



Amnesty International

# THE URGENT ACTION GUIDE

## HOW TO SEND URGENT ACTION APPEALS

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### How to use this guide

All you need to know to write an Urgent Action appeal is in the Do's and Don'ts (right) and in the casesheet. So you don't have to read the whole of this guide before setting pen to paper or fingers to keyboard – but do please read this page first.

The rest of the guide is there for reference on specific questions.

The glossary explains some of the legal and human rights terms that you will find in the casesheets.

### The basics

#### Do

1. Act quickly: send your appeal by fax, telegram, email or airmail letter as soon as you can.
2. Follow the instructions on the casesheet carefully.
3. Write in English unless you are sure you can write courteously and accurately in the language of the country concerned.
4. Keep your letter brief, clear and factual.
5. Be polite and write as if the reader is open to reasoned argument.
6. Be firm: make a clear request covering the recommended action points in the casesheet.
7. Use the full name of the individual(s) you are writing about and mention any relevant dates and places (e.g. date of arrest or trial, place of imprisonment), so that the official reading your appeal can identify and act on the case.
8. Always give your name and address: this shows the letter is genuine and personal. You can also say a little about yourself if you want to (e.g. your profession).
9. Send an appeal to at least one of the target addresses, with a copy to the UK embassy of the country concerned – then send appeals and copies to any other addresses given in the casesheet if you can.
10. If you receive a reply, please send it to: Individuals at Risk team, Amnesty International UK, Human Rights Action Centre, 17-25 New Inn Yard, London EC2A 3EA or [iar@amnesty.org.uk](mailto:iar@amnesty.org.uk)

#### Don't

1. Don't discuss politics or ideology: Amnesty International opposes human rights violations, not governments or political systems.
2. Don't send appeals after the deadline stated in the casesheet, without first checking with the Individuals at Risk Programme.

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### The details

#### When to send your appeal

Please take action as soon as possible, preferably within 24 hours of receiving an Urgent Action casesheet. If you cannot do so, check the deadline (normally six weeks, but may depend on a trial or execution date) and send your appeal before the date given.

We believe that it is the combination of the large volume of immediate appeals that arrive in the first few days and the appeals that continue to arrive during the full six-week period that make the Urgent Actions an effective tool.

If you have just missed the deadline or you are unsure, contact the Individuals at Risk Programme (details on page 4).

#### Where to begin

The Urgent Action casesheet is divided into two main sections:

- case information – a summary, a more detailed description, and maybe some background information on the country or the human rights issue concerned
- recommended action – what Amnesty wants the authorities to do, addresses to write to, addresses to send copies to, and the deadline.

Start by reading the case description. Then carefully read the recommended action: it will tell you not only who to write to, but also the points to make.

#### The people you are writing to

Please write to at least one of the addresses given, and as many others as you can. **They are listed in order of priority:** the first in the list is the one with most influence over the particular case.

#### Writing your appeal

Appeal letters should be brief, factual and courteous. Remember that you are writing on behalf of a person who is in a vulnerable position, so take care not to sound aggressive or offensive.

Write on the assumption that the official is open to reason and may not know all the specifics of the case and person you are writing about.

#### Letterheads

- You may if you wish use professional or academic titles or professional letterheads – these may impress the authorities and suggest you are a person of influence.
- You may use your company letterhead – but unless you own the company, please ask your manager for permission.

#### Format

- If you are sending a fax or airmail letter, you may if you wish write your appeal by hand.
- 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. When email is an appropriate method of communication for the target, we will include this and expect people to use it (see page 4). However, we do still encourage you to send handwritten letters by post, as we believe that it is the combination of different types of appeals that makes Urgent Action an effective campaigning tool.

#### Language

- Write in English unless you are sure you can write correctly in the language of the country concerned.
- When writing to non-English-speaking countries, use straightforward language and grammar and avoid colloquial expressions that are hard to translate.

#### Length

- Keep your letter brief and focused. It's best to limit it to one page, if possible.

#### Form of address

- The correct way of addressing the official you are writing to (the salutation) is given in the casesheet, below the address.

#### The structure of the letter

- You can start either with a brief summary of the case, or by introducing yourself.
- The central part of your letter should make the specific request or requests outlined in the casesheet.
- At the end, ask the official not only to ensure respect for the human rights of the individual concerned but also to keep you informed of developments in the case.

#### Talking about the subject of the appeal

- Use the full name of the person each time you mention them in your letter. This can be a little awkward but may be useful in making the name more familiar to the official reading your appeal. It also avoids errors in shortening a name incorrectly.
- Include any other information in the casesheet that can help the official to identify and act on the case. This could be the date of arrest, trial or sentencing; the place of arrest or imprisonment; the date and place where someone was last seen.

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### Talking about yourself

- It is a good idea to tell the addressee where you come from, and what your job or occupation is. This helps demonstrate the range of people that are concerned about the case.
- Add any other information that explains your concern: you may wish to mention that you too are a parent, trade unionist, lawyer etc, like the individual featured in the case.
- You may, if you wish, say that you are a member of Amnesty International.
- Always give your name and address: this shows that the letter is genuine and personal and ensures that they can respond to you.

### Talking about Amnesty International

- You may mention Amnesty International in your letters, unless you are specifically asked to write in a private or professional capacity. Letters written in a private or professional capacity can be just as effective – and sometimes more so.
- Unless the casesheet gives specific instructions to the contrary, you can cite Amnesty International as the source of your information about the case.
- It may be useful to include a brief explanation of Amnesty International's aims and principles (impartiality and independence from any government, political faction, ideology, economic interest or religious belief). You may also indicate, if appropriate, that Amnesty International champions the rights to physical and mental integrity, to freedom of expression and to freedom from discrimination.

### Being persuasive:

- Stress that your concern is for human rights, and not politically motivated. You may refer to relevant provisions in international human rights frameworks, such as the Universal Declaration of Human Rights.
- You may wish to emphasise your personal concern for the country's international reputation.

### Things to avoid

- Avoid references to 'democracy' and 'democratic principles' in letters to non-Western countries: the recipient may see you as ideologically motivated and preaching a Western ideal.

### Closing the letter

- You could use any of the following:
  - 'I look forward to hearing from you in connection with this serious matter'
  - 'Yours sincerely'
  - 'Yours respectfully'
  - 'Please accept, Your Excellency, the assurance of my highest consideration' (This is the full diplomatic formula, and may be suitable to end a long and detailed letter to a high government official.)

### Sample letter

Your Excellency,

I am writing about the case of [name] who was arrested on [date] and [place]. I understand he/she is in poor health, and has been held without charge for several months. Please use your influence to ensure that he receives medical treatment and that he is charged with an internationally recognisable criminal offence and promptly brought to court or released.

Please could you let me know what medical treatment [name] has received and when, and tell me when he/she will be charged?

I look forward to hearing from you on this important matter.

Yours respectfully,

[Your name]

### Sending your appeal

Time is of the utmost importance so if you can, please send a fax, email or telegram.

If you cannot send a fax or telegram, and no email address is given, send an airmail letter instead. Airmail letters are delivered anywhere in the world within five days.

We believe that the success of Urgent Actions is largely a result of the diversity of ways that our supporters send appeals. Recipients are bombarded in all directions by communications from Amnesty supporters, and this has a bigger impact than if only one method were used. Our advice is that any method of appeal writing is useful – choose the method that most suits you, and if your appeals do not seem to be reaching their target through one route, try another if you are able.

### Faxes

You may well encounter problems when sending faxes overseas. This could be for any one of several reasons:

- The receiving machine is out of order, or has run out of paper.
- The telephone lines into the receiving country are overloaded.
- There has been a power failure (in some countries this may last longer than a day).
- The receiving machine is switched off at night (which may be daytime in the UK).
- In some Muslim countries offices are closed on Thursdays and Fridays.
- A typing error in the number on the casesheet (this is rare but it happens).

If your fax fails to connect after half a dozen attempts, put your appeal letter in an envelope and send it by airmail. And

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please inform the Individuals at Risk Programme (details on page 4) that your fax failed. As soon as we are made aware of a failed fax number, we let the researcher who issued the Urgent Action know and if they can provide us with an alternative, we send this out to the network.

### Email

Email addresses of government officials are included in the Urgent Action casesheet only when researchers know that email is a respected and effective form of communication for the particular case or country, and that the address is reliable and reaches the correct target.

If your email fails, please inform the Individuals at Risk Programme, and send your appeal by fax or airmail. Although some emails bounce back, we know that many do get through because of the replies that our supporters receive from government ministers. An email may bounce back because an account is overloaded, which may alert the attention of the authorities. Please do not be discouraged when emails fail, and as with failed faxes, please post a copy of your email instead.

### Airmail

The Post Office has two sets of overseas postage rates, one for Europe (including Turkey and countries of the Former Soviet Union) and one for the rest of the world. You can obtain a chart of prices from the Post Office. Postage rates usually go up at the start of each new tax year (6 April).

### Sending copies

Please make sure you send a copy of your appeal to the embassy or high commission in the UK of the country concerned, asking for your concerns to be relayed to the appropriate authorities. You will find the address on the casesheet. You can send the copy by fax, email or post.

Sending this copy is important because ambassadors are responsible for reporting back to the home government how their country is viewed in the UK. By showing them that a UK resident is concerned about a particular situation in their country, you are making that situation more important in their eyes. So the copy functions as a form of additional pressure.

If you can, send copies of your appeal to one or more of the other people or organisations listed under 'Please send copies to'. This provides an additional route towards the intended targets, particularly if there is a possibility that the original appeal might not reach its addressee. These addresses are not listed in order of priority. Just send copies of your appeal to as many as you can.

Sending a copy of your appeal to a solidarity group shows them that people outside their country are concerned

about the human rights violations to which their colleagues, members or compatriots are subjected. This can be immensely encouraging and often motivates them to continue their vital work.

There is no need to send a copy of your original appeal to Amnesty International UK.

The easiest way to send a copy is to make a photocopy of your letter or to print off and sign additional copies.

If you have time, you can write a cover letter like the one below.

### Sample cover letter for copies

Your Excellency,

I enclose a copy of a letter, which I sent today to the President, the Minister of Defence and the Minister of Education. Its contents are self-explanatory.

It is my hope that this letter will help improve human rights conditions in [name of country]. I respectfully urge you to add your voice to the concerns expressed in the letter.

Thank you for your consideration. I await your reply.

### What to do with replies

Some governments write back to anyone who contacts them, but many do not respond at all. You may receive a reply from a government, an embassy, an opposition group or a support group. It is worthwhile, if appropriate, to thank the official who has replied and to ask to be kept informed about the case. If the reply is general and fails to address the individual you wrote about, you may ask for a more detailed report of that person's condition and restate the concerns expressed in your first letter.

If you receive a reply from the authorities, please send a copy to the Individuals at Risk Programme (details below). The reply will be forwarded to the relevant researcher at the International Secretariat and will help Amnesty International to monitor the official response to our actions.

### Further information

For more information about Urgent Action, consult the *Urgent Action: FAQs* [www.amnesty.org.uk/urgent](http://www.amnesty.org.uk/urgent) or contact the Individuals at Risk Programme (see below).

### The Individuals at Risk Programme

Amnesty International UK  
17-25 New Inn Yard  
London EC2A 3EA

T: 020 7033 1572  
E: [iar@amnesty.org.uk](mailto:iar@amnesty.org.uk)

### Glossary

#### Abduction

The forceful and unlawful seizure and detention of a person by government agents or armed groups. Please use the term 'abduction' rather than 'kidnapping'.

#### The accused

A person who has been arrested and charged with an offence.

#### Administrative detention

Detention by order of an executive authority rather than a court or judge, often with no intention of bringing the detainee to trial.

#### Arbitrary detention

This term describes any one of three situations:

1. Where there is no legal basis for detention. This includes people being held without charge or trial, or despite a judicial order for their release, or being kept in prison after their sentence has expired.
2. When an arrest or detention is legal under the national law of the country concerned, but arbitrary under international standards. For example, if the national law is vague, excessively broad, or violates the right to freedom of expression.
3. When there has been a grave violation of the detainee's right to a fair trial.

#### Asylum seekers

People who are outside their country of origin and are seeking protection from persecution, but have not yet been formally recognised as refugees. Amnesty International opposes the forcible return of people seeking asylum to countries where they will be at risk of serious human rights abuses. This is known as the principle of *non-refoulement*. Amnesty International also opposes the detention of people seeking asylum, unless they have been charged with a recognisably criminal offence, or unless the authorities can demonstrate that the detention is both necessary and lawful in the individual case.

**Related terms:** non-refoulement, refoulement, refugee

#### Child offender

Someone aged under 18 who has committed a criminal offence. In death penalty cases, a child offender is a person aged under 18 *at the time of the offence* – whatever their current age or the age at which sentence was passed.

#### Civilians

International humanitarian law distinguishes between civilians and combatants, and gives civilians certain protections. People who do not meet the definition of combatants under international law are civilians. They may lose civilian status if they take direct part in hostilities.

**Related terms:** Direct attacks on civilians, war crimes

#### Commute

To replace one punishment with another that is less severe; most often used when a death sentence is replaced by a long prison term.

#### Conscientious objection

Refusal to perform military service on the grounds of conscience or profound personal conviction. This can include refusal to participate in a particular war (selective objection). Generally, Amnesty International considers anyone imprisoned for exercising their right to conscientious objection to be a prisoner of conscience, unless they have rejected an alternative non-military service that is not punitive or discriminatory.

#### Corporal punishment

Physical punishment imposed by judicial or administrative order. It includes amputation, branding, caning and flogging. Corporal punishment always constitutes cruel, inhuman and degrading treatment, and in some cases can amount to torture.

#### Crimes against humanity

Certain acts – including murder, torture, enslavement, enforced disappearance and other inhumane acts – are considered crimes against humanity if they form part of a widespread or systematic attack directed at a civilian population as a state or organisational policy.

#### Death penalty

State-imposed death as a punishment for a crime, following a judicial process.

#### Death row

Part of a prison where prisoners under sentence of death are held.

#### Detainee

A prisoner who has not been convicted of an offence.

#### Direct attacks on civilians

Deliberate attacks on individual civilians or the civilian population during an armed conflict. Such attacks constitute a war crime.

#### Enforced disappearance

When someone has been apprehended by the authorities, their agents or people acting with their acquiescence, but that person's fate or whereabouts are concealed or not acknowledged by the authorities.

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### **Extrajudicial executions**

Unlawful and deliberate killings carried out by order of a government or with its complicity or acquiescence, or by an official or state agent acting without orders.

### **Forced eviction**

The permanent or temporary removal, against their will, of individuals, families or communities from their homes or land, without appropriate forms of legal or other protection. For an eviction to be lawful, international human rights law requires safeguards, including adequate notice, consultation, due process and provision of adequate alternative accommodation.

### **Habeas corpus**

The right to seek access to a judge to challenge the legality of one's detention and to be released if the detention is found to be illegal.

### **Human rights abuses**

Can be used to mean breaches of human rights by governments, armed groups and private individuals or groups.

### **Human rights defenders**

People who act to promote or protect human rights.

### **Human rights violations**

Applies to breaches of human rights by governments.

### **Immunity**

A doctrine of international law that allows an accused person to avoid prosecution for a crime, either because of the function that the individual performs or the office they hold.

### **Impunity**

The failure to bring perpetrators to justice, to establish the truth and to ensure that victims receive full reparations.

### **Incommunicado detention**

When a detainee is denied access to people outside the place of detention.

### **Indigenous peoples**

Peoples with a historical continuity with pre-invasion and pre-colonial societies that developed on their territories, who have retained social, cultural, economic and political characteristics that are distinct from those of the dominant societies in which they live.

### **Indiscriminate attacks**

Attacks in which armed forces fail to take the necessary measures to distinguish between civilian and military targets.

### **Internally displaced people**

People forced to flee their homes because of armed conflict, generalised violence, human rights abuses or natural or human-made disasters, and who remain in the same country rather than fleeing abroad.

### **International human rights instruments**

Intergovernmental agreements on human rights, some of which are legally binding, such as treaties, pacts and protocols.

### **International human rights mechanisms**

These include:

- bodies established by international or regional human rights treaties to monitor the implementation of a treaty by state parties; and
- working groups, experts, representatives or rapporteurs appointed by intergovernmental organisations to monitor and report on member states' human rights records or human rights themes.

### **International human rights standards**

Standards set out in international human rights instruments.

### **International human rights treaties**

Legally binding agreements between states relating to human rights. States take on treaty obligations in two ways: by signature and ratification (two steps) or by accession (one step after the treaty is no longer open for signature).

### **International humanitarian law**

Principles and rules regulating the protection of people and the conduct of hostilities in armed conflict. It seeks primarily to protect civilians, and combatants who have surrendered or are incapacitated (and are therefore no longer participating in hostilities).

### **Non-refoulement**

A principle in international law that obliges states not to return anyone to a country where he or she would be at risk of serious human rights abuses.

**Related term:** refoulement.

### **Political prisoner**

Any prisoner whose case has a significant political element. This may include the motivation of the prisoner, the prisoner's acts or the motivation of the authorities. Political prisoners include both prisoners of conscience and those who, for political reasons, are held in administrative detention or have been accused or convicted of criminal acts.

### **Prison conditions**

Amnesty International calls on governments to ensure that laws and practices relating to prison conditions conform to international human rights standards.

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### **Prisoner**

A person held under any form of detention or imprisonment, including people held in pre-trial and administrative detention.

### **Prisoner of conscience**

Someone who has not used or advocated violence or hatred, and is imprisoned or placed under other physical restriction (such as house arrest) because of their political, religious or other conscientiously held beliefs, ethnic origin, sex, colour, language, national or social origin, economic status, birth, sexual orientation or other status.

### **Protocol**

A formal, legally binding supplement to a treaty or agreement.

### **Ratification of treaty**

A decision by a state to adhere to a treaty that it has signed and to be legally bound by its provisions.

Related term: signature of treaty

### **Recognisably criminal offence**

An offence that would be evidently criminal under international or national law.

### **Refoulement**

The expulsion or forcible return of anyone to a country where he or she would be at risk of serious human rights abuses. Refoulement is prohibited under international law.

Related term: non-refoulement

### **Refugees**

The UN Refugee Convention defines a refugee as a person who 'owing to well-founded fear of being persecuted for reasons of race, religion, nationality, membership of a particular social group or political opinion, is outside the country of his nationality and is unable or, owing to such fear, is unwilling to avail himself of the protection of that country'.

### **Rendition**

The transfer of people from one state to another or into the custody of another state, by state agents or others working on behalf of a government, using means that bypass judicial and administrative due process.

### **Reproductive rights**

The rights to decide freely the number, spacing and timing of children, to have the information and means to do so, and to attain the highest standard of sexual and reproductive health free of discrimination, coercion and violence.

### **Signature of treaty**

The expression by a state of its intention to ratify a treaty. Related terms: ratification of treaty

### **Solitary confinement**

Isolation of a prisoner or detainee from other inmates.

### **Special rapporteurs**

Fact-finding experts or representatives appointed by international or regional intergovernmental bodies to assess the human rights situation in specific countries or to report on specific themes.

### **State party**

A state that has ratified or acceded to a treaty and is legally bound to follow its provisions.

### **Summary executions**

Executions carried out after speedy and grossly unfair trials or without any judicial proceedings at all.

### **Summary trials, summary proceedings**

Speedy trials or proceedings often conducted without the normal procedural safeguards.

### **Torture**

The UN defines torture as 'any act by which severe pain or suffering, whether physical or mental, is intentionally inflicted on a person for such purposes as obtaining from him or a third person information or a confession, punishing him for an act he or a third person has committed or is suspected of having committed, or intimidating or coercing him or a third person, or for any reason based on discrimination of any kind, when such pain or suffering is inflicted by or at the instigation of or with the consent or acquiescence of a public official or any other person acting in an official capacity'.

### **Unlawful killings**

Killings that are unlawful by international human rights or humanitarian law and standards. The term can apply to killings committed by, or on the authority of, armed forces under the control of a government and to those committed by by armed groups.

### **Violence against women**

Any act of gender-based violence that results in, or is likely to result in, physical, sexual or psychological harm or suffering to women.

### **War crimes**

Serious violations of international humanitarian law committed in either international or non-international armed conflict.