



Amnesty International

URGENT ACTIONS Q&A

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How Urgent Action works

How are Urgent Actions researched and distributed?

Amnesty's International Secretariat in London receives information about possible cases from a variety of sources including the families, colleagues, friends and lawyers of those at risk, local human rights groups, prisoners released from detention and even newspaper reports. Once the researchers have verified the facts of the case, they must decide whether Amnesty has the mandate and the resources to take action. If so, and if the situation is pressing enough to require an Urgent Action and Amnesty thinks this might be effective, an appeal is drafted and forwarded to the Urgent Action team who edit it and send it to Urgent Action Coordinators based in national offices (known as sections). This can happen within a few hours of an incident taking place or of a report being received.

How many members are in Amnesty International UK's Urgent Action Network and how large is the Urgent Action Network worldwide?

There are around 10,000 participants in the Urgent Action Network in the UK. Globally, there are approximately 150,000 members in 80 countries.

Writing letters

What sort of letter is most effective?

An effective letter is firm, courteous, brief and focused. It gives an indication of who you are and why you are concerned for this person. It is written on the assumption that the government is open to reason and that the official may not know of the specifics, which pertain to the individual victim for whom you are writing.

Always ask that the official not only improve the human rights situation of the individual(s) involved, but also keep you informed as to the developments in the case. Stress the fact that your concern for human rights is not politically motivated but in line with basic principles of international law.

Remember that you are writing on behalf of a vulnerable individual, so it is important to consider the tone as well as the content of appeals.

It is often best to avoid references to 'democracy' and 'democratic principles', which may seem to be innocent enough but may be viewed by appeal recipients as preaching a Western ideal.

It is best to keep letters to no more than one page in length. When writing to non-English speaking countries, use simple language, straightforward grammar and avoid colloquial expressions which are not easily translated.

Is it more effective to send letters clearly representing myself as an Amnesty member or simply as an interested person without naming Amnesty as my information source?

Either is fine. We encourage letter writers to use their professional or academic affiliations in their correspondence with government officials. Titles or professional letterheads may impress authorities and indicate or suggest that writers are influential. Unless the casesheets give specific instructions to the contrary, you can refer to Amnesty International as your information source. Then again, you may choose to simply state that you have learned about this person's plight and are concerned. If you do refer to Amnesty International it may be useful to include a brief explanation of Amnesty's aims and principles (impartiality and independence from any government, political faction, ideology, economic interest or religious belief).

URGENT ACTION FREQUENTLY ASKED QUESTIONS

Should I write on my company letterhead?

Yes, the more diverse a letter-writing campaign is, the greater its chances of getting the attention and respect of government authorities. We encourage people to express themselves in a variety of ways as long as the message is polite, non-political and legible. Some companies may object to the use of their letterhead for human rights advocacy; others will be pleased to lend support in this way. Unless you are authorised to make such a decision, please ask your line manager before using your company letterhead.

Can I hand-write my letters?

Of course. Handwritten appeals get the attention of authorities: they show the recipient that you are willing to invest considerable time and effort on behalf of an individual of concern to you.

Anecdotal evidence collected over the years by Amnesty International and other organisations suggests that personalised handwritten letters can be as effective, sometimes more so, than emails and template letters. We believe that it is the combination of different types of appeals that makes Urgent Action an effective campaigning tool.

Where can I view sample appeal letters?

In Part 2 of the Urgent Action Guide.

I am often confused by the name and gender of some subjects of Urgent Actions. Should I use the person's full name or shortened form of their name in my letters?

Males are designated with (m) and females with (f) at the top of Urgent Actions. Please use the full name of the detainee each time he or she is mentioned in your letters. This can be a little awkward but it makes the name more familiar to the government official and prevents errors in shortening a name incorrectly.

Can you provide letter-writers with more detailed information about a particular case?

The standard Urgent Action format is limited to two pages so that it can be disseminated around the world quickly and economically, and contains everything you need to know in order to take action. Updates are sometimes issued when substantial developments occur. More detailed thematic or country information is available online at: www.amnesty.org

Can I personalise the salutations by adding the name of the official?

This is not necessary when using 'Your Excellency' but could be useful with 'Dear President', for example 'Dear President Fox'. If you do use the official's name with the salutation, please use his or her surname (in the case of Spanish surnames, use both last names). Many African and Asian names are written with the surname first.

Sending letters

Is there a time-limit on appeals?

Yes, the date is provided at the end of the Urgent Action. Whenever possible, Urgent Action members should respond to a case within the first few days, if not sooner, and certainly by the deadline. You should not respond after the deadline without checking with us first, as facts may have changed and inaccurate letters may be counterproductive. If you cannot respond to an appeal immediately, use your letter to put questions. Questions will not undermine Amnesty's earlier information and yet, if the individual's situation remains unchanged, will create strong pressure for an improvement.

We believe that it is a combination of the immediate high-volume response followed by the continued sustained appeals sent during the full six weeks that makes Urgent Actions an effective tool.

Should I send copies of my appeals to Amnesty International?

No. Because our network is so large, we would be quickly inundated. However, should you feel anxious the first few times you write an appeal letter, feel free to forward a copy to the Individuals at Risk Programme, who will provide feedback.

Are the addresses for appeals listed in priority order?

Yes. The first official is the most important for the specific appeal and the last listed official is the least important. Amnesty really never knows for sure which official may respond to our appeals in a way that will stop the abuse or potential abuse. If you can write to each official listed on the Urgent Action, that's great. If not, pick just one or two officials, knowing that other Urgent Action letter writers will choose to write to the others. Addresses listed in the 'Copies to' section are not listed in any specific order. Just send copies of your letters to as many as you can handle each time.

Why should I send copies of my letters to individuals and organisations listed?

To increase the pressure on the authorities in the country concerned. When you send a copy to the diplomatic representative in the UK, he or she gets a snapshot of how UK residents feel about a particular situation in his or her country and has a responsibility to report this back to the home government.

Also, you can compel officials to take you more seriously simply by informing them of your intention to copy your letter to others. You may do this by simply typing (or writing) 'cc' at the bottom of appeal and listing the names of people or organisations to whom you will be sending copies.

When you send a copy to a solidarity group, you are letting them know of concern abroad for the human rights violations to which their members are subjected. This is immensely encouraging to them and often motivates them to continue their vital work.

Your copies can, in a few cases, be even more effective than your original appeal to government authorities. If the officials, for one reason or another, do not receive or read their mail, the solidarity groups and news media to which we send copies of these 'unread' letters tend to publicise them. This is their way of pressuring the government and ensuring that its officials know about Amnesty members' concerns.

How do I use the addresses listed in the 'Copies to' section of the Urgent Action?

You are not expected to send copies of letters to every address listed, but please choose one or more.

The easiest way to use the 'Copies to' section is to make a photocopy or print a further copy of your letter. From time to time, you might like to write a cover letter directly to the ambassador, for instance, drawing attention to your letter attached and asking him/her to forward your concerns to the home government. There is a sample in Part 2 of the Urgent Action Guide.

URGENT ACTION FREQUENTLY ASKED QUESTIONS

Why don't my faxes go through? Am I doing something wrong? Are the numbers provided incorrect?

Faxing overseas is fraught with problems. There can be many reasons for failure. We would like to think that after the first 100 appeals from around the world, the machine is unplugged to stop the Amnesty deluge!! But there are other reasons too:

- The receiving machine is out of paper. Paper can be expensive in some countries and the machine may not be re-loaded for a while.
- The receiving machine is out of order or is busy (hopefully with incoming Amnesty appeals!)
- The receiving machine is turned off at night, which may be daytime in the UK.
- In some Muslim countries offices may be closed on Thursdays and Fridays.
- The telephone lines into the receiving country may be overloaded. Likewise, the lines into the city or even the particular office may be overloaded.
- There has been a power failure. It could last more than a day.
- Although the International Secretariat staff check the fax numbers carefully, occasionally a typing error produces an incorrect digit.
- If you fail to connect after a handful of attempts, please put your appeal letter in an envelope and post it. It may not be instant but it, too, is effective. Because some members succeed in faxing their letters and others resort to conventional mail, letters arrive over the course of a number of days. This staggered response helps to reinforce the message and to constantly remind the official about the case. Please let us know the fax failed, but bear in mind the reasons for this and don't become too disheartened.

Why can't I email government officials more often? Why don't Urgent Actions provide authorities' email addresses more regularly? What if my email fails?

We know that many people would prefer to send their appeals by email when possible, and we understand that this means activists can take action quickly. We occasionally include the email addresses of government officials in an Urgent Action but only when researchers know that email is a respected and effective form of communication in that particular case or country and that the address is reliable. Amnesty really does not know how different authorities view emails. Authorities may only read the subject line and delete the message. They may simply shut down their email accounts if they are flooded with appeals. Countries with unreliable telecommunication systems may not be able to support any serious and sudden influx of email. Also, governments may be suspicious of those who send appeal letters because the origin of an email can be concealed. They may even suspect that a single person is responsible for a number of emails.

Then, there is the informal tone of email. Some playful email addresses may even be viewed as offensive (for example, 'ilovemycat@...' or 'mancityforever@...'). Moreover, for the time being, emailed appeals tend to come from Western countries, which undermines the idea of an international human rights movement. Finally, email may simply not have the physical weight and presence of a hard copy letter delivered either by fax or conventional mail. Amnesty members have often impressed authorities with their ability to fill offices with bags and bags of mail. If authorities can see and feel the physical weight of international concern, they may be more easily persuaded to take action.

If your email fails, please let us know by email and send your appeal another way – by fax, post or via the embassy in the UK.

URGENT ACTION FREQUENTLY ASKED QUESTIONS

I would like to write to the individuals concerned as well as to the officials, but you never give their addresses. Why not?

There are two reasons:

- The purpose of the Urgent Action Network is to call on governments or opposition groups with control over a territory to stop the torture, executions and other forms of ill treatment occurring within their jurisdictions. Direct solidarity is therefore not our objective. Of course, when they learn of our letter-writing support for their case, it can be heartening.
- Some prisons and detention centres limit or prohibit mail to prisoners, and in some cases prisoners' safety could be put at risk by international mail. We do run a solidarity campaign – the Greetings Card Campaign – beginning in November each year, where we ask people to write to individuals at risk, their families and communities. The cases featured are all subject to risk-assessment to ensure the recipients will not be put at risk if they receive high volumes of correspondence.

Greetings Card Campaign: www.amnesty.org.uk/gcc

Impact of Urgent Actions

What are the positive effects of Urgent Action appeals?

An Urgent Action campaign can produce many benefits. Some of these could be anticipated but others are pleasant surprises, and many testify to the invisible but effective preventive work Urgent Actions accomplish. Here are some of them:

- Providing specific and consistent witness to serious human rights violations, even if there's no direct positive impact
- Letting a government know that its actions are monitored, even if that government does not respond
- Compiling information that can be used later in asylum claims
- Decreasing in number or strength the harassments or death threats against law-abiding citizens
- Giving moral support to a prisoner with an execution date, the family of a person who has 'disappeared', a community whose leader has just been imprisoned
- Providing human rights groups in the targeted country with the courage to continue their vital human rights work; promoting international solidarity
- Working in partnership with local human rights groups to create a flood of appeals through an international Urgent Action on an issue of mutual concern
- Providing long-term protection
- Delayed impact: sometimes prisoners featured in Urgent Actions are not released immediately, but are listed for release when general amnesties are planned
- Shining a spotlight on isolated communities to ensure their residents' safety
- Obtaining media coverage
- Developing new contacts for Amnesty researchers

Why are updates not issued for all Urgent Actions?

Amnesty does not necessarily receive updates on all cases for which we issue Urgent Actions. This may be because we do not hear from the individuals or communities once the immediate danger has passed; further action may not be wanted or appropriate; or it may be difficult to obtain information from an individual's remote location. Updates are issued when there is a significant development in the situation that requires a change of action, or if we need to end action on a case, for example when the danger has passed or where an execution may have gone ahead notwithstanding our efforts.

At Amnesty International UK we do not put all Urgent Actions on our website. If you need information on a specific Urgent Action, visit the International Secretariat website's library, where all public Amnesty documents, including Urgent Actions, are stored online. If you select the Index number at the top of the casesheet and paste it into a search engine, you will be able to locate information about the individual case.

www.amnesty.org

What to do with replies? How often can I expect to receive a reply to my letters of appeal? What should I do when I receive a reply?

It depends on the country you are writing to. Some governments write back to anyone who contacts them as a matter of policy, but many do not respond at all. A reply may come from a government, embassy, opposition group or a support group. Sometimes only one Urgent Action writer appears to have received the reply. At other times, we receive hundreds of identical copies or the contents vary over time as the government acts.

Please send us – by fax, email attachment or post – a copy of each reply you receive. We forward these replies to the relevant Amnesty research staff. This information is important to Amnesty researchers who monitor the reaction of officials to our actions. You may, if you wish, write a short note to an official who writes to you, thanking him or her and asking to be kept informed on developments in that particular case. If the reply is general and does not address the individual you wrote about, you may ask for a more detailed report on that person's condition and restate the concerns originally expressed in your first letter.

URGENT ACTION FREQUENTLY ASKED QUESTIONS

Miscellaneous

Can I receive more or fewer Urgent Actions each month? Can I receive actions just involving people of a specific profession or Urgent Actions from a specific region?

You can tailor the number of Urgent Actions you receive – but you will still receive all updates on each of those cases. Email the Individuals at Risk Programme with your request. The average number is 12 a year, but some people receive many more.

There are a number of specialist networks that provide actions based on identity including children, women, trade unionists, health professionals, journalists, teachers/academics and lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender. Please contact the activism team to find out how you can join.

Regarding specific regions, Urgent Actions are issued based on a pressing need for intervention and so we can't predict when a case will be issued on a country or a subject you are interested in. If you need to find out more about an individual country, go to the International Secretariat website library, where all public documents, including Urgent Actions and country-based information are stored online.

Individuals at Risk Programme: iar@amnesty.org.uk

Specialist networks: www.amnesty.org.uk/networks

Activism Team: activism@amnesty.org.uk

Amnesty International: <http://www.amnesty.org>

Can I publish the Urgent Actions I receive to my personal website or to a group or organisation's website?

Yes, but please make sure you also publish any update to the case, and remove it after the deadline. Urgent Actions have a deadline after which the recommended action may become out of date. Continuing to send letters based on inaccurate information can be counterproductive and may actually put someone at greater risk.

How can I involve my young children in this programme without exposing them to the horrible details of torture and executions?

We produce materials designed for younger activists: Junior Urgent Action for 7-11-year-olds and Youth Urgent Action for 11-18-year-olds. This element of our programme is administered with our Education and Student team. Each is written especially for younger readers and the graphic details of ill treatment are not included. We include educational components in each case: maps, a national flag, country statistics and a photograph (where possible).

Junior Urgent Action: www.amnesty.org.uk/junior

Youth Urgent Action: www.amnesty.org.uk/youth

Education and Student Team: 020 7033 1569 or student@amnesty.org.uk

Further questions

If you have any further questions that have not been answered here or suggestions or comments, please get in touch by telephone, in writing or by email:

Individuals at Risk

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