

Amnesty International aids the oppressed

by Lynda Cassels

Halifax's Amnesty International group has been involved in action to support oppressed people the world over.

For Amnesty members, "action" means letter-writing. A government official who receives and unrelenting stream of courteous, unprecisely worded and factually accurate letters of protest is made all too uncomfortably aware that the goings-on within his country are a source of lively concern in the international community. Over the past two years Metro Amnesty members have flooded the offices of South Korean President Chun Doo-Hwan and his cabinet with letters on behalf of Kang Jong-Hon.

Although their mandate is limited — a frequently heard complaint of AI is that they are too conservative in the issues they choose to address — the organization is hard pressed to meet the obligations they set for themselves. Statistics on human rights violations are staggering: roughly one-third of the world's governments practice torture; one-half are known to hold prisoners of conscience; and as

many as two in three countries are "executing" states.

Before Amnesty acts on any reported violation, the information is generally corroborated by at least two independent sources. This diligence in research has earned the International Secretariat in London international respect. New reports are received daily through the press, church and human rights organizations, government bulletins, and, frequently, personal letters from prisoners or their families.

According to Goodfellow, one of the primary appeals of Amnesty for its members is the sense of personal contact and contribution that develops through the letter-writing process. By writing a letter, a member is taking direct action. The letter may even provoke a personal response. The Halifax store clerk has a voice — a voice which can be heard, and which deserves to be exercised.

But do the months of research, the endless flow of envelopes into the red mailbox, achieve results? (Assuming the mail makes its way out of the country!) Is Amnesty International "effective"?

Although their insistence on

having reports thoroughly investigated before acting may cost Amnesty precious time in some instances, their almost unblemished credibility is vital to their success. When AI says "it is so", the public is not willing to acknowledge that yes, it most likely is so.

Amnesty declines to take credit for the release of any individual prisoner. For the record book, however, it suffices to say that roughly 50 per cent of the prisoners adopted by Amnesty are released before serving their full sentence.

A Soviet prisoner adopted by the Halifax group was released earlier this year. A Jew, Mark Nepomnyaschy, had been imprisoned for his involvement with the Soviet Jewish Movement in the Ukraine. his release was part of an amnesty granted to a group of prisoners last spring. Were Amnesty's efforts a factor in his release?

"I think of it as a bucket with a number of different taps running into it," Alex Neve explains. "Those taps may represent pressures within the country, external diplomatic pressures, or any number of factors. But one of those taps represents Amnesty.

And when enough water flows into the bucket, it overflows.

In its 26 years of operation, AI has adopted more than 35,000 prisoner of conscience cases. Over 16,000 of them have been released.

Much of what Amnesty strives to achieve, however, cannot be measured by statistics. Much of the organization's work focuses on large-scale campaigns, such as the Campaign Against Torture launched 14 years ago. Also, Amnesty has remained a grassroots organization for over a quarter of a century, relying on volunteer time and financial support from individuals.

"Human rights are the responsibility of every individual and every government," Goodfellow says. This is what Amnesty's work attempts to demonstrate — and in this light, perhaps the growing awareness of human rights issues around the world is a more accurate indicator of the organization's "success".

The Halifax chapter is only one of three Amnesty groups active in the Metro area. The original Metro group, which began in 1974, split into more local units three years ago. Today's Dartmouth, Bedford and Halifax groups are part of a network of over 100 Amnesty groups across Canada.

l e t t e r s

What's your opinion?

To the Editors,

Scott Neily's critique on *Star Trek: The Next Generation* was carried out with all the finesse of Mr. Spock himself. So, that leaves just one question for him

to answer: "Did you enjoy the show?"

Daniel Finch

Speaking with all logic possible: Damn right I did!

Scott Neily

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