

1. How many members are in AI Canada's (English Section) Urgent Action Network and how large is the UAN worldwide?

There are over 5000 participants in the Urgent Action Network in Canada. Globally, there are approximately 80,000 writers in 55 countries.

2. How are Urgent Actions researched and distributed?

Amnesty International's International Secretariat in London (or other international hubs) receives information about possible cases from a variety of sources. They include the families, colleagues, friends and lawyers of those at risk, local human rights groups, prisoners released from detention and even newspaper reports. Once the researchers have verified the facts of the case, they must decide whether Amnesty has the mandate and the resources to take action. If so, and if the situation is pressing enough to require an Urgent Action, a case is drafted and forwarded to the UA staff where it is edited and issued as an Action. This can happen within a few hours. They send the UA to Urgent Action Coordinators around the globe. One is based in Amnesty's Toronto office. A second UA Coordinator, linked to the French-speaking branch, works out of Montreal.

3. What sort of letter is most effective?

Remember that you are writing on behalf of a specific individual who can be harmed as well as helped by our efforts. Therefore, appropriate tone and content are very important.

An effective letter is firm but polite. It tells the reader who you are or where you are writing from, and why you are concerned for this person. Write assuming that the government is open to reason and that the official may not know about the specific individual for whom you are writing. The letter could emphasize personal concern for the country's international reputation. Always ask that the official not only improve the human rights situation of the individual(s), but also keep you informed about developments in the case. Stress the fact that your concern for human rights is not politically motivated and is in line with basic principles of international law.

You will want to avoid references to 'democracy' and 'democratic principles', which may seem to be innocent enough but may be viewed by recipients as preaching a Western ideal.

Finally, to be effective it is important to keep your letter brief and focused, no more than a page in length. When writing to non-English speaking destinations,

use simple language, straightforward grammar and avoid colloquial expressions which are not easily translated.

4. Is it more effective to send letters clearly representing myself as a member of Amnesty International or simply as an interested person without naming Amnesty as my information source?

Either is fine. We encourage letter writers to use their professional or academic affiliations in their correspondence with government officials. Titles or professional letterheads may impress authorities and suggest that writers are influential.

You may always refer to Amnesty International as your source of information. Or you may simply choose to state that you have learned about this person's situation and are concerned about him or her. If you do refer to Amnesty International, you could include a brief explanation of AI's aims and principles (impartiality and independence from any government, political faction, ideology, economic interest or religious belief). You may also indicate, where appropriate, that AI responds to the most serious challenges to a person's economic, social and cultural rights, and champions their rights to physical and mental integrity, to freedom of expression and to freedom from discrimination.

5. Should I write on my company letterhead?

Sure. We believe that in general, the more diverse a letter writing campaign is, the better its chances of getting the attention and respect of government authorities. We encourage people to express themselves in a variety of ways as long as the message is polite, non political and legible. Some businesses may object to the use of their letterhead for human rights advocacy. Others will be pleased to lend support in this way. Unless you are authorized to make such a decision, ask your supervisor before using company letterhead.

6. Can I hand-write my letters?

Of course. Handwritten appeals get the attention of authorities. They show the recipient that you are willing to invest considerable time and effort on behalf of an individual of concern to you. In fact, UA Coordinators believe that handwritten letters carry more weight than an emailed appeal which is informal, impersonal and easy to delete. You should, however, do what's easiest for you.

7. Where can I view sample appeal letters?

<https://www.amnesty.ca/sites/amnesty/files/Sample%20letter.jpg>

Or you might find additional tips useful from our toolkit:

<https://www.amnesty.ca/sites/amnesty/files/Letter%20Writing%20-%20Tool%20Kit.pdf>

8. Should I use the person's full name or can I use a shortened form?

We prefer that you use the full name of the detainee each time you mention him or her in your letters. This can be a little awkward but may be useful in making the name more familiar to the government official. It will also prevent errors caused by shortening a name incorrectly.

9. Can you provide letter writers with more detailed information about a particular case?

The standard Urgent Action format is limited to two pages so that it can be disseminated around the world both quickly and economically. Updates are sometimes issued when substantial developments occur. More detailed thematic or country information is usually available at www.amnesty.org or from our office upon request.

10. Is there a time limit on appeals?

Yes, although an exact date is not provided. Whenever possible, Urgent Action members should respond to a case within 24 hours. Even 48 hours is good. The longer you wait to respond to a case, the less impact you will have and the more likely the facts will have changed. Inaccurate letters may even be counterproductive. If you cannot respond to an appeal promptly, yet feel compelled to do so late, use a question format. Questions will not undermine Amnesty's earlier information and yet, if the prisoner's situation remains unchanged, will create strong pressure for an improvement.

11. Should I send copies of my appeals to you?

No. Our office would quickly get overwhelmed. However, should you feel a bit anxious the first few times you write an appeal letter, feel free to forward a copy to urgentaction@amnesty.ca and we will provide feedback.

12. Are the addresses for appeals listed in priority order?

Yes. The first official is the most important for the specific appeal and the last listed official is the least important. Amnesty International really never knows for sure which official may respond to our appeals in a way that will stop the abuse or potential abuse. Write to each official listed on the Urgent Action if you

can. If not, choose just one or two officials, knowing that other UA letter writers will be writing to the others. Addresses listed in the 'Copies' section are also listed in order of priority. Send a copy of your letter to as many as you can.

13. Why should I send copies of my letters to the individuals and organizations listed?

It is very important that you not ignore the 'Copies' section of a UA. When you send a copy to the diplomatic representative in Canada, you give them a snapshot of how Canadians are feeling about a particular situation in his/her country. The Ambassador or High Commissioner has a responsibility to report this back to the home government. Copies therefore function as a form of pressure. When you send a copy to a solidarity group, you are letting them know of concern abroad for the human rights violations to which their members are subjected. This is immensely encouraging to them and often motivates them to continue their vital work. One human rights defender calls our letters "the oxygen" she needs to keep going. When you send copies to newspapers, the volume of mail arriving from Amnesty members and the nature of the correspondence is, from time to time, the subject of an article.

It is possible for your copies to be even more effective than your original appeal to government authorities. If the officials, for one reason or another, do not receive or read their mail, the solidarity groups and news media to which we send copies of these 'unread' letters tend to publicize them. This is their way of pressuring the government and ensuring that its officials know about Amnesty members' concerns.

14. How do I use the addresses listed in the 'Copies To:' section of each UA?

Not every UA writer will be able to send copies of letters to every address listed. Even choosing one is fine. *Never send the Urgent Action case sheet to any official or address in the country concerned.*

The easiest way to use the 'Copies' section is to make a photocopy of your letter. From time to time, you might like to write a cover letter directly to the ambassador, for instance, drawing attention to your letter attached and asking him/her to forward your concerns to the home government. Here is a sample:

'Your Excellency, I enclose a copy of a letter which I sent today to the President, the Minister of Defense and the Minister of Education. Its contents are self-explanatory. It is my hope that this letter will help improve human rights conditions in Colombia. I respectfully urge you to add your voice to the concerns expressed in the letter. Thank you for your consideration. I await your reply.'

Also, you can compel officials to take you more seriously simply by informing them of your intention to copy your letter to others. You may do this by inserting 'cc:' or 'COPY' at the bottom of the appeal and listing the names of people and/or organizations to whom you will be sending copies.

15. Why don't my faxes go through? Am I doing something wrong? Are the numbers provided incorrect?

There is nothing more frustrating than not getting through to your destination, and nothing more wonderful than making the connection and watching your message go!

Faxing overseas is fraught with problems. While connections are becoming easier as more countries increase their telecommunications capacities, it is still common to reach worldwide fax destinations only 50% of the time. There can be many reasons for failure. The most delightful is that after the first 10 or 20 appeals arrive from around the world, the machine is unplugged to stop the Amnesty deluge! But there are other reasons too...

- The receiving machine is out of paper. Moreover, paper can be expensive in some countries and the machine may not be re-loaded for a while.
- The receiving machine is out of order.
- The receiving machine is busy (hopefully with incoming Amnesty appeals!)
- The receiving machine is turned off at night which, in many cases, is daytime in Canada.
- The circuits out of Canada, or into the receiving country, may be overloaded. Likewise, the circuits into the city or even the particular office, may be overloaded.
- There has been a power failure. It could last more than a day.
- The International Secretariat staff may have checked to make sure the number is working but by afternoon, authorities may have disabled the machine.

If you fail to connect after 3 tries on 2 separate days, put your letter in the mail. It may not be instant but it, too, is effective. Because some members succeed in faxing their letters and others resort to conventional mail, letters arrive over the course of a number of days. This 'staggered response' helps to reinforce the message and to constantly remind the official about the case.

16. Why aren't there Updates for all UAs issued?

When the human rights crisis passes, AI does not always hear further news. This is in part due to the fact that each year we work on thousands of prisoners through the UAN so keeping tabs on them all would be time-consuming. In other cases, many of the victims are in remote places where it is difficult to get any information out. Also, when the concern is a death threat, no further information is good news!

17. How often can I expect to receive a reply to my letters of appeal? What should I do when I receive a reply?

On average, one in five UAs elicits a response, usually from a government but sometimes from an opposition group or a support group. Sometimes only one UA writer appears to have received the reply. Other times, we may receive 10 identical copies. Please send in the original or a copy of each reply you receive by fax, email attachment or mail. The replies go to the relevant Amnesty research staff as well as to our national office. This information is important to Amnesty International researchers who monitor the reaction of officials to our actions. You may, if you wish, write a short note to an official who writes to you thanking him or her and asking to be kept informed on developments of that particular case. If the reply is general and does not address the individual you wrote about, you may ask for a more detailed report of that particular person's condition and restate the concerns originally expressed in your first letter.

18. I would like to write to the prisoners as well as to the officials, but you never give their addresses. Why not?

There are two reasons. The purpose of the Urgent Action program is to call on governments or opposition groups with control over a territory to stop the torture, executions and other forms of ill treatment or abuses occurring within their jurisdictions. Direct comfort to prisoners is therefore not our primary goal. Secondly, mail is not permissible in many detention centres and, in some cases, prisoners' safety could be put at risk by receiving international mail.

19. Can I receive more or fewer UAs each month? Can I receive actions just involving people of a specific profession or Urgent Actions from a specific region?

Yes. You can tailor the type and frequency of UAs you receive. You can do so by emailing urgentaction@amnesty.ca.

20. Can I post the UAs I receive to my personal website or to a group or organization's web site?

Yes.

21. How can I involve my young children in this program without exposing them to the horrible details of torture?

We create a monthly action designed for activists ages 9 and up, called the *Lifesaver*. We use simple language and avoid graphic details of ill treatment. We often include an educational component. Contact urgentaction@amnesty.ca for a sample action or to receive them every month.

22. What are the positive spin-offs of Urgent Action appeals?

An Urgent Action campaign can produce many benefits. You might anticipate some of them but others are pleasant surprises. Many testify to the invisible but effective preventive work UAs accomplish. Here's a partial list:

- Bearing specific and consistent witness to serious human rights violations, even if there's no positive impact from our appeals
- Letting a government know that its actions are monitored, even if that government does not respond
- Compiling information that can be used later in asylum claims
- Decreasing in number or strength the harassments or death threats against law-abiding citizens. In one instance, a paramilitary checkpoint was closed down after a UA was issued.
- Giving moral support to a prisoner with an execution date, a family of a 'disappearance' case, a community whose leader has just been imprisoned
- Providing human rights groups in the targeted country with the courage to continue their vital human rights work; promoting international solidarity
- Reactivating dormant human rights groups by unleashing a flood of appeals through an international UA on an issue of mutual concern
- Providing long-term protection. (A Peruvian on a 'disappearance' case miraculously reappeared. He visited the local human rights office where copies of our appeals had flooded in and created from them a book which he carries with him to prevent future arrest. When threatened, he plans to say 'Best not arrest me, for these are all my friends who will be upset if you do.')
- Ensuring future release if not immediately freed (Prisoners who were featured in UAs have been listed for release when general amnesties are being planned.)
- Preventing an intolerable fate (Even when UAs have little chance of success, NOT to respond could make a terrible situation worse.)
- Shining a spotlight on an isolated peasant community to ensure its residents' safety
- Getting media coverage

- Developing new contacts for Amnesty researchers
- Proving to current contacts the value of their collaboration by taking action on their reports