



**AMNESTY  
INTERNATIONAL**

## THE HISTORY OF AMNESTY INTERNATIONAL

Outraged after learning of two Portuguese students imprisoned for raising a toast to freedom in 1961, British lawyer Peter Benenson published an article, 'The Forgotten Prisoners', in The Observer newspaper. His article launched the worldwide campaign, 'Appeal for Amnesty 1961' and provoked a remarkable response. It was reprinted in newspapers across the world as his call to action resonated with the values and aspirations of people everywhere. This was the genesis of Amnesty International.

### 1961 to 1971

The first Amnesty International candle, which was to become the movement's iconic emblem, was first lit in London in 1961. The candle symbolized Peter Benenson's hope that through its work, Amnesty International would shine light on the darkest of places, where human rights abuses went unseen and unpunished. Benenson was inspired by the proverb "better to light a candle, than curse the darkness."

**The first ten years of Amnesty International saw the movement grow from a small group of volunteers in London, led by Peter Benenson himself, to 18 national sections with 850 groups in over 27 countries.**

**The movement did not waste time; only a year after being established the first human rights missions to Ghana, Czechoslovakia, Portugal and East Germany were launched and an observer was sent to the trial of Nelson Mandela.**

International recognition came quickly, Amnesty International was granted consultative status at the United Nations in 1964 and at the Council of Europe a year later.

By 1965, the movement had 'adopted' the cases of over 1,300 prisoners. Two years later, this had grown to nearly 2,000 prisoners in 63 countries. Imprisoned solely for their beliefs, Amnesty International named these individuals, 'prisoners of conscience'.

In 1966 Eric Baker took over leading the organization and in 1968 Martin Ennals succeeded him, accepting the newly formed title of 'Secretary General'.

By 1969 the movement had received consultative status with the United Nations Education, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO). That same year Amnesty International reported the release of over 2,000 prisoners of conscience.

Amnesty International launched the movement's first human rights reports on Portugal, South Africa and Romania.

## 1972 to 1981

**The next ten years was a period of exceptional growth in the size of Amnesty International as a movement and its impact and breadth of work. By the end of 1981 the movement had gained over 250,000 members, subscribers and supporters in over 150 countries or territories.**

The first 'Urgent Action' was issued in 1973. The Urgent Action network was established to enable the swift, worldwide mobilization of people to take action at short notice when an individual was identified as being in immediate danger, or when a human rights crisis was taking place.

By 1981 a total of 317 Urgent Actions were issued on behalf of thousands of prisoners in more than 60 countries.

**This period saw 19 new national Sections established and missions initiated in 23 countries.** The first global campaigns were launched, calling for the abolition of torture and an end to the death penalty across the world.

By 1980, and with the transition to Thomas Hammarberg as Secretary General, 150 paid staff worked at the International Secretariat in London. **The movement had grown to 39 national Sections and 2,200 groups.**

The UK section held its first *Secret Policeman's Ball* in 1976. Changing the way Amnesty International engaged with artists and celebrities, the hugely popular comedy and music event paved the way for many successful charity benefits around the world. The event brought Amnesty International together with a huge number of well-known comedians, artists and musicians such as Peter Gabriel, Duran Duran, Mark Knopfler, Bob Geldolf, Eric Clapton, Phil Collins, Peter Cook, John Cleese and Monty Python, with whom Amnesty International would continue to work in the coming years.

International recognition for Amnesty International's work continued. In 1972 it was granted consultative status with the Inter-American Commission on Human Rights of the Organization of American States, and in 1974 was awarded the Dag Hammarskjold Memorial Award of the American Veterans Committee.

In 1977, the movement was awarded the Nobel Peace Prize for "having contributed to securing the ground for freedom, for justice, and thereby also for peace in the world", and subsequently, in 1978, the United Nations Human Rights prize for "outstanding contributions in the field of human rights".

## 1982 to 1991

**The next ten years saw major changes in the international arena with the fall of the USSR and independence in Eastern and Central European countries, leading to more than 40 Amnesty International groups being established in the region.**

The movement launched an appeal for a universal amnesty for all prisoners of conscience. More than one million people signed the petition, which was presented to the United Nations. The second campaign calling for the abolition of torture was also launched.

In 1985, at the movement's International Council Meeting in Helsinki, Amnesty International made a decision to broaden their Statute to include work for refugees. The movement also began to explore its role in human rights education with the publication of the first Amnesty International educational pack in 1985.

In 1986 Thomas Hammarberg handed over to Ian Martin as Secretary General.

**During this period Amnesty International continued to grow from a total of around 250,000 supporters, members and activists in 151 countries in 1981, to around 700,000 around the world by 1990, including more than 6,000 volunteer groups in 70 countries. A further 17 country sections were established.**

On Amnesty International's 30th anniversary, in 1991, the movement decided once again to broaden the scope of its work. It adopted a new mandate, and pledged to promote all rights enshrined in the Universal Declaration of Human Rights.

Building on the success of partnerships with well known comedians, artists and musicians, the movement launched two major concert tours: the Conspiracy of Hope rock concert tour in 1986, and the Human Rights Now! concert tour in 1988.

The Conspiracy of Hope tour featured U2, Sting, Peter Gabriel, Bryan Adams, Lou Reed, the Neville Brothers and others. Travelling to 19 cities in 15 countries the Human Rights Now! concert tour featured Sting and Bruce Springsteen, among many others. Human Rights Now! concerts were held in: London, Paris, Budapest, Turin, Barcelona, San Jose (Costa Rica), Toronto, Montreal, Philadelphia, Los Angeles, Oakland, Tokyo, New Delhi, Athens, Harare, Abidjan, Sao Paulo, Mendoza (Argentina), Buenos Aires.

These events had a huge impact on the public's awareness of the movement, and human rights in general, and led to a surge in Amnesty International membership in many countries.

## **1992 to 2001**

In the ten years that followed Amnesty International launched a number of major international campaigns including: against [political killings, disappearances](#) and extrajudicial executions; on women's rights; Stop the Torture Trade and demands for a permanent International Criminal Court. There were also campaigns looking at the role of health professionals in exposing human rights violations; on refugees; against land mines; on child soldiers and on the trading of small arms.

This period saw the tenure of two Secretary Generals, Pierre Sané who took the reins in 1992 and Irene Khan, who took over in 2001.

**In 1992 the total number of Amnesty International members, supporters and subscribers passed the one million mark and continued to increase, reaching over 1.8 million by 1999.**

Key milestones in Amnesty International's work took place in the late 1990s as the Secretary General was able for the first time to bring human rights concerns directly to the attention of the UN Security Council in 1997. The Rome Statute of the International Criminal Court, which the movement had long campaigned for, was adopted by the UN General Assembly in 1998.

Also in 1998, Amnesty International marked the 50th anniversary of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights with the Get Up, Sign Up! Campaign. Thirteen million pledges of support were collected and presented to the then UN Secretary General Kofi Annan, demonstrating the public will for all to recognise and adhere to the tenets of the Declaration.

Once again working with well-known artists, Amnesty International held a major concert in Paris on Human Rights day in 1998 featuring Radiohead, Asian Dub Foundation, Bruce Springsteen, Tracey Chapman, Alanis Morissette, Youssou N'Dour and Peter Gabriel. With special appearances by the Dalai Lama and other international human rights activists the concert aimed to raise the profile of human rights and Amnesty International.

In 1999 the movement's governing body, the International Council, agreed to expand the organisation's remit. The remit now included: the impact of economic relations on human rights; the empowerment of human rights defenders; campaigns against impunity; enhancement in work to protect refugees; and the strengthening of grassroots activism.

In 2001, as the movement reached its 40th anniversary, Amnesty international once again expanded its remit. Making changes to its Statute, the movement incorporated into its mission work on economic, social and cultural rights. This committed the organisation to the advancement of both the universality and indivisibility of all human rights, as enshrined in the Universal Declaration.

Following the events of 11 September in the USA, Amnesty International unequivocally condemned the targeting of civilians and the deplorable loss of life suffered in New York. In the subsequent 'war on terror' investigations and the many hundreds of people detained in its name, the movement campaigned robustly for human rights standards to be adhered to. It demanded that individuals under investigation be treated with full respect for their rights, both under US law and international standards.

## **2002 to 2011**

After many years of continued requests to the governments of Myanmar, Sudan and Iraq, this period saw the movement finally given access to these countries and it was able in some cases to conduct research into human rights issues for the first time. These breakthroughs were a testament to the persistence of the movement in its campaign for

human rights standards. In 2002, Amnesty International was given access to Myanmar for the very first time, and Sudan for the first time in 19 years. The following year Amnesty International conducted its first research mission to Iraq in 20 years.

**During the next ten years Amnesty International continued to expand both its human rights remit and its membership. By 2011 the movement's supporters, members and activists totalled over 3 million.**

Amnesty International began to award the movement's Ambassador of Conscience award, the first one awarded to Vaclav Havel, former Prisoner of conscience (2003). Others followed: [Mary Robinson](#) and [Hilda Morales Trujillo](#) (2004), U2 and their manager Paul McGuinness (2005), Nelson Mandela (2006), Peter Gabriel (2008) and Daw Aung San Suu Kyi (2009).

2009 saw the launch of the major global Demand Dignity campaign. In so doing, Amnesty International increased its remit to end the injustice and exclusion that keeps those in poverty trapped in a cycle of deprivation. The Demand Dignity campaign sought to enable people living in poverty to have control over decisions that affect their lives. By focusing on issues such as maternal mortality, slums, corporate accountability and making certain rights law, Amnesty International had begun to work on issues close to the heart of Salil Shetty, who took over as Secretary General in 2010.

This ten year period witnessed the movement's launch of campaigns to control small arms. By highlighting the plight of young women intimidated, harassed and murdered in Mexico Amnesty International focused world attention on violence against women. The organisation continued to campaign for those tortured in the context of the 'war on terror'. Amnesty International drew attention to the culture of impunity for human rights abuses in Russia and demanded respect for the human rights of those living with HIV/AIDS. Major work was conducted to highlight the dire human rights situation in Sudan's Darfur region.

In 2005, Yoko Ono demonstrated her continued commitment to human rights by generously donating the recording rights to John Lennon's entire solo songbook, including to the song Imagine, to Amnesty International.

At the same time Yoko Ono and Amnesty International collaborated with over 30 world-class musicians working on the Make Some Noise campaign, focussing on a global petition to the Sudanese government to protect human rights and civilians in Darfur. Efforts included the launch of a specially recorded music CD, which by 2007 raised over US\$2.5 million for the human rights cause.

Other key campaigns during the last decade include working to end the pervasive human rights violations faced by Indigenous Peoples. This included supporting the Dongria Kondh indigenous community in Orissa's Niyamgiri Hills, eastern India who successfully stopped the Vedanta mining company evicting them from their traditional land.

As Amnesty International reaches its 50<sup>th</sup> anniversary, it is a moment to look back at how much individuals working together have achieved, but it is also a time to take stock

of what still needs to be done. Fifty years on, the world has changed dramatically. However the imperative for individuals to stand together to protect human rights, wherever they may be, remains as powerful as ever.