



# Amnesty International

Orange County

GROUP 141 ORANGE • GROUP 175 LONG BEACH  
GROUP 178 IRVINE • GROUP 596 HUNTINGTON BEACH

March 2005

<http://www.aiusaoc.org>

## The Man Who Decided It Was Time for a Change Peter Benenson Remembered

*This article is was written by Richard Reoch on February 26, 2005.*

The man who lit the fuse of the human rights revolution died this week, having refused all honours and leaving behind him a world changed by the countless protests and petitions he championed

Peter Benenson, the founder of Amnesty International, was 83. He was born into a world without the United Nations. Not a single international human rights treaty was in existence. The Universal Declaration of Human Rights had yet to be written. There wasn't a single one of today's major human rights organizations on the political landscape. Civil society was yet to be born.

Inordinately modest and self-effacing, the one-time lawyer who launched Amnesty International in 1961 would never claim credit for the sea-change of the last 40 years. He was offered knighthoods by almost every successive British Prime Minister but he never accepted.

Each Prime Minister who wrote to him received a personal response from Benenson—who typed his own letters until late in life—in which he would cite the current human rights violations Amnesty was confronting in the UK. He would suggest, without mincing his words, that if the government wished to take account of his work for human rights, what mattered was to redress those abuses.

In comparison with the world into which he was born, Benenson left behind him one changed so fundamentally that it is hard to conceive of the scale of the transformation. Nearly a hundred human rights treaties and other legal instruments are now in force internationally. Over ninety percent of the world's countries are now party to the most comprehensive of these, the twin international covenants on civil/political and economic/social rights. Almost all of those states have now formally given the right to their citizens to make international complaints.

In addition to the human rights bodies of the United Nations, there are now regional intergovernmental bodies covering up to three-quarters of the world's nations.

Women's rights, child rights, minority rights, workers' rights, the rights of disabled persons - all of these have been codified and strengthened by successive declarations, conventions and acts of national legislation. Torturers have become international outlaws. As we enter the 21st Century, more than half the countries of the world have rejected the death penalty—either by abolishing it altogether or ceasing to carry out executions.

However, the most extraordinary phenomenon—and the one on which Peter Benenson left his indelible mark—is the birth of what has come to be known globally as “civil society”. Today there are well over a thousand domestic and regional organizations working to protect human rights. Among them, his brainchild Amnesty International, is one of the best known, with almost 2 million members, subscribers and supporters in more than 64 countries and territories.

But to think of Peter Benenson merely as the founder of one organization (indeed he started several others) is to misread perhaps the single most distinctive political feature of the period from the end of the Second World War to the present: the emergence of organized, non-violent public opinion as an increasingly powerful force in domestic and international politics. Historians may locate its origins in any number of social changes following the war. But there is one event that will incontestably be told and retold in any social history of that period.

It is the story of a man in a bowler hat reading his newspaper on the London underground in late 1960. He reads a small item about two Portuguese students being sentenced to seven years' imprisonment for raising their glasses in a toast to freedom. He is outraged, decides to go to the Portuguese embassy in London to make a personal protest and then changes his mind. Instead he gets off at Trafalgar Square station and makes his way to the church of St Martin's-in-the-Fields. He goes in, sits down for three-quarters of an hour, and thinks.

In his words, “I went in to see what could really be done effectively, to mobilize world opinion. It was necessary to think of a larger group which would harness the enthusiasm of people all over the world who were anxious to see a wider respect for human rights.”

That man was Peter Benenson, then a barrister in London. When he came outside into the square, he had his idea. Within months, he launched his Appeal for Amnesty with a front page article in *The Observer* newspaper.

Nothing quite like it had ever been attempted on such a scale before. The response was overwhelming, as if people worldwide were waiting for exactly such a signal. Newspapers in over a dozen countries picked up the appeal. Over a thousand letters poured in within the first six months. And the post-bags of the world's heads of state changed forever.

*Continued on page 2*

## February Meeting Minutes

### Group #175 Long Beach

#### Attendees

Norma Edwards, Mike Farris, Kevin Gaffney, Bobbi Kendig, Robert Quinn, Jim Roberts, Naomi Steinfeld, Steve Wicke.

#### Letter-Writing

Group 175 generated 38 letters abroad (25 to Nepal, 8 to Vietnam, 5 to China) and 16 letters to Washington DC.

#### Work on Home Countries

After introductions we discussed the issue of work on home countries. Pros and cons were addressed. We also expressed considerable concern regarding the situation with the abuses of civil and human rights in Guantanamo Bay.

#### Prisoner News

Jim provided good news and bad news regarding our POC in Vietnam. Nguyen Dinh Huy had finally been released, but he is under such strict surveillance that there are even reports of a police presence in his home. Conditions for prisoners still held in Vietnam continue to be very bad.

#### Myanmar Update

Jim added some comments on Burma. It was noted that a recent article in widely distributed *Parade Magazine* designated Than Shwe as the second worst dictator in the world today. Aung San Suu Kyi, an elected leader more than a decade ago, remains under house arrest.

#### Response from Homeland Security

Norma read aloud a letter she received from Homeland Security in response to her correspondence regarding the death of Rev. Joseph Dantica, a man who arrived in the U.S. with papers in order but who was nonetheless detained. He died in custody when his heart medication was kept from him.

#### Next Month's Meeting

Our next meeting will be Wednesday, March 16, at 7:00 PM. All are welcome to join us.

## February Meeting Minutes

### Group #178 Irvine

#### Attendees

Jaques Kilchoër, Maung Nyeu, Julie Ralls, Steve Wicke, Todd Anglin, Al White, Richard Nordrum.

#### Letters Written: 28

#### Group Business

The group decided to give financial support to Racquel S-Saboor and Beth McFarland to attend the conference, "Making the Connections: New Partnership and Strategies for Combatting Human Trafficking."

The Southern California Mini-Conference is on March 26, 2005. We need volunteers to help before opening 8-9 AM and after closing at 6 PM. Jaques volunteered to help in the morning and Maung to help in the evening. Any more volunteers?

Richard Nordrum expressed interest in bringing in Tad Daley as a speaker. We recommended that the Mini-Conference may be a more suitable forum.

Julie will contact Pat Gerencser and invite Pat to speak on Syria.

We decided to send our annual contribution of \$575 to our National Headquarter.

We also decided to host a workshop on non-violence in fall 2005 for Reverend James Lawson. This workshop will be at the UCI campus and in cooperation with the UCI student group.

#### Upcoming Meetings

**March 2005 Meeting.** This meeting will feature a presentation on human trafficking. Thousands of women and children around the world are victims of human trafficking. What is Amnesty International's position? What are the rights of these victims? What can we do? Please join us and listen to the speakers.

**April 2005 Meeting.** We will be screening the documentary *Señorita Extraviada, Missing Young Woman*. This 74-minute film tells the haunting story of the more than 350 kidnapped, raped and murdered young women of Juárez, Mexico.

### Peter Benenson Continued from page 1

Benenson's idea was so simple, perhaps that's why he remained so shy of personal publicity throughout his life. Termed "one of the larger lunacies of our time" by one of its critics, a network of letter writers was set up to bombard governments with individual appeals on behalf of prisoners jailed and ill-treated in violation of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights.

In an age of self-aggrandisement, his modesty was almost hard to fathom. He never went forward to receive the numerous accolades showered upon Amnesty, known universally by its candle in barbed wire. His mind was always fixed on what had not been accomplished and the countless victims still to be rescued.

"The candle burns not for us," he declared, "but for all those whom we failed to rescue from prison, who were shot on the way to prison, who were tortured, who were kidnapped, who 'disappeared'. That is what the candle is for."

In later years, as Amnesty's impact grew exponentially and went on to harness the power of the international news media, other groups began to adopt and adapt its methods in support of their causes. The extraordinary impact of the environmental movement twenty years later, the women's rights movement and a host of other single-issue and coalition groups, working in their own countries or across national boundaries, can often be traced to the early examination they made of the methods Benenson's organization was using.

Today we take the power of charities, voluntary groups and people's campaigns for granted. But before that day in Trafalgar Square—the day on which a single newspaper reader decided it was time for a change—that power had yet to shake the world.

Nothing has ever been quite the same since. As he said in 1961, lighting the first Amnesty candle, "I'm reminded of the words of a 16th century man sentenced to death by burning: We have today lit such a candle as shall never be put out."

## Southern California Mini-Conference

The 4th Southern California Amnesty Mini-Conference will be held on Saturday, March 26, 9:00 AM–6:00 PM at the California State University, Fullerton campus. There will be a continental breakfast at 9:00 AM. Admission is free and there is no pre-registration required. The program for the day (subject to change) and directions to the conference are given below. If you need flyers or a map please contact the Los Angeles office at (310) 815-0450.

### Schedule

9:00- 9:20 AM **Continental Breakfast**

9:20-10:20 AM **Opening Plenary**

**Ochan Otim**, Ph.D., President of Friends for Peace in Africa, will speak on Northern Uganda

**Erin Callahan**, AIUSA Western Regional Director, will speak on Amnesty's Torture Campaign

**Benson Deng** (Lost Boy), will speak on the crisis in Southern Sudan

10:30-11:50 PM **Workshops I**

Armed Conflict Interdependency: Southern Sudan and Northern Uganda

Human Trafficking

Introduction to Amnesty International

12:00-12:40 PM **Caucuses (Discussion Sessions)**

Topics to be determined

12:40- 2:00 PM **Lunch (on your own)**

2:00- 3:20 PM **Workshops II**

Death Penalty (Showing of *Interview with an Executioner* and Q&A)

Group Health and Leadership (in Relation to Amnesty Structures)

Women's Campaign (The ICC and Its Relationship to Violence Against Women)

3:30- 4:50 PM **Workshops III**

Refugees (Refugee Migration Patterns)

AIDS and Human Rights (Various Countries will be Discussed)

War on Terror and Human Rights Law (Abu Ghriab, Guantanamo Bay Cases, Patriot Act and various other topics regarding Human Rights Law)

5:00- 5:30 PM **Closing Plenary**

**Victor Condé**, President of Human Rights Aware

Further information can be found at the websites:

[www.amnestysd.org](http://www.amnestysd.org)

[www.amnestyusa.org/events/western/03262005mini-conference.html](http://www.amnestyusa.org/events/western/03262005mini-conference.html)

### Directions

- Cal State Fullerton is located west of the Orange (57) Freeway in Fullerton. The university is bordered by Nutwood

Avenue to the south, State College Boulevard to the west, Yorba Linda Boulevard to the north, and the 57 Freeway to the east.

- Coming from either the south or the north on the 57 Freeway, exit at Nutwood Avenue. Go west on Nutwood. Turn right at the main campus entrance at Commonwealth Avenue. Follow E. Campus Drive to Parking Lot F.
- Follow the signs to University Hall. The registration desk will be outside University Hall Room 252 at the south end of the building on the 2nd floor. There are stairs outside and an elevator inside the building leading to the registration area.

## February Meeting Minutes

### Group #596 Huntington Beach

For the first hour of the meeting we watched the award winning documentary *Left Behind* and then proceeded to have a group discussion about the film. During the second half of the meeting we discussed both the March 26 Amnesty Mini-Conference and the May 14 AIDS and Human Rights Conference.

### Southern California Mini-Conference

At the Mini-Conference the Huntington Beach group will be running the AIDS and Human Rights workshop. Six groups have picked different regions of the world to research into all the reasons why HIV / AIDS has spread in their specific regions. Regions that will be represented are Asia, India, North America, Latin/South America, Middle East, Europe/Russia, and Africa. Each group will have 7–10 minutes to summarize how Human rights violations have led to the spread of HIV / AIDS. The AIDS and Human Rights workshop will be a prequel to an all day conference that will be held in May.

### AIDS and Human Rights Conference

On May 14 we will be hosting an all day conference on AIDS and Human Rights. Workshops will include: Debt Relief: Investing in the Future; The Spread of AIDS: From a Women's Perspective; Poverty and AIDS: The beginning of the Domino Effect; The Collapse of the Global Community; Pharmaceutical Companies: Friend or Foe?; Third World Countries, AIDS and Healthcare: What is a Doctor's Responsibility to Serve?; Stigma, Stereotypes and Denial; Kenya: A Search for Solutions. If you would like to participate or know of a speaker for one of the workshops e-mail Darcie Olson at [darcie.olson@peakdata11c.com](mailto:darcie.olson@peakdata11c.com) or Mahsa Abassi at [Mahsa\\_Abassi@yahoo.com](mailto:Mahsa_Abassi@yahoo.com).

### March Meeting

Raquel S-Saboor will be speaking on human trafficking in our local communities. Raquel S-Saboor is a member of the Huntington Beach and Irvine group as well as secretary for the Orange County human trafficking task force. She will be attending a three-day conference called: Making the Connections: New Partnerships and Strategies for Combating Human Trafficking, on March 21-2-3 at the Japanese American National Museum. She will then speak at our monthly meeting in order to educate people about human trafficking in Southern California.

# Calendar

## March

15 Tuesday 7:00 PM

**Group #141 Orange Monthly Meeting** in Classroom 3 at the Sisters of St. Joseph, 480 S. Batavia Street, in Orange. Look for the classroom/ auditorium building behind the main building. Drive around and to the back. Group #141 meets the third Tuesday of each month. For further information about the group, contact Deidre Jackson at (562) 430-7381.

16 Wednesday 7:00 PM

**Group #175 Long Beach Monthly Meeting** at the Unitarian Universalist Church, Rooms 1 and 2, 5450 Atherton Street, Long Beach. Letter-writing from 7:00–7:30. For further information about the group, contact Norma Edwards at (562) 425-4353.

26 Saturday 9:00 AM–5:30 PM

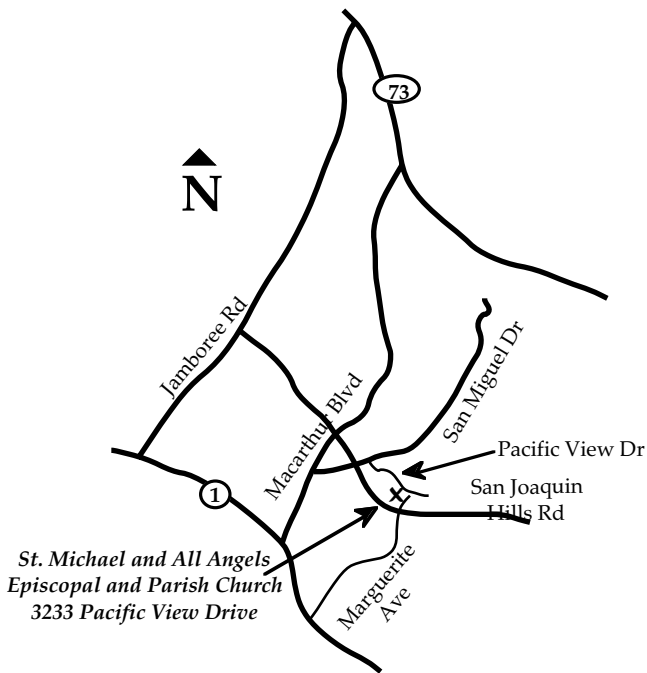
**Southern California Mini-Conference** on the campus of Cal State Fullerton. See the article on page 3 of this newsletter for further information.

28 Monday 7:00 PM

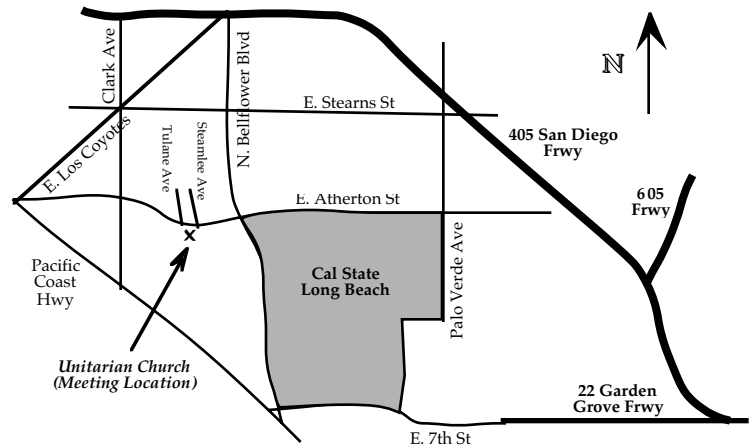
**Group #596 Huntington Beach Meeting** at Saints Simon and Jude Church, Room 7A, 20444 Magnolia Street in Huntington Beach. Group #596 meets the last Monday of each month.

29 Tuesday 7:00 PM

**Group #178 Irvine Meeting** at the Irvine Ranch Water District, 15600 Sand Canyon Avenue, Irvine, between the 5 and 405 freeways. See details on the web page <http://www.aiusaoc.org>. For more information about the group, contact Kris Elali at (714) 724-5811.



**Group #178 Irvine Meeting Location**



**Group #175 Long Beach Meeting Location**

Amnesty International  
Group 178  
P.O. Box 14485  
Irvine, CA 92623-4484