

## Former prisoner of conscience holds party to thank Amnesty members

When Sudanese poet **Mahjoub Sharif** visited Amnesty International's office in London, UK, he decided to invite Amnesty members to a party to thank them for campaigning for his freedom 17 years before.

**"Thank you!"**

**Mahjoub Sharif** is a Sudanese poet whose writings are incredibly popular. Known as the "people's poet", he writes about things like love and politics. Sometimes Sudanese musicians turn his words into lyrics for their pop songs.

Unfortunately, Mahjoub has been jailed many times over the years by Sudan's rulers. The first time was in 1971. Once he was even thrown into jail while on honeymoon with his wife Amira.

Following a military coup in June

1990, the new military government began arresting hundreds of people including politicians, lawyers, university professors, and writers. In December of that year, Mahjoub was again imprisoned. When Amnesty International learned the news, an appeal was launched for his freedom. Amnesty members showed their solidarity by sending him hundreds and hundreds of messages of support.

In total, Mahjoub received about 2,000 cards, which he shared with the other prisoners and used to decorate the walls of his cell.

The message on most cards was

"You are not forgotten".

After Mahjoub left prison, he kept the cards and managed to hide them even though his home was searched 11 times by the Sudanese security services.

In August 2008, Mahjoub and Amira carried the cards to Amnesty's office in London, UK. Then he mailed invitations to the people who had sent the cards 17 years before and asked them to come to a thank-you party.

Mahjoub held his celebration in a church hall in London. Some of the letter writers joined him; many others wrote back to say how happy they were to hear from him. ■



Daniel Berhulik/Getty Images

A child in the Dharavi slum, Mumbai, India. A new United Nations agreement will help protect people's rights to such things as water, housing and health care.

## Important UN agreement promises to protect human rights

On December 10, 2008, the United Nations adopted a new international human rights agreement with a name only a lawyer could love: the Optional Protocol to the International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights.

So what does this mean and why is it so important?

Around the world, women die during pregnancy or childbirth because of lack of health care.

People live in slums. Communities have their land polluted by mining, oil and gas companies. Sometimes these things happen as a result of those in power denying people their basic rights.

Because of the new agreement, people will be able to make complaints at the United Nations when their rights to such things as water and health care are violated. Despite its unwieldy name, the new protocol is a big step forward. ■



## Amnesty donors Margaret and Brian John explain why they chose to remember Amnesty in their wills

Margaret and Brian John have been making a difference as Amnesty volunteers for more than three decades. Margaret is Amnesty's coordinator for Singapore and Malaysia, while Brian is our coordinator for Myanmar.

### Why did you become involved with Amnesty International?

We joined Amnesty International in 1975, convinced by current events that it was time to speak out against injustice.

### What motivates you to carry on as Amnesty activists?

We feel privileged to campaign alongside courageous human rights defenders like Dr Chee Soon Juan, an opposition leader who has been imprisoned seven times in Singapore. Dr Chee says that every day in prison strengthens his determination to bring human rights and democracy to his country. In Myanmar, the times are dire, but as prisoner of conscience Aung San Suu Kyi has urged us all, "Please use your liberty to secure ours." What else can we do but carry on the work?

### Why did you decide to remember Amnesty International in your wills?

We recognize how effective Amnesty's work is, and want it to continue. We can think of no better way of ensuring justice and dignity for future generations.

To find out how to leave your legacy for human rights, please fill out the enclosed coupon, email [giftplanning@amnesty.ca](mailto:giftplanning@amnesty.ca) or call 1-800-AMNESTY (1-800-266-3789).

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Ma Khin Khin Leh with her husband and their daughter in 1996.

## Political prisoners set free in Myanmar

Prisoner of conscience Ma Khin Khin Leh was one of 24 political prisoners set free in Myanmar on February 21, 2009. Amnesty International members had been campaigning for her freedom for almost ten years.

In July 1999, the authorities had been trying to find her husband Kyaw Wunna, who was helping to organize a pro-democracy demonstration. When they could not find him, the authorities arrested Ma Khin Khin Leh instead. They even detained her three-year-old daughter for five days. Ma Khin Khin Leh was then sentenced to life in prison.

Amongst others released on February 21 were nine Buddhist monks and one nun. Another man, Zaw Naing Htwe, was freed from a labour camp. He had been sentenced to nine years in prison in December 2008 for receiving a letter from his jailed older brother. ■



TANG CHHIN SOTH/AFP/Getty Images

Sok Sam Oeun outside a Cambodian court on the day of his release.

## Cambodia: Freedom for men wrongly jailed

Two Cambodian men falsely imprisoned for murder were finally released on December 31, 2008. Sok Sam Oeun and Born Samnang had been jailed for the killing of trade union leader Chea Vichea in central Phnom Penh in January 2004.

Amnesty International believed the men were wrongly accused and Amnesty members campaigned for their release. The prosecution had no evidence directly linking the men to the murder. Both men had strong alibis for the time of the shooting, and the entire police investigation and court process were deeply flawed. ■



© Campaign for Equality

## Prisoner of conscience Hana Abdi released

Hana Abdi, a 22-year-old student and women's human rights activist, was released from prison in Iran on February 26, 2009.

She had been arrested at her grandfather's house in 2007, accused among other things of "enmity against God", and sentenced to five years in jail.

Amnesty International believed she was a prisoner of conscience, who was being targeted because of her peaceful support for the rights of women and Iran's Kurdish minority. Hana Abdi is a member of the *Campaign for Equality*, an organization that is trying to end legal discrimination against women in Iran.

Amnesty members wrote to the Iranian authorities calling for Hana's freedom. Her early release is very welcome news. ■

# “Leave us in peace!”

## Colombians tell human rights abusers

**New Amnesty report tells of the incredible courage of ordinary people**

**Amnesty members support Colombians in their struggle for human rights**

**When Yolanda Becerra** heard a knock at the door she was expecting to meet two colleagues. But when she opened the door, two hooded men forced their way in. They were both armed with guns.

They shoved Yolanda against a wall and threatened her: “You have 48 hours to leave otherwise we will put an end to your family and you will not escape.”

This terrifying incident happened in November 2007 in the city of Barrancabermeja in north-east Colombia. Yolanda knew she was in very serious danger. She leads a local human rights organization and she was almost certainly being targeted because of her work.

To help protect Yolanda, Amnesty International quickly issued an Urgent Action appeal on her behalf. Amnesty members around the world responded by writing letters to the Colombian authorities demanding that they immediately act to protect Yolanda, her family and colleagues.

**A 40-year “forgotten” conflict**  
The assault on Yolanda Becerra is



Colombian children in a camp for displaced people. 40 years of conflict has forced up to 3 million Colombians to flee their homes.

not an isolated incident. “For over 40 years, Colombians have been trapped in one of the worst forgotten conflicts in the world,” says Marcelo Pollack, an Amnesty International researcher who investigates human rights in Colombia.

Between 2006 and 2008, Amnesty International researchers went on a series of in-depth missions to Colombia. A recent report that the researchers wrote is a detailed, up-to-date study on human rights in Colombia and it makes for heart-wrenching reading.

The researchers met Colombians from many walks of life. Many had recently suffered the tragic loss of loved ones, and telling their stories was often a deeply painful experience. But it was clear from the interviews that the Colombian people want peace and justice.

### Speaking out for peace

Despite 40 years of conflict, ordinary Colombian people are showing

extraordinary courage in the struggle for human rights. In the past two years, there has been a series of huge demonstrations across Colombia with people taking to city streets to protest against human rights abuses.

Speaking out for human rights can be dangerous. But the Colombian people have shown that they will not be silenced. And as an Amnesty International member, you are standing in solidarity with them in their struggle to bring peace to their troubled country.

In February 2009, Yolanda Becerra visited Canada on a tour that Amnesty International helped organize. She thanked Amnesty members for all their support over the years.

“The messages that people in Canada and around the world have written on my behalf in the past are the reason that I am still alive today,” she said. “The Colombian government pays a lot of attention to what people in other countries have to say.” ■

# President Obama restores respect for human rights

## President orders closure of Guantánamo Bay

### Amnesty members can take pride in victory for human rights

Since his inauguration on January 20, 2009, President Barack Obama has moved swiftly to restore respect for human rights in the United States.

- Almost immediately, President Obama issued three important executive orders that promise to end some of the worst policies of the “war on terror”.
- He ordered the closure within a year of the Guantánamo Bay detention centre.
  - He ordered the CIA to shut down any long-term prisons it was operating anywhere in the world.



Above, right to left: Moazzem Begg, Murat Kurnaz, Sami al Hajj and Rustam Akhmiarov were all tortured and held for several years in Guantánamo Bay. None were ever charged with a crime. Amnesty members campaigned on their behalf. Since their releases, the four men have spoken out for human rights.

- He also banned the CIA from using torture.
- After years of work, Amnesty International supporters can celebrate this huge victory for human rights. As an Amnesty member, you can take pride in the fact that it was your support for human rights, your persistence and your commitment that

helped shine a light on Guantánamo Bay, torture, and secret CIA prisons.

Right now, millions of people feel included in the new President’s messages of hope and the possibility of change. But there is much work to be done before that hope and change can be fully realised. We must continue to be watchful and press for action. ■

## Court demands arrest of Sudan leader for Darfur war crimes

There is now a real possibility that President Omar al-Bashir of Sudan will face justice for the terrible human rights abuses committed by his government in the Darfur region.

On March 4, 2009, the International Criminal Court (ICC) ordered al-Bashir’s arrest. This is the first time in its history that the ICC has ordered the arrest of a serving head of state. Al-Bashir has been told to appear before the court to face charges of crimes against humanity and war crimes.

The sheer scale of the abuses



A Sudanese boy holds up a drawing showing human rights abuses he witnessed in Darfur.

in Darfur is difficult to imagine: 300,000 killed, thousands of women and girls raped, and more than 2.4 million people forced to leave their homes.

Amnesty International members have been demanding protection and

justice for the people of Darfur since early 2003 when Amnesty researchers warned the world of the looming crisis. International pressure helped persuade the United Nations to send peacekeeping troops to the region in December 2007. ■

# China faces a crucial year for human rights

Since the last issue of this newsletter, we have received some good news from China. Three prisoners of conscience – Bu Dongwei, Ye Guozhu and Mao Hengfeng, whose freedom Amnesty members had campaigned for – have been released.

Unfortunately, human rights are still widely under attack in the country. Since January 2009, the authorities have been blocking Amnesty International's main website. The reason? The authorities say they want to clean up "vulgar" internet content.

Amnesty International's website has been blocked before but it was

"unblocked" shortly before the 2008 Beijing Olympics. At the time, we hoped it was the start of a more open attitude toward human rights in China.

pro-democracy Tiananmen protests. Any of these important anniversaries might inspire protests and trigger further government crackdowns.

Amnesty International is ensuring that human rights in China remains a high priority in 2009.

This is a crucial year for China. 2009 marks the 50th anniversary of the 1959 uprising in Tibet, the 30th anniversary of the 1979 "Democracy Wall" movement, and the 20th anniversary of the crackdown on the 1989

After several years of intense campaigning in the run up to the 2008 Beijing Olympics, Amnesty International is ensuring that human rights in China remains a high priority in 2009. ■

## Freed Mao Hengfeng



**Mao Hengfeng**, was released on November 29, 2008. In 1988, Mao was fired from her job when she became pregnant with her third child. This was against China's family-planning regulations, but she refused to have an abortion. She has often been tortured and is in very poor health. But she has been encouraged by messages of support from Amnesty members and others.



**Ye Guozhu**, was released on October 15, 2008. Ye Guozhu was jailed in 2004 for peacefully protesting against the demolition of his home and businesses to make way for Olympic Games facilities. During his four years in prison, Ye Guozhu's health deteriorated. He is exhausted from his ordeal and is currently receiving medical treatment.



**Bu Dongwei**, also known as David Bu, was released on July 23, 2008. Bu was arrested in May 2006 after police found Falun Gong literature in his home. Tens of thousands of Falun Gong followers have been thrown in jail since the spiritual movement was banned in 1999 as a "threat to social stability".

# Journalist thankful to Amnesty members

**“I’m here thanks to you,”**

Moussa Kaka told Amnesty members and staff in Paris on November 7, 2008. “I received really a lot of letters from Amnesty International that my lawyer gave me, hundreds, maybe thousands... I’m keeping them all. My thanks to all those who worked for my release!”

Kaka is a journalist in Niger, Western Africa. He is director of a radio station and Niger



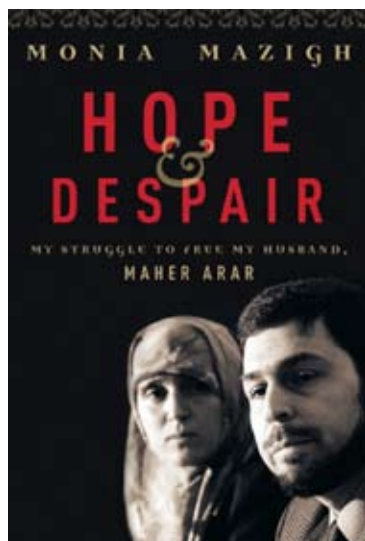
BOUREIMA HAMANA/EPIC/Getty Images

Supporters surround Moussa Kaka to congratulate him after he was freed from jail in Niger.

correspondent of French broadcaster *Radio France Internationale*.

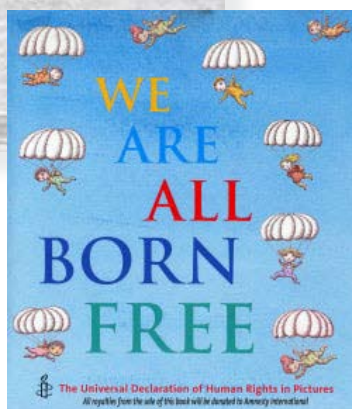
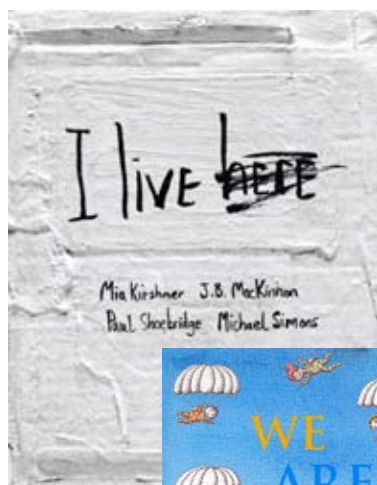
He was arrested on September 20, 2007, and accused of plotting against the government. Amnesty believed

that he was a prisoner of conscience and was being held because of his activities as a journalist. An appeal court finally ordered his release in October 2008. ■



## Three new books support Amnesty’s human rights work

- In *Hope and Despair*, Monia Mazigh describes her courageous fight to free her husband, Maher Arar, from a Syrian jail.
- *I Live Here* by Canadian actor Mia Kirshner is a visually stunning book about the lives of refugees. The stories are deeply moving while the book’s design is a work of art in itself.



- *We are All Born Free* is a beautiful picture book celebrating the Universal Declaration of Human Rights. Children aged 6 and over are sure to take great pleasure in it.

## Free DVD offer for Amnesty donors



Alex Neve, secretary general of Amnesty International in Canada, headed the latest Amnesty research mission to Chad in spring 2008. Now, Amnesty has produced a DVD of Alex’s mission. To receive a free copy while stocks last, please phone **1-800-AMNESTY (1-800-266-3789)**, email **members@amnesty.ca** or fill out the enclosed coupon. A few copies of the DVD of Alex’s previous mission to the Chad/Sudan border in 2006 are also still available.

Food.  
Friends.  
Freedom.

# Celebrate your **Taste for Justice** this summer!



Amnesty International supporters share their Taste for Justice, June 2008.

You and friends can **dine in** and **dine out** this summer in support of Amnesty's work to protect women's human rights and stop violence against women.

You can take part by dining in – hosting a fundraising BBQ or dinner party at any time – and by dining out – visiting participating **Taste for Justice** restaurants from June 1-15, 2009.

To register as a Taste for Justice host, or to find participating restaurants in your city, please visit [tasteforjustice.ca](http://tasteforjustice.ca) or call **1-800-266-3789**.

**Thank you for helping Amnesty stop violence against women!**



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