

Amnesty International

By Kourosh Mohseni



Trade unionist Nazario de Jesus Gracias was murdered at the FEASIES offices in Guatemala in 1992. On the wall above his body is a copy of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights.

During the last month of army rule in Guatemala, Beatriz Barrios Marroquin, teacher, law student and mother of two small children, desperately sought political asylum abroad. Just before she was due to leave, she was abducted and murdered in Guatemala City. Her mutilated body was discovered shortly after, but the authorities made no effort to investigate her murder.

Myrna Mack, a founding member of Association for the Advancement of Social Science in Guatemala (AVANSCO) is another victim of Guatemalan military regime. She was stabbed to death by two men in September 1990. It was only by the efforts of her sister Helen Mack and the Human Rights Office of the Archbishopric of Guatemala

Laos
Freed after 17 years



Khamphan Pradith

that this case finally was brought to justice. The Former Presidential Chief of Staff, sergeant Noel D. B. Alvarez, the first member of the Guatemalan military ever known to be convicted of a political killing by a Guatemalan court was sentenced to 25 years in jail for the assassination of anthropologist Myrna Mack.

Do you remember any day that you have picked up a newspaper or turned on the TV news and received constant horrible news on people around the world being massacred or tortured to death for what they believe or read, or their religions, or simply for protesting peacefully for freedom and justice? For most of us this is what the news are all about. A contradiction to what the Universal Declaration of Human Rights states as Article 1; "All human beings are born free and equal in dignity and rights..."

Young people have often been told that they are our hopes for the future, that they are the inheritors of this planet. But what about the events that are happening now?

For instance, while we are safely attending our courses and lectures, in many countries around the world students are under attack. Not even their age is a protection from intimidation, illegal arrest and detention at the hands of governmental or para-governmental forces. They "disappear",

are exiled, turned into refugees, tortured and executed. Students of universities as well as all other courageous people of society are persecuted for the non-violent expression of their beliefs, for attending meetings, distributing leaflets, collecting signatures for petitions and for participating in demonstrations and hunger strikes. History has proven that students' rights have always been denied by these governments and those whose first task in life is to deny human rights and to crush the human spirit.

Youth/Campus network of Amnesty International ensures that by speaking out, and if enough people act, victims of devastating and calculated human rights abuses can be protected and freed.

Amnesty International is a worldwide movement independent of any government, political persuasion or religious creed. It was founded in 1961 by Peter Benenson, a British

ers of conscience. Within a month of the launch of Amnesty appeal, a fortnightly journal on political imprisonment called "Amnesty" was being published from an office staffed by volunteers in London's legal district.

Cristobal Vega Alvarez, imprisoned for over 20 years from the time General Franco took power at the end of the Spanish Civil War featured in the November 1961 issue. Alvarez is a Spanish poet and journalist who has been described as representing the authentic liberal thought of Spanish intellectuals.

Today Amnesty International has over 1,100,000 members and subscribers in over 150 countries. Its main four goals are:

1- It seeks for the release of prisoners of conscience, people detained for their beliefs, colour, sex, ethnic origin, language or religion who have not used or advocated violence.

2- I works for fair and prompt trials for all political prisoners.

3- It opposes the death penalty, torture and other cruel, inhuman and degrading treatment or punishment for all prisoners.

4- Putting an end to all extrajudicial executions and "disappearances".

Amnesty International (AI) also opposes abuses by opposition groups including hostage taking, torture and killings of prisoners, and other arbitrary killings. In many AI reports there have been signs of abuses by both governments and opposition groups, of which many people suffered from both.

Amnesty International has also worked on behalf of cases involving homosexuality. At the 1979 AI International Council Meeting (ICM), AI adopted a resolution affirming that homosexuality is a fundamental human right. Therefore over the years, AI has called for the release of anyone imprisoned for the release of anyone imprisoned.

"Lighting up the darker corners of the planet"

Pierre Sané,
Secretary
General
of Amnesty
International

lawyer. His first inspiration, as for many of us who care about the rest of the world's dreams as well as our own, came from the morning paper. In fact, this first thought of establishing a human rights movement in the early '60's came from a story about two students. He read in the paper about two students in Portugal who had been arrested in a restaurant and sentenced to 7 years' imprisonment for raising their glasses in a toast to freedom. Indignant, Peter Benenson's first reaction was to go to the Portuguese Embassy in London and protest personally, but he realized that such an individual gesture would accomplish little for the students themselves. His enthusiasm led him to write an article in the *Observer* newspaper, entitled "The Forgotten Prisoners"

The article, and a report in *Le Monde* the same day, announced the launching of a one year campaign called 'Appeal for Amnesty 1961' whose object was an amnesty for all the political and religious prison-

oned for advocating equality of treatment for homosexuals and considers anyone imprisoned for advocating homosexuals' equality to be a prisoner of conscience.

One important fact about Amnesty International is that since the beginning of its campaign, AI as a matter of principle has always been impartial and independent from colour, race or gender. Our voice

is the collection of

all voices for freedom and

justice, one voice that only

serves the human

race as one and

opposes all the

governments that

violate the right to

have such voice. As a

result of such principles

Amnesty International

is proud not to accept

any money from governments

whatsoever.

What Amnesty International

has been facing since its

establishment is a world of

justice. From the horrible

mass political killings by

the government of Indonesia

in 1965-66 (as the most

horrificing government

since the Second World

War: government instigated

killings of communist party

members and its affiliated

organizations, the trade

unions, the women's

organizations, all the

supporters and their families

- a very conservative

estimate of 500,000 people,

absolutely innocent

people to the revolutions

and death squads of the

1970's, to the military

regimes across the entire

south and Latin America.



Guatemala: a soldier threatens a street vendor