

Welcome to the second Urgent Action Newsletter of 2010. Please let the UA office know if you would prefer to receive it in another format (mail/email)

## “I owe my life to Amnesty International”



Amnesty's researcher meets Hafez in Sana'a, March 2010  
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Amnesty's letter writers yearn for happy endings. Here's an exceptional one.

Hafez Ibrahim was a 16-year-old guest at a wedding in Ta'izz, Yemen. Everyone was in high spirits, but as the celebrations reached a climax, a gun went off and killed another guest. Hafez was arrested.

“The first judge sentenced me to death in 2005,” he told Amnesty International. A second judge confirmed the sentence. Hafez was not allowed to challenge it.

Two years later, the Yemen researcher at our London office received a text message on his cell phone: “They are about to execute us. Hafez.” The researcher sent immediate messages to the Yemeni authorities and mobilized the Urgent Action Network (UA 79/05). Writers' appeals sought respect for life, but also leniency because a 16-year-old fits the international definition of a child. The president responded with a stay of execution to allow time for the victim's family to pardon Hafez. The family finally agreed to a pardon in exchange for 25 million riyals (about \$130,000), and Hafez walked free.

Fast forward to April of this year. The researcher had the chance to meet Hafez in Yemen. It was an emotional conversation. “Until now I feel like I am dreaming. I feel that it is impossible that I am still walking,” exclaimed Hafez. Now 22, he is determined to make the most of his life. He is studying law at Sana'a University and plans to dedicate himself to protecting human rights.

## Amnesty International is...” a family of thousands”

65 days. That's how long police in the United Arab Emirates held Pakistani doctor Ayyaz Ali Khan. On 5 April 2010, officers arrested Dr Khan during a trip to Ras al Khaimah University, where he had intended to set up a department of dentistry. Although the police treated him well, his family, his lawyer and his own government had no idea where he was. UA members campaigned for his rights through UA 105/10.

On 8 June, authorities blindfolded Dr Khan and took him to Abu Dhabi airport for a flight to Islamabad. He still did not know why they had imprisoned him. But he contacted Amnesty International on his release, exclaiming “When I was taken, I had a family of 25 members and now I have a family of thousands of people. I am extremely grateful to Amnesty International for all their support. I feel every little pressure helped in my case.”

## Kevin Keith survives death row

Someone shot at Ohio resident Marichell Chatman and five members of her family in 1994. Tragically, only three of them survived. Some evidence linked Kevin Keith to the crime, and police arrested him. But he always claimed he was innocent. Many questions arose during his trial and many remained unanswered when it concluded with a sentence of death. With Kevin Keith's 15 September 2010 execution date approaching, UA



Governor  
Strickland  
Jeff Swenson /  
Getty Images

members around the world began appealing for his life in early July (UA 151/10). In mid-August, we were dismayed when the parole board unanimously recommended that Governor Strickland proceed with the execution. But on 2 September, in a stunning decision, the governor rejected the recommendation because of “all of the unanswered questions” and granted clemency to Kevin Keith.

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## “Life without fighting is not for me”



Aleksei Sokolov says “I am prepared to defend human rights, despite the danger that threatens me.”  
© Aleksei Sokolov

A cartoonist has illustrated the story of Aleksei Sokolov, who founded the human rights organization Pravovaia Osnova (Legal Base). The organization’s members campaign against torture of detainees in the Russian Federation. At times, they investigate reports of inappropriate behaviour by law enforcement officers. Amnesty International believes that Sokolov’s detention in Siberia results not from the robbery charges against him, but from his human rights activities. And now Sokolov himself risks torture (UA 128/10).



Aleksei Sokolov has contacted Amnesty International to thank all its members for offering him help, support, kindness and understanding. It “fills my soul so much that I continue to struggle against despotism, human rights violations and oppression of human beings, wherever I am. In prison many are not happy with my behaviour and dream of the time when I finally break down and become ‘obedient’ and ‘manageable’, but they are sadly mistaken, because life without fighting loses its meaning and is called an existence, and this is not for me.”

If you wish to write for Sokolov’s safety, contact the UA office.

## Prisoner of conscience sends letter of thanks from prison

Mexican authorities freed Indigenous rights activist and prisoner of conscience Raúl Hernández on 27 August 2010. Raúl, a member of the Indigenous group Organización del Pueblo Indígena Me’phaa (OPIM), was finally released from a murder charge that Amnesty International believes authorities invented to put him behind bars. Before he walked free, he had managed to write this letter from Aytula prison in Guerrero State.

The jubilation after authorities had recognized his innocence quickly turned to concern. Within days of his release, someone threatened the lives of Raúl and other Indigenous activists. If you wish to write for their safety, contact the UA office.

21 de junio de 2010. Aytula de Los Libres Guerrero.  
A las Personas y organizaciones, a todos y todas las defensores de derechos humanos hermanos y hermanas de la OPIM:  
Escribo esta Carta para agradecer todo el apoyo que me han dado durante mas de dos años que llevo en Prisión sus Cartas, visitas, su trabajo que veo y el que no Pero del que se que hacen por mi. Lo agradezco todos los días. Me ayuda a mantenerme en lucha. Cuando veo que la justicia no llega.  
Ahora se que la justicia ya está cerca por eso escribo esta Carta para pedirles que sigan conmigo. Tlachinollan me ha informado que ya se presentaron todas las Pruebas que demuestran mi inocencia en la que ustedes han creído desde que me detubieron.  
Me dijeron que ahora todo está en manos del Procurador y del Juez. Por eso les pido que ahora sigan apoyandome para que sea liberado y pueda regresar al campo. Con mi familia y con la OPIM para defender los derechos de mi Pueblo. Espero que pronto puedan solucionar mi problema. este Recibo fuerza de ustedes para continuar.  
Gracias  
Raúl Hernández Abundio defensor de derecho humanos.

*I am writing this letter to thank you for the support that you have offered me over the past 2 years that I have been in jail. Every day, I am thankful for your letters, your visits, the advocacy that I have seen and the advocacy I have not seen but which I know that you are undertaking on my behalf. All of this helps me to carry on when justice seems so far away.*

*Now I feel that justice is close. For this reason, I am writing this letter to ask you to continue this struggle with me. The Tlachinollan Centre informs me they have presented all the evidence that proves my innocence, innocence in which you have believed ever since I was detained. They tell me that all this is now in the hands of the Attorney General and the judge. I ask you now to press your support once again for my freedom, so that I can return home to my family and the OPIM (Me’phaa Indigenous People’s Organization) to continue defending the rights of my people.*

*I hope that soon we will see a positive resolution. I get strength to carry on from all of you.*

*Thank you!*

**Raúl Hernández Abundio, human rights defender**

## Join the world's largest letter writing event on Human Rights Day!

50 countries. 730,000 letters. That's how big Write for Rights 2009 was. On December 10, pick up your pen or head to your keyboard and join writers around the world to call on governments to respect human rights. By the first of December, you'll find 12 actions at [www.amnesty.ca/writeathon](http://www.amnesty.ca/writeathon). Write on one, or on all 12. Write by yourself or ask others to join you. We have actions in French and Spanish, and actions written for children, too. Please end your personal Human Rights Day event by returning to the website to tell us what you did. If you cannot access the website or if you have any questions about Write for Rights 2010, contact the UA office.



## A new Secretary General for Amnesty International

In June, our organization welcomed a leader at the international level. Salil Shetty is an Indian national who left his post as Director of the UN's Millennium Campaign to take up this one. Before that, he led the anti-poverty organization ActionAid. In his first message to the movement, Salil wrote "I have spent most of my last 12 weeks talking to staff and activists...and several world leaders. I am overwhelmed with the level of credibility, goodwill and support that Amnesty enjoys in the external world. And I am absolutely convinced that across the movement our most precious asset is the people who make up and stand behind Amnesty."



*"I feel privileged to be given this amazing opportunity at a time when the world needs human rights for all more than ever before."*  
- Salil Shetty in June 2010 © Amnesty International

## What's special about 28 May 2011?



Amnesty International will mark our 50th anniversary. How sad it is that we still need to exist. This delightful 52-second video lets the world know that we're here to stay:

[www.youtube.com/watch?v=aVtAbYpBbQ8](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=aVtAbYpBbQ8)

*Amnesty's founder, Peter Benenson, lights the original candle on the organization's 20th anniversary*

## Urgent Actions: How many are there? Do they work? Who are we?

One writer loved the review of 2009 UAs in the last newsletter and said "Tell us more."

Well, Amnesty International issues about 350 actions every year and about the same number of Updates. Many address our traditional concerns of torture, execution, enforced disappearances and urgent health issues. A large number effectively protect human rights defenders who are at risk. More recently, UAs are also dealing with violations of economic, social and cultural rights such as forced evictions that separate communities from their usual sources of employment, farmland, markets, schools and healthcare.

Are the UAs effective? We have tracked results since 1984 by focusing on whether the primary goal of the action was reached. (Secondary goals, such as alerting the media and the public, or solidarity with those affected, are very important too.) Our lowest rate of positive results was 20% percent, and our highest was 47. Other than those two unusual years, the rate of positive results hovers between 28 and 38% percent, with an average of 33% percent.

Who besides you is responding to UAs? Around the world, there are about 80,000 of us. Of course we are not all active on every case, and in some countries, only one person is responding to any given UA. In Canada, you are one of 2,500 writers. Each time you receive an Urgent Action, about 100 others are writing with you.

Here's the story behind one of them.

## “Ask everyone to keep writing”

Amnesty International featured Guatemalan activist Guillermo Chen after someone threatened him with death. Last May, the Breaking the Silence network brought him to our Toronto office. You can imagine the joyful welcome UA members gave him!

UA 64/08 began “*Guillermo Chen’s house was shot at six times on the evening of 5 March. He is director of the non-governmental organization Fundación Nueva Esperanza, Río Negro (New Hope Foundation, Río Negro), which campaigns for justice for crimes committed during Guatemala’s internal armed conflict (1960-1996). Amnesty International believes that Guillermo Chen’s life, and the lives of his wife and children, may be at risk.*”

Guillermo showed us photos of the bullet holes in the door of his home. “Nos causó mucho temor,” he said. The shootings caused his family such fear that they sought safety in El Salvador for a week. “People from Canada and even African countries sent appeals for our protection,” he noted. But as soon as the appeals started arriving in Guatemala, the threat level, and the family’s level of fear, dropped. The appeals “forced the authorities to give some protection,” he told us. Copies of the appeals arrived at the office of a local non-governmental organization. After the first 2,000, the staff sighed, “Tell them to stop. We have no more room here.” Guillermo chuckled at the memory.

Guillermo told us that the New Hope Foundation had organized a delegation of survivors and witnesses of the 1982 Río Negro massacre to travel to Spain in February 2008. They provided testimony against Guatemala’s former president José Efraín Ríos Montt and other former high-ranking officials who were facing charges of genocide, war crimes and crimes against humanity. “You can imagine,” he exclaimed, “that the government wasn’t too happy about the publicity.” That is when the threats began.

“What kind of protection did the government give you?” asked one member.

“They offered to post two police officers at our house every hour of the day,” replied Guillermo. “We didn’t accept because many are corrupt and because we would be subjected to their surveillance. But we did accept a regular patrol around the perimeter.” Even though the threats have stopped, Guillermo and his family continue to take different routes to their work, school and market. It makes him sad that his son and daughter do not have a normal life. He will persist in his activities, though. “My work is benefiting Indigenous communities.”

Guillermo plans to graduate from law school and become one of the few Mayan legal professionals in the country.



*“Ask everyone to keep writing. The positive impact for human rights defenders is substantial and gives us courage. Be assured that we do see your letters. Please keep writing them until we get what we need. If you don’t have access to email, send letters by mail. You have no idea how important even one message is.”*

– Guillermo Chen, May 2010, pictured with Marilyn McKim

## Writing tip

“Please write in your own words” often appears on UAs at the call to action. That’s because if all our members’ messages start with “I am concerned that. . .” they would have little effect, right? So here’s one way to make your letter unique. In addition to creating a first sentence about yourself, include just one of the suggested points. If you decide to use more than one, vary the order by choosing the last one to write about first. It is your message’s personal nature that makes it effective.

*Amnesty International is grateful to all Urgent Action writers. We appreciate your time, your commitment and any postage you pay for.*

*Marilyn McKim*

Marilyn McKim, Urgent Action Coordinator