



# Amnesty International

Orange County

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

February 2009

<http://www.aiusaoc.org>

## Obama: A Chance to Build Respect for Human Rights

*This is taken from a January 28, 2009 AI press release.*

Those who watched Barack Obama take office on January 20 were part of a far-reaching celebration of the once seemingly impossible becoming reality. From isolated villages to sprawling cities, millions of people felt included in the new President's message of hope and the possibility of change.

In his inaugural address, President Obama rejected as "false" the choice between safety and respect for human rights. He moved swiftly to turn words into action, issuing three executive orders that held the promise of an end to some of the most contentious policies of the past administration's "war on terror."

He ordered the closure within a year of the Guantánamo Bay detention facility, symbol of the previous government's disregard for human rights.

He ordered the CIA to close any long-term detention facilities it was operating, and prohibited it from operating such facilities in the future.

He banned the harshest techniques used by the CIA in its secret detention program, a program in which enforced disappearance and torture—both crimes under international law—have been committed.

Amnesty International will campaign to ensure that measures to implement these changes fully comply with the USA's international obligations.

As the new President recognized, there is much work to be done. This is only the start of a long overdue process.

President Obama ordered the Secretary of Defense to review conditions of detention in Guantánamo. But the isolation and harsh conditions of reduced sensory stimulation endured by detainees at Guantánamo mirror conditions in some of the USA's harshest "supermaximum" security prisons.

The federal authorities should review such conditions on the US mainland and ensure that no one is subjected to cruel, degrading or inhuman treatment.

There must also be accountability for human rights violations committed by or on behalf of the US authorities—whether in Iraq, Afghanistan, Guantánamo, or in the secret detention program. With the requisite political will and independent oversight, the damage to the rule of law and respect for human rights can be repaired.

At his inauguration, President Obama reaffirmed fundamental values and principles enshrined in international law, including the "promise that all are equal . . . and all deserve a chance to pursue their full measure of happiness."

The truth is that the USA, one of the most prosperous

countries in the world, still has millions of its citizens living in poverty. Stark racial disparities persist in housing, health care, employment, education and the criminal justice system.

More than half of the 46 million people in the USA who have no medical insurance belong to racial or ethnic minorities. Two thirds of those without insurance have incomes near or below the Federal Poverty Level.

President Obama's pledge to raise the quality of health care and lower its cost should be applauded as an important step, but it must be backed by practical measures and adequate funding to ensure universal access to health care.

Ill-treatment in police custody and jails remains a serious concern in many areas, as does the increasing use of electroshock weapons such as Tasers in US law enforcement. Tasers have been linked to dozens of deaths in recent years. Amnesty International has called on the federal government to broaden its ongoing inquiry into fatalities and for the use of such weapons to be suspended or limited to situations where they are necessary to protect life and avoid the use of firearms.

Racial minorities are disproportionately the victims of police brutality, harassment and unlawful shootings. Black men remain 6.5 times more likely to be imprisoned than white men and black women are incarcerated at three times the rate of white women.

The new administration must urgently address the causes of such disparities and racial discrimination in the criminal justice system. It is vital that President Obama's promise to ban racial profiling by law enforcement agencies is effectively implemented.

The death penalty, racism and deprivation are inextricably interlinked. The vast majority of the more than 3,000 people on death row are too poor to pay for legal representation, and numerous studies have shown that race, particularly the race of the murder victim, influences the application of the death penalty. Since 1990 more than 1,000 men and women have been put to death by the state. The new administration should lead the country away from this cruel, inhuman and degrading practice by announcing a moratorium on federal executions.

Women of all races and social classes in the USA face the threat of domestic violence, rape and sexual abuse. But for Native American and Alaska Native women the risks are greater; they are more than 2.5 times more likely to be sexually assaulted than other women in the USA. Full enforcement and funding of the Violence Against Women Act could help tackle the scourge of such violence.

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## January Meeting Minutes

### Group #178 Irvine

#### **Special Presentation on Mongolian Street Children**

At our January 2009 meeting, we partnered with Living Ubuntu to host photographer Kent Treptow who wrote a fascinating series of articles (including narrated slideshows) on the plight of street children in Ulaanbaatar, the capital of Mongolia. View his series at [http://www.dailypilot.com/special\\_reports/mongolia/](http://www.dailypilot.com/special_reports/mongolia/).

Kent told us how, of all the countries he's visited (he has been to five continents), Mongolia was the most different from the US. Even though it's a cliché, in this case he said it was really true: you felt like you had gone back in time. He hiked through the grassy plains and toured other parts of the country, but the slideshow focused on his month in the capital Ulaanbaatar, observing the life of the abandoned or orphan street children.

In 1990, Mongolia abandoned its one-party style of government and embraced democracy and private industry. Unfortunately, the withdrawal of Soviet support and a collapse of the economy has led to widespread poverty and unemployment. The situation of these street children is worsened by the weather. Mongolia, a land-locked country, suffers from extremely cold Siberian winters lasting from October to April with persistent winds. As Kent told us, during the coldest days in the winter, it would be deadly to stay outside. The children therefore take refuge in maintenance holes under the street—small areas where they huddle together to stay warm at night. Many of the children he saw had huge burns on their arms and legs from the hot water pipes that cross their shelter. The children were orphans, had been abandoned by their parents, or had simply drifted away from their homes due to the extreme poverty of their family. One of the children was the son of one of the most popular singers in the country, and would see his father's face plastered on the front of a record store every time he left his underground "home"—his father had rejected the boy upon remarrying.

The children survive by scavenging discarded food, working in open-air markets (one of the photos showed a small boy carrying three huge bags of flour), or petty thievery. They turn to alcohol for comfort. The girls are at risk of being forced into prostitution. Their future prospects are almost nil. It is likely that they will either die young, or, when reaching the age of eighteen, get arrested and spend much of the rest of their life in prison.

One of the groups of children that Kent worked closely with accompanied him to the airport on his departure after his month stay, some of them openly crying. (Kent told us that he was amazed at the capacity of tenderness he could see in even the toughest street kids.) As they said to him upon taking leave: "Don't forget about us". During his visit, they had asked him "Do you think that your article will help us get out of here?" He answered honestly "You personally, probably not, but maybe it will help future children." At our website (<http://www.aiusaoc.org/links.html>) we have information on the Christina Noble Children's foundation who is trying to help these children.

This was a fascinating and extremely powerful presenta-

tion and we cannot urge people strongly enough to invite Kent Treptow to speak at your school, meeting or other venue. Contact us for more information, or you can e-mail Kent Treptow directly at [kent.treptow@gmail.com](mailto:kent.treptow@gmail.com).

At our February meeting we will catch up on group business and discuss our plans for the rest of the year.

#### **Upcoming Events**

1. **Violence Against Women in Darfur Film Screening:** Wednesday, 11 February 2009, 19:30—21:00 (7:30–9:00 PM). See website
2. **Concert to Benefit Darfur:** Saturday, 14 March 2009, Orange Coast Unitarian Universalist Church, Costa Mesa (details not yet finalized).
2. **Great American Write-In:** Saturday, 4 April 2009, Lakeview Senior Center, Irvine.

In the next few months, we will feature at our meetings:

1. Guest speaker from Human Trafficking task force of Orange County
2. Guest speaker to describe a visit to Myanmar to help Cyclone Nargis victims
3. Documentary viewing: *The Greatest Silence: Rape in the Congo* (Recipient, Special Jury Prize, documentary, 2008 Sundance Film Festival)

## January Meeting Minutes

### Group #141 Orange

#### **Obama's First 100 Days**

Kevin talked about Amnesty's 100 Days Checklist setting a human rights challenge for President Obama's first 100 days in office. We discussed some of his actions in his first week in office related to the checklist.

#### **Website**

The group discussed the new Orange County and Long Beach groups' website. Jacques went over some of the site's new features and proposed some additional changes to improve the site and to improve outreach. These included:

- Each group is going to provide a description of a topic for their monthly meeting to post on the site.
- The three active groups (Orange, Irvine, and Long Beach) are going to take turns posting an "Action of the Month" on the site.
- Jacques is going to put a "PayPal donate" button for our fund-raising pages, with proceeds to be shared among all groups at the site.
- Deidre and maybe Ernie were going to come up with a logo/picture/something to use for t-shirts or other merchandise at the CafePress store we will set up, with proceeds to be shared among all groups at the site.

#### **John Woo Action**

Julie discussed two actions planned by the Orange County Peace Coalition for January 30 and February 2 to protest the appointment of John Woo as a visiting law professor at Chapman University in Orange. John Woo was one of George W. Bush's legal advisors and the principal author of several memoranda that were used to justify the use of torture in interrogating military detainees.

## January Meeting Minutes

### Group #175 Long Beach

#### **Present**

Dahmi Adnane, Lizette Ashcraft, Norma Edwards, Mike Farris, Antony Gabriele, Trevor Owens, Elizabeth Petras, Carol Quinlan, Angelique Saavedra, Naomi Steinfeld

**Visitors!** We were happy to see some new faces at the meeting. Carol is a member of the church where we meet and came to see what we were about. Angelique brought Trevor (thank you, Angelique), and Dahmi Adnane came to us from Morocco! Okay, he didn't come from Morocco just to attend our meeting, but we were happy to see him (and our other visitors) nevertheless.

Adnane (I didn't know that the last name comes first in Morocco—I am always learning at Amnesty meetings!) is here to study. He told us he was a very active member of the Amnesty section in Morocco. Yes, Morocco has its own Amnesty section, just like the USA. Adnane described having some disagreements with the executive director in Morocco regarding students being given more decision-making power in the organization. I told him the U.S. has had many similar issues here, though things have improved, and we seem to have more of a system here for initiating changes in our process. We are hoping Adnane will be able to visit us again as he has offered to use his knowledge of five languages to help out with actions if needed.

Carol, meanwhile, is quite hooked up with various peace activities in Long Beach and told us about an ecojustice event on the first Friday of the month at the Unitarian Church as well as some other things. We also talked about using "Good Search" as a Web search engine. You can designate Amnesty, and it will receive money when you search using Good Search ([goodsearch.com](http://goodsearch.com)).

#### **Death Penalty**

Naomi went to a meeting of various nonprofits who are forming an area-wide anti-death penalty group. This was the first meeting for the Los Angeles Coalition for Alternatives to the Death Penalty. (They are trying to come up with a catchy acronym.) The Los Angeles Coalition for Alternatives to the Death Penalty will focus on reducing death sentencing in Los Angeles County and ending the death penalty in California. Los Angeles County currently sends more people to death row than any other county in California. Participating groups include Death Penalty Focus, the ACLU of Southern California, Progressive Jewish Alliance, California Crime Victims for Alternatives to the Death Penalty, California People of Faith Working Against the Death Penalty, and Amnesty International.

Thank you, Naomi, and we all agreed we would love if Naomi and/or Mary Kay could represent us at these meetings.

#### **Group News**

- Naomi visited the store Shades of Africa; the owner expressed interest in allowing us to show videos there. She shows documentaries every Friday night.
- We sent letters to the Gambia and Iran as well as to our senators (regarding Gaza). We also sent cards to people in the holiday action. We sent a total of 61 letters.

## A Chance to Build Respect *Continued from page 1*

The new administration also needs to show leadership in ending discrimination against lesbians, gay men and bisexual and transgender people. Measures to ensure people are not criminalized because of their sexual orientation or gender identity should be part of comprehensive legislative reforms aimed at ensuring that the human rights of all are respected, without discrimination.

The government must also do more to address the human rights of migrants, including the lack of due process for non-US citizens in deportation proceedings; indefinite and mandatory detention policies; and the inhumane conditions under which many immigration detainees, including asylum seekers, continue to be held.

On the international front, the USA's reputation has been damaged by its flouting of international law and its failure to engage constructively with UN human rights mechanisms. This can easily be remedied.

Among other things, the new administration should:

- ratify all core international human rights treaties and protocols, and withdraw limiting conditions on treaties it has promised to uphold;
- ratify the Rome Statute of the International Criminal Court (ICC);
- re-engage with the Human Rights Council;
- promote respect for human rights in its bilateral relations with other countries. One welcome measure already taken by the new administration was to lift the "global gag rule," the ban on federal funding for international organizations that provide or advocate reproductive health services, including safe, legal abortions.

Amnesty International calls on the new administration to remove remaining restrictions and increase funding for programmes addressing reproductive health, maternal health and sexually transmitted diseases, including AIDS/HIV.

In relation to the ongoing tragedy in Darfur, the USA has been a strong voice for the millions of victims of the conflict. But it can and should do more. It should provide funding and equipment to the peacekeeping effort. It should strengthen the arms embargo and support the ICC. It must oppose attempts to defer the case brought by the ICC against President al Bashir.

In response to the Middle East and the humanitarian crisis in the Gaza Strip, the USA should support a UN fact-finding mission to carry out a prompt, thorough, independent and impartial investigation of allegations of serious violations of international human rights and humanitarian law committed by all parties during the conflict in Gaza and southern Israel. It should impose a full arms embargo on both sides and place human rights at the centre of efforts to revive the Middle East peace process. Such responses to these and other international crises would signal the "new era of responsibility" promised by President Obama.

The outpouring of support for Barack Obama's election and his first executive orders reaffirms the enduring hope for a world in which the values embodied in the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, crafted by the USA and others over 60 years ago, are once again at the centre of the US domestic and international political agendas.

# Calendar February

18 Wednesday 7:00 PM

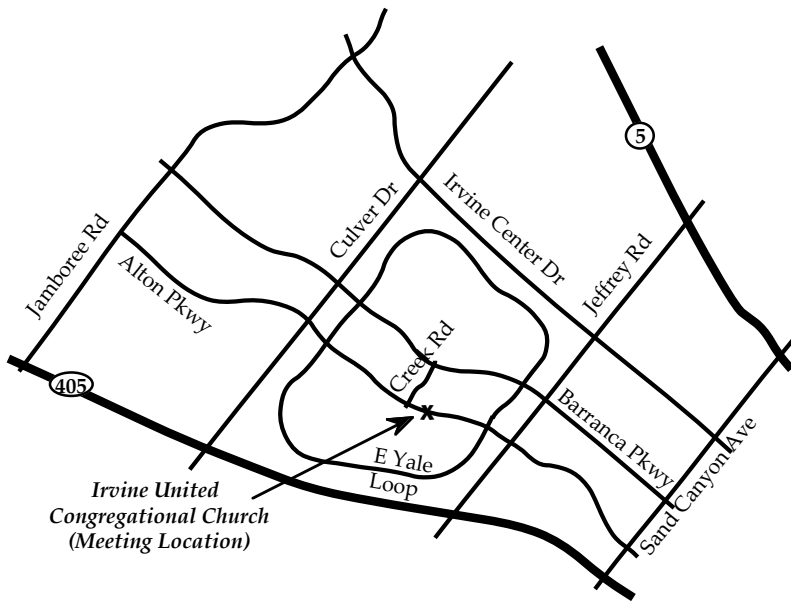
**Group #175 Long Beach Monthly Meeting** at the Unitarian Universalist Church, Rooms 1 and 2, 5450 Atherton Street, Long Beach. Letter-writing from 7:00–7:30. We will have a representative from Free the Slaves, who will show a video about slavery in the world today and then will tell us what her organization does. For further information about the group, contact Norma Edwards at (562) 425-4353.

24 Tuesday 7:00 PM

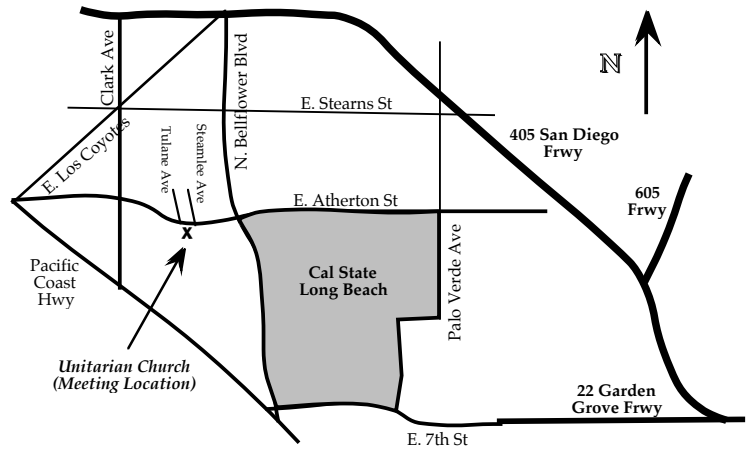
**Group #141 Orange Monthly Meeting** at the Sisters of St. Joseph Center, 480 S. Batavia Street, in Orange. The meeting room is in the Special Events Center located behind (west of) the main building (the Motherhouse). After entering the complex from Batavia Street, drive around the south side of the Motherhouse and park in the lot in the back. Look for the signs directing you to the meeting room. For further information about the group, contact Kevin Gaffney at [xhuskr@aol.com](mailto:xhuskr@aol.com).

26 Thursday 7:30 PM

**Group #178 Irvine Monthly Meeting** at the Irvine United Congregational Church, 4915 Alton Parkway, Irvine. For more information about the group, contact Jacques Kilchoer at [jacques.kilchoer@aiusaoc.org](mailto:jacques.kilchoer@aiusaoc.org).



Group #178 Irvine Meeting Location



Group #175 Long Beach Meeting Location

Amnesty International  
Group 178  
P.O. Box 17186  
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