

Report of talk given at Chester World Development Forum Meeting held on 13th March 2018 by Mike Johnson, Chair of the Chester and Wrexham Amnesty International Group



Amnesty International has its origins in the aftermath of WW2 in an effort to do away with the horrors of war. On 10th Dec 1948 the Universal Declaration of Human Rights was signed. In 1961, Peter Benenson founded AI after hearing a conversation on a train. He set in motion a one year campaign for people who were suffering from human rights abuse. The idea that one set of individuals could campaign on behalf of another set of individuals was started. Now there are more than 50 national sections and well over 7 million members worldwide.

The Aims of Amnesty International: (Taken from AI's website)

- We work to protect women, men and children wherever justice, freedom, truth and dignity are denied.
- As a global movement of over 7 million people, Amnesty International is the world's largest grassroots human rights organisation.
- We investigate and expose abuses, educate and mobilise the public, and help transform societies to create a safer, more just world. We received the Nobel Peace Prize for our life-saving work.

Mike went on to talk about the ongoing national campaigns and how the local group tie-in with these campaigns.

What does AI do?

- Nationally, AI holds public events to raise awareness of human rights abuses, organises demonstrations and carries out detailed research on political prisoners so that AI can campaign on their behalf.
- AI is an independent organisation which receives no government funding so relies on its members.
- AI gets involved mainly in campaigns against torture, the death penalty, and prisoners of conscience
- Increasingly in the last 10 years, AI has broadened its campaigning and currently the campaigns include the refugee issue,
- , the Arms Trade and the "Hate Campaign" following Brexit
- One of countries of most concern is Syria. AI has carried out research into the terrible humanitarian situation
- AI also doing research on Myanmar and Israeli settlements
- Each year, AI produces an annual report on their research findings but it is clear that there are lots more people/human rights abuses that are never heard about.
- Some involvement in educational establishments – raising awareness amongst young people
- A lot of activities both nationally and locally are based around the "power of the pen" – writing letters to governments/ sending cards to specific prisoners
- This year international AI is running a "Human Rights Defenders Campaign" because some people that are campaigning for human rights in specific countries are being targeted themselves e.g. Egypt.

Mike then related a story from Brendan Doyle, the founding member of the local group. Brendan was at an AI meeting in Liverpool when a person came in with a big bag and said he had come to say thank you. He opened the bag which was full of letters that AI members had written urging the authorities to release him as he was a political prisoner. He'd been thrown out of prison and when he left they gave him all the letters.

Amnesty International receive letters from family members of prisoners of conscience thanking AI for their support - testimonies of how important the support is to the prisoners. In addition to the letter writing the group has been raising public awareness locally hosting powerful theatre productions by Journeymen Theatre and promoting the "*I Welcome*" campaign on the refugee situation.

There has been an exhibition in Storyhouse and the Cathedral and it will be displayed again in the Cathedral during "Refugee Week" which runs from 18th - 24th June. There is also to be a dance performance in Storyhouse, the details of which are not yet finalised. (Look for further details in CWDF diary)

Questions:

Are there any countries where AI is not welcome? Some very grudgingly e.g. N Korea
Where is AI based? AI centred in UK.

Is there anything in this country which AI concerned about? Hate crime after Brexit
Mike mentioned the idea of Chester becoming a "City of Sanctuary".

LS: People have no voice but AI can raise awareness of oppression. Mike suggested that the best way to find out about any "urgent actions" is to use the website

Is AI charity or campaigning? UK Amnesty International has two main arms, Amnesty International UK and Amnesty International Charity Ltd - only the latter is a charity. AI UK has to raise its own funds to carry on the campaigning. One good way of fundraising is bag packing in Morrisons. This can raise up to £500.

There followed a card signing session – CWDF showing support for the work of AI and the "power of the pen".

**MOTTO: IT IS BETTER TO LIGHT A CANDLE THAN CURSE
THE DARKNESS**

Terry Green thanked Mike for his interesting and informative talk about this very important work

Further information:

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<https://www.amnesty.org.uk/groups/chester-and-wrexham>