to receive more information about Reprieve.

## Workshops

There were three workshops using the main hall and two smaller rooms:

* Lobbying & general election – Shoomi Chowdhury (AIUK Human Rights Education Officer) & Laura Trevelyan, (AIUK Advocacy Coordinator – Outreach)
* Social Media – Emerson Povey (AIUK Communities Editor)
* Refugees and Asylum Seekers: Rights and Responsibilities – Philip Strudwick (Trainer)

The numbers attending were about one dozen for each of the first two and two dozen for the third. The difference between the sum of these numbers and the total was due to those washing up, those who arrived late and the people running the workshops. There were problems with projectors and the lack of internet connection in the building. There is a general difficulty in that a lot of Amnesty material does rely on the use of computers. It should be possible to run workshops without them but that is probably not possible for one on social media. I should have sorted that aspect out before suggesting that particular workshop.

## Torture in the Philippines

Lesley Burgess, who has recently become the Country Coordinator for the Philippines, gave a wide ranging talk on the Stop Torture Campaign in the Philippines. She gave background information on the history and geography of the country to show how they influenced the present situation. She included the history of Amnesty’s opposition to torture. A worldwide survey of attitudes to torture by Amnesty showed many disturbing facts, such as that in many countries people fear that if they are arrested they will be tortured. Basically the police force in the Philippines is small, badly paid and ill trained. As in other places they find it easier to arrest lots of people for crimes and then try and get them to confess by torturing them. The police are not subject to any form of accountability for their behaviour. They act with impunity. There are many concerns about what happens in the Philippines including: enforced disappearances, abuses by paramilitaries (effectively private armies of the few wealthy families in the country), ethnic conflicts, and death squads in the South. Lesley showed a picture of the “torture wheel” used by the police to determine which form of torture will be used against known drug dealers. In one case torture was recorded on CCTV and later shown on TV. A senior police officer was known to be carrying out some of the torture and yet he is still in his job and is on a national human rights commission. There was an Anti-Torture Act in the 2009 in the Philippines, but no-one has been convicted under it. According to Amnesty there are many ways to prevent torture including: access to relatives and lawyers, monitoring of interrogations, an independent complaints process, protection against reprisals on people who give statements against those being tried, and independent medical services for the accused. There is an Amnesty report on torture in the Philippines called “Above the Law”, which asks for an independent police commission. The researchers interviewed 55 people who had been tortured.

## The state of Amnesty International

Sam Strudwick gave a summary of the present state of Amnesty and a little on the future direction. He started with some of the basic facts. There were about 7 million activists for Amnesty in 2014, including all those who wrote letters or contributed financially. Of those about two million are members. Amnesty has a presence in 216 countries. Internationally there has been a large growth in numbers with the best being an approximate doubling in India. There are now four Hubs carrying out local research and several more are planned.

Sam mentioned some of Amnesty’s recent successes including: a reduction in torture round the world; the My Body My Rights campaign has lead the Moroccan government to change the rape laws; the Crisis and Country Campaign has helped induce Uganda to drop the anti-homosexuality bill; considerable activity in the Central African Republic, in Syria and in Turkey; help for Human Rights Defenders in Afghanistan; assisted in rejecting the charge against Elena Klimova in an anti-gay propaganda trial in Russia; help with securing the release of Hakamada Iwao in Japan from the longest running period on death row in the world; working on the freeing of Meriam Ibrahim from death row in Sudan for refusing to give up her Christian faith; ensuring that there is new training for those escorting people being deported from UK after cases of deaths in custody; and the case of Raif Badawi who has not been flogged for the last three weeks after being sentenced to 50 lashes a week for 20 weeks.

The plans for 2015 include more emphasis on fundraising as the membership has declined slightly. The main campaigns will be: Individuals at Risk; defending the Human Rights Act; My Body My Rights; Crises and Tactical Campaigning; Stop Torture. The AIUK development focus will include more on governance, connecting better with people, and more involvement of people. There will be an International Council Meeting for the whole of Amnesty in August. AIUK is now on a sound financial footing until 2018. There will be a relaunch of the International Secretariat website on 28th February.

Philip Strudwick
South East Regional Representative
11th February 2015