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Welcome to the second of two newsletters in 2015. I welcome your comments and questions.

Marilyn McKim
 Urgent Action Coordinator

“It was the first flicker of light in my dark days.”

Write for Rights 2015 is here! Last year, supporters of Amnesty sent 3.2 million messages on or around December 10, Human Rights Day. Let's shed light again on 11 specially selected cases. We'll be writing for Raif Badawi's lawyer in Saudi Arabia, a cartoonist in Malaysia, girls in Burkina Faso, a mother in Mexico, and a couple in Greece, among others. Write on your own, invite friends to join you, or join an event in your community. Register and find the actions at www.writeathon.ca or by contacting me. Don't miss out on the world's largest human rights event!

Dr Tun Aung's case was, for me, the most difficult one we featured in Write for Rights 2013. The prisoner of conscience was isolated in a prison far from home, and I wasn't sure that even the 100,000 appeals we sent would secure his freedom. Well, first we heard he received an official visit. Then the authorities transferred him close to home and gave him medical attention. Next, they reduced his sentence. Finally, he walked free on 20 January 2015. Here is his message to inspire your letter writing this year.

“Greetings to all AI including its executives, members and supporters. I am overwhelmed by the support and activities done by AI to secure my release. I am also very grateful for AI's continuing support and assistance.

“I have been following AI's work for decades. I first came to know about AI for its fight on the release of political prisoners of Cuba. In those days, it was almost impossible to accomplish such feats. When I was arbitrarily arrested and sentenced, AI was the first organization I thought of and I hoped in some way AI will work for my release. When I first met the UN Special Rapporteur for Human Rights situation in Myanmar, Mr. Thomas Ojea Quintana, I mentioned AI to him. Later, in Sittway and Insein central prisons, I started receiving some letters from AI members. It was the first flicker of light in my dark days. I truly believed AI will do all it can for my release.

“Only after my release, I was amazed to know the magnitude of AI's work for my release. I felt privileged to be part of the global letter writing campaign in 2013. All those activities are beyond my wildest imagination. The extent of the campaign and hundreds of



Dr Tun Aung is reunited with his wife on the day of his release © Private

personal letters written to me and my family made me very emotional and humbled. I owe so much to those who have bestowed such unbelievable care and support towards me and my family. I sincerely support your continuing efforts in freeing other prisoners of conscience and wrongfully imprisoned individuals across the world.”

Introducing the UA app

You may know that we are developing an app to promote Urgent Actions. It will help us reach many more people to respond to human rights emergencies. Some of you suggested delightful names like Amnesty UAct, URNotAlone, UrgentAct, Amnesty Alert, and Amnesty 911. UA writer Luc Iogna suggested the winner: Amnesty S.O.S. Watch for more about the app in the spring issue of the UA newsletter. By then, we expect to have thoroughly tested it.



Reasons to keep writing

Appeals secure immediate eye treatment

By last April, Foudama Ousmane had been in the Cameroon prison system for over six months. There were no charges against him. For the first 99 days, he had been denied access to family and legal counsel. Terrible as that is, what triggered Urgent Action 89/15 was his health. He had developed tuberculosis and was at risk of going blind.

- On April 16, writers in Canada and around the world began pressing for medical attention.
- On April 20, a doctor examined Foudama during a visit by the General Prosecutor to the Maroua Prison. The doctor confirmed that Foudama Ousmane had pulmonary tuberculosis and eye problems, and prescribed medication. That was granted.
- On April 21, the General Prosecutor informed Amnesty International that he had received “around 50 phone calls daily.” His inbox was full of messages urging him to provide Foudama Ousmane with medical treatment for his eyes.
- Amnesty International was able to close the UA on April 22. The appeals were successful!

Worldwide support sustains students

This past May, 16 students in Thailand faced charges for participating in peaceful protests on the anniversary of the 22 May 2014 military coup. They were put on trial in a military court. Amnesty International issued UA 136/15 in June to protest the violation of their right to freedom of expression. Fourteen of the students were released on 8 July, but they are not yet free. They could still be jailed for seven years for creating “unrest and disaffection... or [causing] people to transgress the laws of the country.” If that happens, they will be prisoners of conscience.



Rangsiman Rome (left) and Chonthicha Jangrew © Amnesty International

Rangsiman said, “I was overwhelmed when I knew that friends from many parts of the world sent wishes and encouragement through postcards, letting me know that I am not alone.”

Two of the students, Rangsiman Rome and Chonthicha Jangrew, travelled to London to share their experience with staff at our international office. Rangsiman recounted, “As you might know, I and other 13 students have been released. Time in prison refuses

to go by. It feels like eternity. The prison guards prohibited us from reading [the] newspaper or receiving news. The only way we could get a glimpse of what was going on outside was when our friends came for a visit. Now we know there are people who stand by us as we fight for democracy in Thailand.” We often do our best work when we provide moral support to defenders of fundamental rights.

Meeting one of the bravest people anywhere

UA 137/01 had featured Berenice Celeyta Alayón after a series of death threats put her life in danger. On 18 May 2001, for example, she found this message on her answering machine: “We are going to kill you, you old bitch.” The following day, a funeral wreath was left on her doorstep. That week she was followed constantly by unknown men in cars. Our messages alerted the government to concern from abroad and put a spotlight on her. Although Berenice has lived with danger all her life, here she was, safely in Toronto, for a few days. I took great pleasure in hearing her address a crowd on a June evening downtown.



In my position with Amnesty Canada, I sometimes have the great pleasure to meet the subjects of Urgent Actions. Last June, I met Colombian human rights defender Berenice Celeyta Alayón.

“Years ago there was an Urgent Action”, she told a supportive audience. “It was distributed in both English and Spanish, not just in Cali but all around the world. So many organizations supported me: Amnesty International, Peace Brigades, Human Rights Watch -- they all contributed.” Do you get protection from the government? someone asked. “If we were to accept protection from the government, it would be like saying that Dracula guards the blood bank. Protection is not always guaranteed or secure.” Another question was what Colombia needs to escape the violence so many citizens suffer. “Colombia is a country of violence but also of dignity. We need a commission of truth, we need reparations for damages, and we need guarantees that human rights violations will not be repeated. But we have not yet attained post-conflict. Colombia is still at war, in war.” What keeps you going? someone asked. Her face lit up. “The faces of our children. They have such hope, a hope that supersedes the war.”

Berenice has returned to Colombia to continue carrying out her legitimate human rights work.

Prisoner leaves death row alive

Amnesty International mobilized the UA Network in May 2013 for Willie Manning on Mississippi's death row (UA 113/13). At the time, he faced execution for two murders committed in 1992. He maintained his innocence. Five hours before he was to be executed, the state Supreme Court halted preparations.

In February 2015, the Court granted Willie a new trial. The Court said the state had originally failed to provide certain evidence that would have been favourable to his defence. On April 21, the Oktibbeha County District Attorney in Mississippi dismissed the charges against Willie. The Death Penalty Information Center in Washington now lists Willie Manning as the 153rd death row prisoner to be exonerated in the USA since 1973. You can see that list at <http://bit.ly/W7PxVh>.

Speaking of the death penalty, here's a mini quiz for you. Find the answers on the back page.



- If we leave out China (due to lack of information), how many executions did Amnesty International record in 2014?*
 - 60
 - 607
 - 6700
- The five countries that execute the most are China, Iran, Saudi Arabia, Iraq and _____.*
- True or False? Once a country has abolished the death penalty, none have reinstated it.*
- True or False? Multiple studies have shown that the death penalty deters crime no better than humane penalties.*
- In 1977, Amnesty International decided to lead the world in campaigning against the death penalty. In that year, how many countries had abolished it for all crimes?*
 - 16
 - 26
 - 52
- And how many today have abolished it in law or practice?*
 - 140
 - 101
 - 132

Your Questions Answered

Cynthia from Fredericton asks:

I have received my first Urgent Action and am sending emails to the parties indicated. Do you want to have a copy?

If you are unsure about your letter, you are welcome to send it to me for comment. Otherwise, the answer is "no, thanks". My inbox would overflow daily from all the letter writing activity.

Also, should I send the letter as an attachment or just a message written or pasted into the email?

Always send it in the body of the email. Some officials will not open attachments for fear of a security risk. And remember to add your location and to make it as unique as possible. That way, it is personal and the recipient knows where it is coming from.

Laura from Peterborough has three questions.

Should I explain that I am writing via Amnesty International?

It's not necessary, but you are welcome to. I sometimes begin, "I have heard from Amnesty International that... Can you confirm the information?"

Why are the cc letters important?

- The authorities do not always act on our requests. If they know someone else is seeing the appeals, it puts a little more pressure on them to respond.
- Copies to the diplomatic missions are important too. Ambassadors and high commissioners report back to their governments on how Canadians feel about issues in their home countries. Your copies may exert extra pressure if the country is a trading partner or a tourist destination for Canadians.
- Copies to human rights groups in the country can have a tremendous impact. When these groups know that people outside their country are standing up for their rights, it can markedly increase their stamina and courage.

Should I avoid signing an online petition if I am also writing a letter for the same person?

No. Go right ahead and do both.

How does Amnesty conduct its research?

I am often asked how Amnesty conducts its research. I've added to my standard reply after reading Christoph Koettl's article at <http://bit.ly/1M29eE9>. Christoph is the founder and editor of Amnesty's Citizen Evidence Lab. In the article, he describes how new technology and citizen journalism helped to expose war crimes in Nigeria. Let me know if you would like a copy mailed to you.

Wanted! Volunteer leaders for Amnesty Canada!

We are looking for volunteer Youth Organizers, Local Organizers, and Fieldworkers.

- Youth Organizers work with youth and students on human rights activities.
- Local Organizers connect people in their communities to Amnesty groups, activities, and campaigns.
- Fieldworkers motivate and support Amnesty activists in their human rights work. They train and support local leaders, network with other social justice groups, respond to media requests, and speak at public events on behalf of Amnesty.

If you are interested in learning more about becoming a Youth Organizer, Local Organizer, or Fieldworker, please contact me for more information.

Leaving a legacy for Amnesty International

After nearly four decades of involvement in Amnesty's work, Margaret John is as passionate as ever about human rights. Her strong desire to seek justice for generations to come motivated her to leave a gift to Amnesty International in her will. You, too, can pass on the values that you stand for. Your legacy gift, of any size, will help stop human rights violations in the future. For information about how to leave a gift in your will, or add changes to it, please contact Hala Al-Madi at 1-800-266-3789 or halmadi@amnesty.ca.



Margaret John says "I can think of no better way of ensuring justice and dignity for future generations than to leave a gift to AI in my will."

Photo by Paul Thomson

Help Amnesty stop torture!

Our petition at <http://bit.ly/1ByWdhi> asks Canada to work for an end to the use of torture around the world. If you have already signed it, thank you. Now we need your help to secure 100,000 signatures by spring 2016. Please share the link widely.



Include your full address on appeals

This fall, UA writers in New Zealand received a response from the Myanmar National Human Rights Commission about four prisoners of conscience who were featured in UA 75/15. It assured the writers that the four were well-treated and had access to their families and lawyers. The Commission also noted that they had received appeals from elsewhere, but many included only names and signatures, so it lacked full contact information to reply to each appeal. Please include your full address on your appeals, especially when you ask for information. Complete contact information also gives your appeals integrity and helps to make each one unique. Those qualities make your calls for justice more effective.

Refugees Welcome!

Stay tuned for information about an upcoming campaign to increase and promote support for refugees in Canada. The campaign will let it be known that **Refugees are Welcome** in Canada. It will call for safety for **More Refugees and More Fairness** for refugees. If you might like to participate and be a champion in this campaign, contact Gloria at gnaftziger@amnesty.ca.



Answers to mini quiz

1. 607
2. USA
3. False. Last year, seven countries reinstated the death penalty, including Belarus, Jordan, and Singapore. Still, use of the death penalty is declining worldwide.
4. True
5. 16 countries had abolished the death penalty in 1977.
6. Now, 140 have done so.

Amnesty International believes the world will be a better place when together we take injustice personally. Thank you for doing exactly that by your active involvement in the UA Network!