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2016 AIUK AGM Speech

2015 has been a year dominated by borders.

Many have sought to cross them. Others have sought to keep them out. Where people have risked their lives fleeing conflict and persecution, others have built new walls.

Borders matter. They represent units of government. As citizens and as residents of this country, we are afforded rights which many others do not possess.

But borders also create barriers. These barriers are more than just physical. They divide the world into “us” and “them”. They focus on differences, not commonalities. They protect us from having to understand, or share the pain, of those who are “over there”.

More than ever, we live in a globalised world, where we are all increasingly interdependent, and national problems become regional problems, and regional problems become global problems.

But our response to these challenges – as governments, if not as people - is largely the same as it's ever been.

Most of the time it involves building a wall - between “us” and “them”.

I have spent a huge amount of my life working with refugees.

Before Amnesty, I worked for 12 years at the refugee council – campaigning with and delivering services to asylum seekers and refugees arriving in the UK. During the collapse of Yugoslavia I led the emergency evacuation programmes from Bosnia and then Kosovo into the UK.

What drove me then, as it does now, was a fundamental belief that regardless of which side of the border we are from, we owe it to each other as human beings to provide refuge, protection, and support to those who need it.

I know that each of you here shares that same sentiment. Many of you have taken very significant, and very effective action over the past year to compel the UK to help refugees who have been fleeing unspeakable suffering in Syria, Iraq and elsewhere to find sanctuary on these shores.

Exactly one year ago, at our last AGM, we heard news of the tragic loss of life in the Mediterranean.

Many of you were there too, and you will remember our impromptu action.

We were quick to make our feelings of outrage public. Within 5 days we were on Brighton Beach with an emotional action which got a big reaction.

When search and rescue ships were withdrawn in the Mediterranean we saw **1,200** people die in the week of 12-19 April.

1,200 people in One week.

We all swung into action – here in the UK where you made our demands clear to 99% of MPs across the UK and our members across Europe tackled their governments too.

And we got those ships back in action. In the four months prior to this, **1 in 16** people died attempting the crossing. Since we got the ships back, that figure became **1 in 427**. Still far too

many. But it was essential that we responded quickly and emphatically, and we did.

In the last year I have stood on the Hungarian borders watching the razor wire go up as exhausted refugees tried to find a way to continue their flight to safety.

I think of the people with desperate stories I met in Lampedusa and Sicily, refugees from Eritrea and Somalia as well as Syria.

What stays with me as I spoke with the brave Italian Coastguard, with the head of the hospital in Lampedusa who has examined every dead body out of the thousands that have washed up on his shores, with the mayor of that tiny island of 4,000 people who says clearly and bravely ‘we will not let people drown’ – is their anger. An anger directed not at the refugees but at those Governments in Europe who refuse to help.

I was in Lebanon, where a tiny country has given refuge to 1.4m Syrians to see the camps and conditions there for myself.

I know if I was living in such conditions for 2,3,4 years with my family I would do anything to find a way out of there. And I fully understood the challenge of the Lebanese official I met when she said to me: how can you expect us to keep our borders open when you will not do the same?

The work that so many of you do locally is crucial to this, and has the potential to save lives.

This evening, we will have a panel on the refugee campaigning we have all been part of and will discuss the work that you have led.

A great example of concerted action is AIUK's Asylum Justice Project, which was formed in January last year after a meeting of around 40 activists from across the UK. This is an activist-led project, campaigning for an end to the fast-track asylum system

and an end to indefinite detention. They support other amnesty activists and groups to be better informed and campaign for the rights of Asylum Seekers in the UK through workshops, meetings and mailings. In November 2015 they lobbied MPs on the family reunification of refugees and an end to indefinite detention.

The Asylum Justice Project is important not only because it increases our campaigning capacity and vibrancy on a particularly significant issue but also because it illustrates an important development in the way that we are seeking to work together as staff and activists.

And this is really important.

We are nothing if not a movement of people working together to achieve extraordinary change.

What this means is that we need to actively encourage and support activities and initiatives which our members wish to take and which are in line with Amnesty's overall policy and priorities.

As staff we can provide guidance, coordination, and the means through which to effect change. Indeed, that is our role; as staff, as the Board, as activist leaders. But it is up to you, the members, the activists, to translate that into real action on the ground. And it is our role to support that, and empower our members to make things happen locally, regionally, and indeed nationally – in a spirit of **partnership**.

Because that is how change happens. And that is how we will succeed in amplifying our voice – not as an international organisation made up of national sections and local groupings,

but as a genuine movement of human beings standing up for and taking action on behalf of our fellow human beings.

A great example of how we can achieve that is through local media. In September last year we appointed seven Regional Media Support Officers, who are activists who work with other activists in their areas to help us reach more local media.

In the 3 months since their appointment, the number of articles mentioning Amnesty in the English regional media increased by a massive 66% compared to the same period in the previous year.

Another example of activists taking the initiative on Amnesty campaigning is last year's Pride, where the LGBTI network ran our Pride presence, with some of us turning up on the day in support as wheel stewards. And what a great day it was.

This quote from Simon Ware of the network says so brilliantly what it is we are aiming for:

“It's great to see staff and volunteers working together in genuine partnership and with mutual respect to make a big impact. Think that is something special. And Amnesty at its best.”

This spirit of partnership has in fact permeated many more of our activities throughout the course of 2015, and it owes much to the amazing energy, commitment and contribution of Amnesty activists everywhere.

Let's take a closer a look.

These were our campaigning priorities for 2015;

My Body My Rights

Stop Torture

I@R

Crisis

Save the Human Rights Act

On each of these, there is so much that we have achieved.

My Body My Rights is our global campaign to stop the control and criminalisation of sexuality and reproduction.

In 2015 we focused attention on Northern Ireland and the Republic of Ireland, where it is illegal to have an abortion in almost all circumstances - even in cases of rape, incest or fatal foetal impairment.

Northern Ireland has the harshest punishment for abortion in Europe: a woman having an illegal abortion or anyone

assisting her faces life imprisonment. According to the UK Government, more than 4,700 women and girls travelled to England and Wales to have abortions over the last 5 years - and this is likely to be an underestimate.

We campaigned hard on this issue. In a landmark ruling in November 2015, the High Court in Belfast found that laws governing abortion in Northern Ireland in cases of serious malformation of the foetus, and sexual crimes, are in breach of Article 8 of the European Convention on Human Rights. There is an appeal outstanding on this – so we still have work to do. And I am proud that we are at the forefront of this campaign in a part of the UK where an 18 year old girl can get a 3 months suspended sentence because she was too poor to travel to England for an abortion.

More than half a million amnesty supporters across the world, including thousands in the UK, urged the government of Burkina Faso to enforce national and international law against early and forced marriage.

In Feb 2016 the Ministry of Justice announced plans to raise the legal age of marriage for girls to 18 years and to ensure that forced marriage is clearly defined in the criminal code.

The ministry said it had received correspondence from across the world calling on Burkina Faso to eradicate early and forced marriage. Before the end of the month I will join our Amnesty Section in Burkina Faso at the launch of our major report and to meet with politicians to advance the changes we seek.

The global stop torture campaign, which launched in May 2014, had some notable successes in 2015. We focused on Mexico and Nigeria - as well as the UK.

In August 2015 the Mexican Government approved a protocol which included key safeguards we had been campaigning for.

Closer to home, we focused on the EU trade in tools of torture.

In Oct 2015 MEPs voted overwhelmingly to close loopholes in the EU law prohibiting trade in torture equipment, something we have been working for since 2005.

And right here at home in the UK we are focusing our effort on a judge-led enquiry into the allegations of UK Government complicity in torture.

And of course, one of the absolute highlights of the year was hearing that Moses had been released and pardoned and it

was so moving to hear from Justine this morning as he lit the Amnesty candle.

Both My Body My Rights and Stop Torture campaigns are global campaigns that will come to an end in May this year, and a huge thank you to all of you who have taken part and contributed to the significant successes of each.

Individuals at Risk is a key priority for us and will always remain so. Half the work we do on it wouldn't be possible without the dedication and hard work of Country Coordinators who lead on much of our long term case work, supporting groups, running events, designing campaigns and speaking to FCO desk officers. In 2015 we had 541 recorded campaign activities on Individuals At Risk by Country Coordinators.

Last month Hugh Sandeman, Chair of the Country Coordinators came to our Senior Management Team meeting

where we discussed the Country Co-ordinator annual report and we reviewed how we are working together as staff and activists. It has been a really great year of work and we were all very proud of what we have achieved together.

Individuals at risk remains such a critical focal point for our work. Campaigning on individual cases allows us to not only bring justice and protection to individuals who in many cases have personally suffered for their courage in standing up for human rights, but to mobilise people behind a particular cause.

Over **300,000** people signed our petition for Meenakshi Kumari and her sister who were sentenced by the male only village council to be raped as a punishment for their brother's actions.

India's Supreme Court has ordered protection for the two sisters and they and their family have told us how grateful they

are to everyone who signed the petition to India's Home Secretary.

And so many other people have become free at last. Not least, Albert Woodfox, who had been held in solitary confinement for over 43 years.

Albert was featured in our global Write for Rights campaign.

3.7 million people took part, of which 78,000 were from the UK.

This is an amazing achievement.

But, of course, we are aware of the scale of the challenges we face.

Our latest annual report, released in February, paints a disturbing picture of governments continuing to undermine the very mechanisms that have been put in place to protect human

rights, at a time when these protections are as necessary as they have ever been.

The UK, it's sad to say, has not done well.

It is unusual for our global report to focus on the UK in this way, and really quite disturbing to hear the Secretary General of Amnesty focus so much on the UK, and Europe.

But as a country and continent which prides itself on a tradition of human rights and respect for the rule of law, we have set high standards for ourselves. And when we undermine these standards, the repercussions are felt throughout the world.

It was disappointingly predictable for the newly-elected Conservative government to seek to repeal the Human Rights Act soon after coming into power.

We campaigned vigorously to retain the Human Rights Act and we succeeded, by working in partnership with other organisations and thanks to our activists, in forcing the UK government to relent on this misguided initiative 89,000 people signed our petition

Amnesty activists contacted every single MP.

We also owe success so far to the views of some committed conservative MPs who are defending the Act. With a Government majority of 12, it is very good that we have them.

The point about the Human Rights Act is not that it's perfect – no piece of legislation ever is – but that it enshrines human rights directly into UK domestic legislation. It was adopted with cross-party support, and it's made a real difference to many people's lives in this country, many of whom would have suffered miscarriages of justice. Repealing it is unnecessary,

retrograde and would send a terrible - and dangerous - signal to countries across the globe, many of whom would be quick to jump on any excuse to restrict human rights further at home.

President Kenyatta of Kenya referred to the UK government's threats to ignore rulings of the European court of Human Rights as he sought to evade the investigations of the International Criminal Court.

But while we have succeeded in keeping the forces of regression at bay and the stop/start has felt at times like the Grand Old Duke of York, the UK government has not wholly abandoned its plans to scrap the Human Rights Act, and we must remain vigilant in case they choose to try again.

Since we were all together one year ago, the UK political landscape has changed significantly.

Just as many of us were getting used to the idea of coalition governments, the last General Election gave us a majority Conservative government. Amidst the soul-searching and hand-wringing of the Labour party, an unprecedented majority of Labour members voted for Jeremy Corbyn – a rank outsider, but also a long-term member of Amnesty and strong human rights advocate – to assume the leadership of the Labour party. And now we have the EU referendum to cast a long shadow over everything.

Aside from attempting to repeal the HRA, and the often relentlessly negative and biased media coverage of human rights, the UK government has been woeful in respecting its international obligations towards refugees, and cynical in selling weapons to Saudi Arabia in contravention of the ATT - and they've also spied on Amnesty, to boot.

As part of my role I get to see the government from the inside, and that insight can often be quite reassuring but not always.

We have sought legal advice on the sale of arms to Saudi Arabia in the light of the role that Government is playing in Yemen. The legal advice is that the UK Government is breaking domestic and EU law and that it is breaking the ATT.

None of this fills us with optimism.

But we know that we have significant support.

We also know that there are many MPs from across all parties who are long-time Amnesty supporters and who are keen to champion human rights – in Holyrood, Stormont and Cardiff as well as Westminster.

More importantly, we know that many of the public are actually on our side.

You will remember how the media did an about turn on refugees when faced with the heartbreaking image of Aylan Kurdi, the toddler whose body was washed up on a Turkish shore.

A Com Res poll for the BBC in Jan 2016 found that the majority of the UK population said that protecting refugees from Syria and Libya showed Britain at its best.

Research also shows that people are most persuaded positively about refugees by seeing ordinary people like them talking about refugees, working with refugees and seeing refugees as people just like them.

The vast majority of British people 8/10 believe rights have to apply to everyone equally, in order to be effective at all. Two

thirds of British people agree that politicians should not be able to choose which rights they enforce.

In Northern Ireland - a poll for Amnesty found that nearly 7 in 10 people back abortion law reform. That's a higher proportion than people who voted in the last General Election.

The British public are, for the most part, humane, but anxious.

Amnesty doesn't take sides. We're not in it for the kudos. We're not in it for the power. Our side is that of all humanity. And fundamentally I believe that at heart people agree with us.

Looking ahead, one of the things which we will be discussing over the next two days is our new 5-year strategic plan, which is before you as a resolution at this AGM. I look forward to hearing those debates and to talking with you about the plan over the weekend. Sarah has spoken about last summer's

International Council Meeting and the adoption of movement

wide strategic goals. It was just great to see a movement united and determined. That is such a strong place for our movement to be in and it allows us to take those goals and plan ambitiously for our contribution from AIUK.

We have chosen our strategic priorities for human rights work.

A global campaign on People on the Move;

Never has a campaign been more timely and more significant.

20,000 Syrians over the next 4 years is not enough. And we must do all in our power to change that.

A global campaign on the shrinking space for Human

Rights Defenders. We are seeing a global crackdown on human rights defenders and their ability to challenge authority and fight for their rights and for the rights of others. In Russia we are concerned that our office may be forced to close, in a

country which now demands that you put your passport number by your signature on a petition.

In Venezuela there is a clampdown on civil society which is making it hard for Amnesty's survival there. A former chair of Amnesty Venezuela was shot **at** as he left the Amnesty office one evening. It was designed to frighten him, as they could have killed him if they wanted to. The Section there has to report to the government on names of paying members, so **35,000** activists are now **20,000** and of course decreasing.

We know from our partners in Egypt, Sudan, Ethiopia, Sri Lanka and in many other countries that Human Rights Defenders are targeted, harassed and blocked from doing their crucial work.

We need to change all of that.

To the UK and **the Human Rights Act**;

In the UK, we don't risk being shot at for our work but I have talked already about this government's approach to human rights and the attitude of the media too. Over these next 5 years we will campaign hard to stop the regression of human rights in the UK.

Crisis response; We continue our focus on Syria and respond where necessary to the human rights crises that will inevitably emerge in the future.

We will campaign tactically where we think that high media profile on an issue gives us the chance to raise human rights concerns. So, we'll be talking a lot about human rights in Brazil in the lead up to this summer's Olympic Games there.

Individuals at Risk: We will continue to campaign and it has been quite a week with trade unionist Mahdi Abu Deeb freed on Tuesday from prison in Bahrain and Phyoe Phyoe Aung, student activist in Burma, freed yesterday. We will continue to write and show our solidarity with prisoners of conscience and Human Rights Defenders across the world.

Our Human Rights Education work will remain key. Our goal is a world in which everyone knows, values and can claim their rights because everyone has access to human rights education. Amnesty has an increased global focus on Human Rights Education as a means to empower people. One example is in Burkina Faso where we in AIUK have secured matched funding from DFID for our human rights education work with communities on FGM and early forced marriage. The

one exception across the movement for taking Government funds is for HRE and on Monday this week I spoke with Yves Toure, my counterpart in Burkina Faso about the great work we are doing together. Expect to see a lot of fundraising from us in the next couple of months and it will be great if you can think about how you can build that into your work for the year ahead. To give ourselves the best possible chance of achieving all of this we want to get more people involved with human rights and engaged with Amnesty.

By the end of 2020, we want two per cent of the UK population to be actively engaged with us. Our goal is to triple our size.

That's a big goal. When I talk to politicians I tell them about Amnesty and I let them know that we have 600,000 members, supporters and activists. And I can see the effect. They literally sit up a bit straighter. Try it next time you talk to your MP! Think

what 2% of the population will make them do. We have ambitious fundraising plans too, fundraising is a crucial part of our human rights impact and we are proud to fund our work here in the UK and to make a substantial contribution to funding the amazing human rights work that goes on around the world.

Sarah has talked about the increasing scrutiny of our fundraising and I welcome that – we will be proud of every penny we raise because we know how important our work is.

And we will need all of us to reach out and engage new people with Amnesty to achieve our goals.

My thanks to each and every one of you for all the brilliant work we do together. As Sarah stands down as Chair of the Board I would like to thank her for her determination to get our governance right for our organisation and for the huge amount of work that she has led on this. The other thing I would like to

say about Sarah is that her care for us as a staff group shines through and we feel that support in all that we do. I certainly do and I am very grateful for her careful and thoughtful advice, her sharp intellect and her instinctive kindness. Thank you Sarah

I started this speech by talking about borders.

Borders of any type, whatever their history, whatever their reasons, create distance and distrust between people who have more in common through their shared humanity than they differ because of their background.

As members of the Amnesty movement, we share a common cause that knows no borders. That cause is human rights.

We are all agents of change. By working together, in partnership, we truly can achieve a fair and secure world, where the human rights that make up the universal declaration are available to all of us.

Thank you.