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Amnesty International UA NEWSLETTER



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Luiz Rossi (centre) was the subject of the first ever Urgent Action, the brain child of Amnesty researcher Tracy Ulltveit-Moe (pictured at right with Luiz and his wife Maria Jose). Their inspiring story is found on page 2.



Irene Khan today said: "Every Urgent Action reminds us why the work of Amnesty International is so important, and of the unique role we have in combating human rights violations worldwide. I would like to extend my sincere gratitude to all members of the Urgent Action network for their tireless campaigning for human rights."

Thank you for all your hard work. We really do make a difference.
-- The UA Team, International Secretariat, London, ENGLAND

Turning 30: Hip, hip UA!

Date : March 19, 2003
From : Amnesty International
Subject : Hip Hip UA! Urgent Actions 30 Years Old Today!
To: Everyone in the Urgent Action Network

Dear Friends:

As you may well already know, today Amnesty International celebrates three decades of Urgent Actions. The UA Team would like to join with AI Secretary General Irene Khan in thanking current and past members of the UA Network for helping to make the technique such a success, and so making a real difference to countless lives worldwide.

Here are a few great ways to mark the 30th anniversary

1. Make a cake with 30 candles. Invite friends over to share it and to write 30 letters or postcards on current UAs. Let us know the date of your event, so we can rush one or two UAs to you the day before.
2. Ask 30 people to add their signatures petition-style to the letters you write on UA cases in the next 30 days.
3. Don't write on the next Urgent Action you receive. Instead, give it to someone who might be interested in the subject matter and ask them to write (torture/medical concerns

- are ideal for sharing with a doctor; legal concerns for a lawyer; teacher/student cases work for anyone in the education system; childrens' cases interest teenagers, etc.)
4. Personalize the press release we've prepared (*see insert*) and send it to the editor of your local newspaper as a good news story with a local angle that's worthy of coverage.
5. If this list overwhelms you and you're feeling a bit "burned out", take a 30-day guilt-free holiday from writing.

The story of Amnesty's first Urgent Action

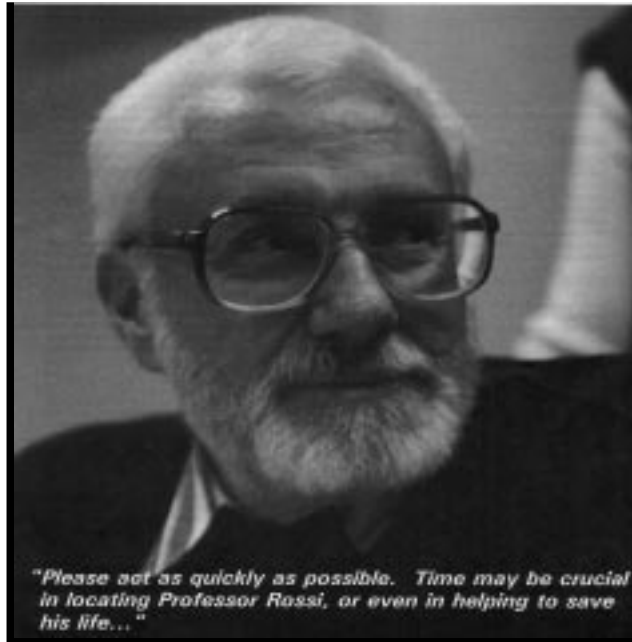
"Please act as quickly as possible. Time may be crucial in locating Professor Rossi, or even in helping to save his life."

Those were the words that began the first ever Urgent Action, a human rights technique that marked its 30th anniversary on March 19th.

It was 1973 and Brazil was ruled by a military regime. On the night of February 15, heavily armed military police forced their way into the home of Luiz Basilio Rossi, a professor of Brazilian History at São Paulo University. Without explanation, Rossi was taken away into the darkness. As Rossi himself remembers: "At the time, many people were being arrested for political reasons and tortured to death or 'disappeared'. I had a real fear this would happen to me too."

Security forces returned to the house, surrounding it and nailing boards across the front door. Although trapped inside, Rossi's wife, María José, managed to get a note to her neighbour's young daughter via a back window. Eventually, the smuggled message reached London and Tracey Ullveit-Moe, Brazil researcher with Amnesty International. For some time, Ullveit-Moe had been receiving horror stories from Brazil of brutal state torture, usually in the first days of custody. "What we needed was quick action for prisoners in danger," recalls Ullveit-Moe. "I suggested the name 'Urgent Action' and the title stuck."

The details of Luiz Rossi's case were typed up, along with the names and addresses of Brazilian government officials to whom letters on Rossi's behalf should be sent. On March 19, 1973, using names from a shoebox of hand written address cards, the first Urgent Action



was mailed out far and wide.

Two weeks later, Rossi's wife was ordered to military police headquarters to identify her husband's body. Instead, she sees her husband alive. She is also shown a pile of letters. The military police director tells her: "Your husband must be a more important person than we thought because we've got all these letters from all over the world."

María José Rossi is convinced those letters saved her husband's life. "I got the impression from the Director that he and the authorities were feeling under great pressure from AI – pressure to produce the prisoner, to show him because he was getting so much publicity," recounts María José. "We were heartened to know that people outside Brazil knew what was going on, that they cared, and that they were prepared to do something about it. It gave us great comfort and hope."

Luiz Rossi cannot say enough about the effectiveness of the strategy. "The torturer aims to isolate you, to cut all links with the outside world. But Amnesty's Urgent Action was able to break that isolation," he says. "Once the authorities know that other people know you're there and what's happening to you, they are forced to be more careful about how they treat you."

Luiz Rossi was released in October 1973 and went into exile in Belgium. Many years later he returned to live in Brasilia, where his wife was a founding member of that city's AI group, as well as Brazil's AI Health Professional's Network. States Luiz Rossi: "I will write an Urgent Action appeal anytime – how can I refuse!"

Human Rights Day letter writing marathon

Remember the 24-hour letter-writing marathon that UA members in Poland invited us to join for Human Rights Day 2002? It was described in our November Newsletter. Well, UA writers in 21 countries participated and the final count totaled 6,366 letters. Canadian participants in Victoria, North Vancouver and even Savage, Minnesota put the figure over the 6,000 mark by contributing 372 messages. The biggest gathering was in Niagara-on-the-Lake (see photo). Amnesty Poland will be organizing another marathon around December 10, 2003. Look for details in the next Newsletter, due in November.



Good News! Your letters work!



N'sii Luanda Shandwa released in Congo

UA participants began asking for the release of N'sii Luanda Shandwe in April 2002 (UA 120/02). The prisoner of conscience and human rights defender was being held in Kinshasa, the capital of the Democratic Republic of Congo. On February 28, we finally got news of his release. One of the first things he did was write to Amnesty International about your letters: "Perhaps they can't quite imagine how much courage, moral comfort, protection and happiness their actions gave me. I will remain forever grateful..."

100 percent success in Bangladesh

The Research Team at the International Secretariat has this message for anyone who worked on a Bangladesh UA in the past year: "All 16 individuals named in Bangladesh UAs since March 2002 have now been released. We wish to thank the UA Network for the great work it has done in recent months urging the government to respect human rights. This has given support and encouragement to lawyers seeking judicial redress for their detainees. Our UAs have received regular coverage in the Bangladeshi media, helping publicize and illustrate the patterns of human rights violations that have been taking place against members of the opposition and others who speak out against government policies and practice in Bangladesh."

Illinois Governor George Ryan pardoned death row prisoners

Madison Hoble, Stanley Howard, Leroy Orange and Aaron Patterson on January 10 (EXTRA 88/02). The following day, he converted 3 death sentences to 40 years in prison and 164 others to life in prison.

Three years ago, Governor Ryan imposed a moratorium on executions because of what he called a "shameful" record of wrongful convictions.

Said the Governor: "There is not a doubt in my mind that the number of innocent men freed from our death row [now] stands at 17 ... That is an absolute embarrassment ... a catastrophic failure... If the system was making so many errors in determining whether someone was guilty in the first place, how fairly and accurately was it determining which guilty defendants deserved to live and which deserved to die?... To say it plainly, one more time: the Illinois capital



Governor Ryan

punishment system is broken. It has taken innocent men to a hair's breadth escape from their unjust execution. Legislatures past have refused to fix it. Our new legislature and our new Governor must act to rid our state of the shame of threatening the innocent with execution and the guilty with unfairness."

"He owes his freedom to you ..."

Mr. Baryalai, a telephone operator from Sharan, Afghanistan, was detained on November 12 and held in isolation by U.S. military forces in what he believes were 3 different locations (EXTRA 87/02). Letterwriting helped secure his release in late December. Amnesty International received this letter: "Mr. Baryalai has asked me to convey his heartfelt gratitude and immense appreciation to all those colleagues at Amnesty International and its members world-wide who worked so hard to secure his legal rights and ensure humane treatment for him while in U.S. custody... He wishes to congratulate you all and wants you to know he owes his freedom to you! The often-time, nerve-shattering experience would have proved unbearable, and all hope would have been lost had it not been for the excellent support and assistance Mr Baryalai and his family received from Amnesty International since the time of his detention."

Chinese AIDS activist released and back at work

Dr. Wan Yanhai, a Chinese HIV/AIDS activist, went missing last August. UA 273/03 was issued for him on September 2. He was released on September 20. In October, he was allowed to re-register his action group under a new name. Amnesty International continues to monitor his case.



Harassment of AI member in Tunisia stops

Amnesty International member Zouhayer Makhoulf was detained along with former political prisoner Chadli Turki on September 4, 2002 (UA 279/02). Tunisian authorities arrested them as part of an ongoing pattern of harassment and intimidation against human rights defenders. Zouhayer was questioned about his activities with AI and asked to give up his membership. Two days after the UA was issued, both men were released without charge and have not been harassed since.

"Who are you that the President of Turkmenistan is so interested in you?"

Turkemen citizen Gulgeldi Annanyazov sought refuge in Kazakstan and received formal refugee status from the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees in September 2002. Even so, UA 275/02 had to be issued for him when deportation appeared imminent. As a former political prisoner, he would have been at high risk of torture if forcibly returned home.

But Gulgeldi remains safe and your letters were instrumental in convincing Kazakstan authorities to respect their obligations under international human rights law not to return a person to a situation where they could be tortured.

"Thank you for doing an action on my behalf," Gulgedi told Amnesty International. "The director of the investigation-isolation prison where I was kept in Kazakstan said to me: 'Who are you that the President of Turkmenistan is so interested in you?'"

Human rights defenders in Liberia have frequently been the target of arbitrary arrest and often tortured. Last June, UA 194/02 was issued for Humanist Watch Executive Director Sheikh K.M. Sacko and Hassan Bility, a journalist and human rights defender. Both were detained without charge and held incommunicado. Detention also awaited Liberians who campaigned for their release and UA 322/02 had to be issued in October for Dempster Brown, Blamoh Sieh and Peter Nicholson, members of the Liberia Coalition of Human Rights Defenders. By the end of the month, they had been set free, unharmed. Following months of national and international pressure, Hassan Bility was also released on December 7 and deported to the United States.

An update to UA 322/02 was issued when the Secretary General of the Liberia Coalition of Human Rights Defenders, Aloysius Toe, was arrested. He and three prisoners of conscience remain in detention. Weeks ago, Aloysius Toe managed to send a message from Monrovia's Central Prison asking for sustained pressure to bring about their release. If you would like to respond to his request, please send a postcard or short letter, saying: "I share Amnesty International's call for the release of Aloysius Toe, Sheikh K.M. Sackor, Mohammad Kamara and Ansumana Kamara. Please set them free now." Send your message to:
President Charles Taylor, Executive Mansion, P.O. Box 9001, Capitol Hill, Monrovia, LIBERIA



The words of Freed Liberian journalist Hassan Bility:
"It is with joy that I send you this first message after about 6 months in jail under the repressive Taylor regime ...
I must thank Amnesty International for all the efforts exerted to secure my release. I feel really indebted to Amnesty International and words are inadequate for me to express my gratitude...
You are indeed a great rights advocacy group."
Thank you so much."



The POWER of mail !!

"I have no fax or email. What good is a letter that will take 2 weeks to arrive?"

How frustrating it can feel trying to respond to a violation that's happening *now*, with only Canada Post, no matter how sterling its service, to support you. Don't fret! Here's why:

- Your letter is not an individual effort; it's part of a global attack. Others are sending messages via fax, perhaps via email/telephone/telex, and via their national postal services. What we want is an outburst, followed by a steady stream of concerned voices. Your letter, whenever it arrives, feeds into that process.
- If your letter does not arrive in time to prevent harm to a prisoner, we have to trust it will have a preventive effect the next time there is a potential for abuse. Often, we underestimate the power we have to prevent human rights violations because it's difficult to measure. But no doubt the preventative effect of our appeals is much greater than we can ever guess.
- Letters remain the best way to deliver your message. A hand-written or personally-worded, typed appeal with a real signature and address conveys sincerity and proof of effort on the part of the writer. A letter has always been a formal communication tool and such formality is vital if governments are to take our appeals seriously. A case in point is the computer-generated email reply from Ariel Sharon's office suggesting that if one has a specific question or concern, a *signed letter* should be sent to him.

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- Fax is a great compromise between the quickness of email and the formality of mailed appeals. You could scout around in your community for someone who has a machine and ask to use it occasionally for human rights work. Offer to pay for the long distance charges, of course, although faxing one page often costs less than an international postage stamp, so your host might just absorb the charges. Who knows, your work might just pique their curiosity, and you might eventually recruit a new member for Amnesty!



Your daily smile

"I am one of your UA people. Quite recently you had a problem sending a fax to my machine. I think this had something to do with my cat – who likes to walk on it and listen to it beep. I can't find anything wrong with it now and have taped a bottle cap over the important keys so she can't push them. She phoned my 88-year-old aunt at 3 A.M. one morning so I thought I should take some "urgent action" of my own!! Sorry about the problem."

Ellen Knapp, November 14, 2002



From time to time, we hear of governments becoming exasperated with the deluge of appeals that just doesn't seem to let up. Some have contacted our International Secretariat in London, asking for relief from more letters. The reply: "Of course we'd be happy to comply and will do so when you have stopped violating the human rights the letters are about."

In a most recent example, the President of an

African country telephoned a journalist, imploring him to "stop Amnesty International" because the situation was becoming embarrassing!



— Original message —

From: Destinations in Africa
Sent: Periodically
Subject: URGENT ASSISTANCE

Do you suffer from these kinds of email messages? The individuals sending them invariably claim they have a massive amount of money, such as 25 million dollars and want your help investing it. They do not want their identity revealed and they assure you that you will get a cut of the profits.

Please, never read these messages for more than amusement and simply delete them; there is no way to prevent their arrival. Do not respond to them and never provide information on your personal finances.



Some tips about COPIES

"I always add an intro to any copy I send, i.e. I generally tell ambassadors I would like to let them know Canadians are concerned about an issue, and ask them to bring it to the attention of their governments." -- *Orysia Daly, February 21, 2003*

That practice is ideal, although admittedly not everyone has the time to add a hand-written note to their copies.

If you've just written to a Spanish-speaking government authority and you are ready to send a copy to a human rights group, here are some Spanish phrases you can add in the margin:

"No estan solos." (You are not alone.); "Valoramos mucho el trabajo tan importante de ustedes." (We value the important work you do.); "Con mucha solidaridad desde Canada." (With much solidarity from Canada)

Greetings from Marilyn's new sidekick

At the beginning of February, Kathy Price took over for Joanne Lebert -- now in Africa doing her PhD research -- to help Marilyn coordinate the Urgent Action network. It is a homecoming of sorts for Kathy, who first found voice for her human rights activism as a member of McGill University's Amnesty International letter writing group, more years ago than she cares to tell!



New UA co-coordinator Kathy Price (right) with Colombian human rights defender Beatriz Jaramillo.

Kathy went on to a career in journalism at CBC-TV current affairs, continuing to do Amnesty and refugee resettlement work in her free time. In 1993, she decided to make human rights a full time occupation and joined the Inter-Church Committee on Human Rights in Latin America (ICCHRLA). Fluent in Spanish, Kathy has traveled extensively in Mexico, Central America and South America, taking part in numerous human rights fact finding delegations. Kathy has also produced critically-acclaimed videos about post-war Central America (*Peace, What Peace?*), Colombia's dirty war (*The Hidden Story*) and the impact of a Canadian-financed hydroelectric dam on Embera Katio

indigenous communities in northern Colombia (*Our River, Our Life*).

"I will never forget how an urgent action appeal saved the lives of 22 Embera Katio who had been abducted by Colombian paramilitary forces on the Sinu River," recounts Kathy. "Embera leaders who met with Colombian government officials were told that many letters had ar-

rived from Canada and other countries. They were convinced that without those letters, 22 people would not have been released to return to their families and be able to continue to defend the rights of their communities."

Continues Kathy: "I know of so many other cases where quick response to urgent action appeals literally saved the lives of human rights defenders, trade unionists and community activists, allowing them to carry on their important, courageous work. For that reason, I feel incredibly privileged to work with the dedicated members of the Urgent Action Network. Your commitment, humanity and letters are a powerful force for human rights and an enormous source of hope."

Advice from a master

Urgent Actions rely on the power of the word. And speaking of words, here's what George Orwell had to say about the craft of writing:

"A scrupulous writer, in every sentence that he (sic) writes will ask himself at least four questions, thus: What am I trying to say? What words will express it? What image or idiom will make it clearer? Is this image fresh enough to have an effect? And he will probably ask himself two more: Could I put it more shortly? Have I said anything that is avoidably ugly?"

Those are powerful tips for UA writers, especially since many of our appeals must be translated at their destination.

Reading between the lines: A glossary of UA lingo

Words -- that's what our letters rely on. But some of the words used in Urgent Actions, themselves, can be *obfuscating* (that is: *complicating* or *confusing*)! We hope this glossary will help clear things up.

Arbitrary

In daily use, this adjective often means "determined by chance, whim, or impulse, and not by necessity, reason, or principle". In UAs, it is likely used in the legal sense to mean: "not supported by fair or substantial cause or reason". In other words, *arbitrary* means *unlawful* or *illegal*.

Allegedly

You'll see this word a lot in UAs. *Allegedly* refers to something that is "accused but not proven" and often means "of questionable truth or genuineness". It is important to assess who is *alleging* and whether they have a reputation for truthfulness! In a recent UA about Colombia, the army *allegedly* found explosives and detained leaders of a Peace Community, labelling them guerrilla collaborators. Yet they were later released without charge, casting doubt on the truth of the *so-called* evidence against them. Other synonyms you can use include: *supposed*, *dubious*, *questionable* or *reported*.

Commute or Commutation

For city-dwellers, commute is daily travel between home and work, often in a traffic jam! UAs use the legal meaning. To *commute a punishment* is to change it to one that is less severe. For example, the Governor "provided a *commutation* from a death sentence to life imprisonment." Putting that into your own words in a letter, you might ask an authority to *convert* the death

sentence to a humane penalty, or to *exchange* or *substitute* it for a punishment that respects the right to life.

Deterrent

The dictionary tells us this means "serving to *deter*" or in other words, to "discourage" or "prevent". In death penalty cases, you may be asked to make the point that "there is no proof the death penalty *deters* crime more effectively than other penalties." When making this argument in your letters, be careful to finish the thought. To say: "the death penalty has never been proven to be a deterrent" is obviously not true. What you want to say is that "the death penalty has never been proven to *deter crime* better than other, more humane, punishments."

Extrajudicial

Definitions include "not forming a valid part of regular legal proceedings", "in contravention of due process of law" and "without legal authority". In plain speak, *extrajudicial* means *unlawful*.

Incommunicado

This term, originally from Spanish, literally means without communication. Prisoners who are *incommunicado* are not permitted to speak to or see anyone from outside their prison or place of detention. This state puts detainees at high risk of physical abuse because prison authorities feel least responsible for what happens to their

charges while they are hidden from view. Other words to use in your letters instead of *incommunicado* are *in isolation* or *in solitary confinement*.

Habeas corpus

You'll see this Latin term most often when a lawyer is not permitted to see a disappeared or *incommunicado* client. *Habeas corpus* is a legal order stating that a person must appear before, and be judged by, a court of law or a judge before he or she can *lawfully* be made to stay in prison.

Immunity

You've likely seen *immunity* used in the context of health to refer to protection against disease. In UAs, *immunity* usually means *exemption from penalty*, especially for those who have committed violations of human rights, as in "they insisted that heads of state must not be immune (i.e. must not be exempted or protected) from prosecution."

Impunity

Impunity is linked to *immunity*. The dictionary definition is "exemption from unpleasant consequences" or "freedom from punishment". In UAs, *impunity* refers to being protected from being held accountable, or judged and punished for abuses. In your letters, insist that "perpetrators do not enjoy *impunity* but are brought to justice, in accordance with your laws."