



Amnesty International

Orange County

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

April 2007

<http://www.aiusaoc.org>

AGM 2007: Ordinary People Making Extraordinary Change

This article is taken from the April 2007 AIUSA Connect.

Dr. Saad Eddin Ibrahim had one small piece of advice for the delegates attending Amnesty International's 2007 Annual General Meeting in Milwaukee, Wisconsin March 23–25. "Never grow up," the Egyptian human rights activist and former Amnesty International prisoner of conscience exhorted. Not if growing up means abandoning your ideals, your passion and your commitment. He made it clear he had no intention of doing so himself. "I know my family tells me I should grow up," he beamed. "But my message to you is never grow up. Never give up, never give up! If you believe what you are fighting for, continue the fight."

The official theme was "ordinary people, extraordinary change" as more than 800 Amnesty International USA members, staff and activists from across the country converged on Milwaukee to tackle some of the most pressing human rights issues facing the world today. But Dr. Ibrahim's admonishment was sage advice to a movement, no longer young, and preparing to tackle change on an almost unprecedented scale in the months ahead.

"That is what Amnesty International has always done. We have always been willing to change," AIUSA Executive Director Larry Cox told the opening plenary Friday evening. "It hasn't been easy. It's often come with great controversy. It's often caused painful internal divisions for a time. But we have always done it because that's the only way that we can live up to our tradition."

"And now we are confronted with the need to make other kinds of change. Changes in the way we're organized. Changes in the way we think about our work, changes in the way we carry out our work. We have, as you all know, adopted a strategic plan for our section that takes a very hard look at the obstacles that prevent us from unleashing the full power of our movement, which is to say, prevent us from unleashing the full power of all the people in this room. We have identified, I think very honestly and boldly, those obstacles and we have set up goals toward eliminating them. And those changes will require sacrifices that will require hard thinking, debate and discussion and some disagreement. They won't be easy to make at all. And there's only one reason why we will make them. We will make them because that is what we have to do to be more effective in serving the people who suffer."

And Cox reminded the delegates that as members of Amnesty International's largest section and the section representing the most powerful nation on earth, the nation with the most influence, for good or for ill in the world, AIUSA members had an extra responsibility.

"Because we are not just any section of Amnesty International," Cox stated. "We are the section of Amnesty International that exists in the United States of America. At a time when the United States of America is one of the biggest threats to human rights all over the world, not because it is so much worse than every other country in the world, but because it has always aspired to be so much better. Because it has always told the rest of the world that it was so much better. So when this nation justifies its own violations of human rights, it sends an incredible message to dictators and killers around the world, giving them aide and comfort and it undermines the brave men and women who are fighting around the world against tyranny and oppression."

The conference kicked off Friday afternoon with a rally at Milwaukee's Pere Marquette Park to focus on another unfolding human rights tragedy, in Darfur, Sudan, and to call for greater U.S. and international action to stop the killings. Amnesty International is in the midst of a campaign calling for the United States, China and other nations to press the Sudanese Government to admit U.N. peacekeepers.

In choosing Milwaukee, AIUSA was celebrating the city's and Wisconsin's legacy of social justice. In 1982, Wisconsin became the first state in the country to amend its state human rights statute to bar discrimination on the basis of sexual orientation. The state has been death-penalty-free for more than 150 years.

If any of the activists gathered in Milwaukee had doubts about the power of the work they've committed themselves to do, several people were on hand who said they owed their freedom, if not their lives to the work of people like those gathered before them.

Lydia Cacho is an investigative journalist from Mexico and founder of the Refuge Center for Abused Women of Cancun and president of the Center for Women's Assistance. Cacho was on hand to receive AIUSA's 2007 Ginetta Sagan Award during Friday evening's opening plenary. Her refuge centers do not turn away any woman or child, often fleeing from violent criminals, who seek sanctuary in her shelters. It is life saving work. But it is work that has placed her own life in jeopardy. She was raped in 1999 in a bid to intimidate her and has received several death threats.

"I'm really glad to be here," she said simply in accepting the award. "I am happy especially because I am in a room looking at the faces of the people who saved my life. I want to thank you for being Amnesty International."

March Meeting Minutes

Group #141 Orange

Letter-Writing Actions

We had a short meeting that produced 24 letters, including letters to Iranian officials on behalf of two women arrested on March 4 for demonstrating against the trial of five women's rights activists; to Chinese officials on behalf of Ye Guozhu, who was imprisoned for trying to organize demonstrations protesting evictions due to construction for the 2008 Olympic Games; and to Sudanese officials protesting the government's refusal to cooperate with the International Criminal Court.

March Meeting Minutes

Group #175 Long Beach

Attendees

Mary Kay Dunn, Norma Edwards, Norm Ericson, Deidre Gaffney, Kevin Gaffney, Jim Roberts, Tom Song, Steve Wicke

Group News

Terrible note-taking, on Norma's part, so not many details on our meeting. We talked about upcoming events and reviewed our campaigns. We planned on making a general plan of action for the group at our next meeting, so bring your ideas!

New Members

The group welcomed Norm Ericson and Tom Song to the group, contributing greatly to our number of actions sent! Special thanks go out to Mary Kay for bringing so many of her friends to our meetings. It's always nice to see new faces, hear different perspectives and knowledge, and write more letters too.

Letter-Writing Actions

We wrote to Iran and its U.S. embassy about the death penalty; to General Than Shwe and Myanmar's embassy about our prisoner of conscience, Ye Htut; to Guatemala and its embassy about impunity and violence against women; to the Chinese embassy about China's support for Darfur; to El Salvador and its embassy about gay human rights activists under persecution and threat; and to our senators, Boxer and Feinstein, about the America we believe in.

March Meeting Minutes

Group #178 Irvine

Change in Meeting Location and Day

We discussed changing our meeting location to a room at the Irvine United Congregational Church, 4915 Alton Parkway, Irvine, CA 92604, (949) 733-0220. The pastor, Paul G. Tellström, invited us to his church and was happy that we wanted to meet there. We hope that some members of the congregation will be interested in coming to our group meetings.

Glen later talked to the pastor who gave his approval for the group to meet the last Thursday of every month at the church. **The group will be meeting there beginning this month, on Thursday, April 26.**

Prisoner Visit

We also discussed the possibility of sponsoring a visit by Ngawang Choephel, a former Amnesty International pris-

oner of conscience from Tibet. (See amnesty.org library, index ASA 17/041/2000.) Julie Ralls will find out from Ngawang Choephel what kind of presentation he would offer (topic, length of presentation) and if he has any video footage that he could show during his presentation. A possible location for this event would be the Orange Coast Unitarian Universalist Church in Costa Mesa.

Control Arms: Governments Must Deliver on Promise of Arms Trade Treaty

The Control Arms Campaign, which Amnesty International is part of, called on all governments considering a British blueprint for an Arms Trade Treaty (ATT) in March to ensure their proposals for the treaty recommend a ban on arms transfers that fuel serious human rights abuses, conflict and poverty. The coalition also includes Oxfam International, Saferworld and the International Action Network on Small Arms (IANSA.)

The coalition warned that otherwise the historic vote in the UN General Assembly in December 2006 to start work on a global Arms Trade Treaty could be rendered meaningless. The UN Secretary General is currently consulting all governments on the feasibility, scope and parameters of the treaty. The governments of Argentina, Australia, Costa Rica, Finland, Japan, Kenya and the United Kingdom were co-hosting a meeting at the United Nations in Geneva, calling on all governments to take part in the UN process to build the treaty. Campaigners are launching their vision for the treaty at the same event.

"Amnesty International's research over the past decade has consistently shown how irresponsible arms transfers fuel grave human rights abuses around the world. If governments are serious about preventing such abuses, there has to be a global Arms Trade Treaty with strong human rights safeguards," said Helen Hughes, Control Arms researcher for Amnesty International.

The United Kingdom Government's proposal calls for a legally-binding arms trade treaty covering all conventional weapons and explicitly banning transfers that fuel serious human rights abuses, provoke conflict, undermine development, and fuel violent crime and terrorism. It covers all arms transfers between governments, and by individual brokers. However, campaigners are concerned that the proposal does not call for the provision of adequate resources to support implementation of the treaty by poor countries. Without the means to implement it, the agreement could have little impact on the arms trade.

"This treaty is potentially the most significant advance in international conventional arms controls in 20 years, offering hope to millions of people suffering in the world's conflict zones. But unless the 153 governments who voted for the treaty last December follow through with tough proposals, it will not save a single life. The skeptics must not be allowed to water it down," said Anna Macdonald, Oxfam's Control Arms Campaign Manager.

Only the United States voted against the resolution to start work on the treaty in December 2006. Despite having comparatively strict national laws to control its arms exports, the United States is reluctant to back a new international agreement.

From the Deputy Executive Director In This Campaign We Will Play a Supporting Role

This article is taken from the March 2007 AIUSA Connect.

Next month AI will be releasing a ground-breaking new report drawing attention to the serious problem of sexual violence against American Indian and Alaska Native women. The report is primarily based on detailed research conducted in three specific localities: Oklahoma (which has the second largest American Indian population in the U.S.), the Standing Rock Sioux Reservation in South and North Dakota, and Alaska (where some 20 percent of the population is Alaska Native).

The report will kick off an international campaign which will seek to support the efforts of American Indian and Alaska Native activists who have long struggled against these abuses. It is a part of the international Stop Violence Against Women campaign project on stopping violence against indigenous women globally.

We all know that sexual violence against women in the U.S. is widespread. But the incidence is far higher for American Indian and Alaska Native women who also experience a systemic failure to punish those responsible and official indifference to their rights to dignity, security and justice. While the next issue of Connect will cover this report and campaign in greater detail, it is long overdue that we recognize that this is a major human rights problem.

According to U.S. Government statistics, American Indian and Alaska Native women are more than 2.5 times more likely to be raped or sexually assaulted than women in the U.S. in general. Equally shocking are statistics, again from the U.S. Government, which indicate that 86% of the perpetrators are non-Indigenous.

Sexual violence against Indigenous women today is informed and conditioned by a legacy of widespread and egregious human rights abuses. It has been compounded by the federal government's steady erosion of tribal government authority and its chronic under-resourcing of those law enforcement agencies and service providers which should protect Indigenous women from sexual violence.

Campaigning efforts will be aimed at supporting initiatives already identified by and being worked on by Indigenous organizations. These will include campaigning to secure full funding of the Violence Against Women Act which for the first time contains a specific Tribal Title that seeks to improve safety

and justice for American Indian and Alaska native women.

AIUSA has partnered very closely with American Indian and Alaska Native organizations throughout the research and will continue to do so during the campaign-planning phases of this project and it is crucial that this collaboration become even more intensive as the campaign unfolds. It is imperative that we work alongside and with the guidance of those who are directly impacted by these human rights violations.

This means that we:

Start with respect. Indigenous people's own organizations are the primary defenders of Indigenous people's rights. AI should not speak for or instead of Indigenous peoples. We will work with Indigenous peoples' organizations to create space where the government, the media and the public can hear those voices directly.

Be prepared to listen. We need to build relationships by learning about the experience of Indigenous peoples' organizations and their concerns, priorities and campaigning agenda. Those relationships will better prepare us to work on areas of common concern.

Understand cultural differences. Our Indigenous partners have stressed the importance of AI participating in this work in a way that is culturally competent. It will be extremely important to be aware and respectful of distinct cultural traditions and values which will impact how we work together with Indigenous peoples. For example, there are specific ways to ask for the help of elders and community leaders. There may be certain times of the year when people cannot engage in public activism because of other commitments, such as observing religious ceremonies. The use of certain images or symbols might be inappropriate or insulting. There will be training opportunities in various fora to help ensure our approaches are informed.

As in other areas of our work worldwide, AI's capacity to make a real contribution to advancing the human rights of Indigenous peoples depends on our credibility and influence as an independent voice informed by international standards. We will need to work strategically and be aware of our limits. But with an informed approach, we have a unique opportunity to help support those fighting one of the most longstanding and neglected human rights struggles of our time.

We eagerly look forward to your participation.

Curt Goering, Deputy Executive Director

If you would like to continue receiving this newsletter and supporting the work of the Orange County and Long Beach Amnesty International groups, please return this coupon to the address shown with annual dues of \$10.00. Dues cover the costs of this newsletter and of stamps used for saving lives. Your address label contains your membership expiration date. Join us!

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Please make your check payable to Amnesty International. Contributions to AI are tax-deductible. Thank you for your interest and support!

Calendar

April

17 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 Kevin Gaffney at xhuskr@aol.com.

18 Wednesday 7:00 PM

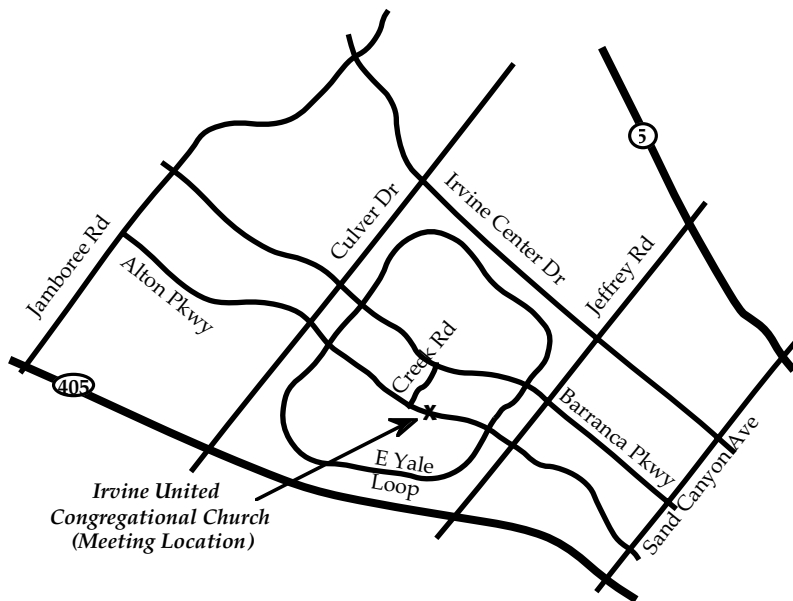
Group # 175 Long Beach Monthly Meeting at the Unitarian Universalist Church, Rooms 1 and 2, 5450 Atherton Street, Long Beach. Letter-writing from 7:00-7:30. For further information about the group, contact Norma Edwards at (562) 425-4353.

26 Thursday 7:00 PM

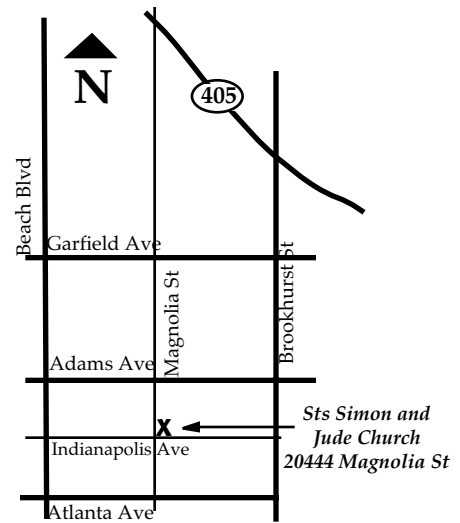
Group # 178 Irvine Monthly Meeting at the Irvine United Congregational Church, 4915 Alton Parkway, Irvine. **Please note the new meeting location and day!** See details on the web page <http://www.aiusaoc.org>. For more information about the group, contact Glen Nielsen at nielsenelectric@cox.net.

30 Monday 7:00 PM

Group # 596 Huntington Beach Meeting at Saints Simon and Jude Church, Adult Center, 20444 Magnolia Street in Huntington Beach. For more information, email c_olson@onebox.com.



Group # 178 Irvine Meeting Location



Group # 596 Huntington Beach Location

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