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AMNESTY
INTERNATIONAL



ACTIVIST

Turn the page on
immigration detention with
human rights defender
Sara María Gomez Lopez



In This Issue

JUNE 2023

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Thanks to the featured human rights defenders for trusting us with their stories.

Next Print Issue

The next issue is scheduled for the Fall 2023. If you would like to submit content or a letter to the editor, please do so by August 31, 2023.

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The *Activist* has a new look!

After a lengthy pandemic hiatus, we're glad to be back, bringing Amnesty members exciting human rights stories from across the movement. This newsletter has undergone many changes over the decades as you can see from the covers to your right. We'd love to hear from you about this latest version of the *Activist*, now reimagined as a user-friendly magazine with postcards and poster inserts that you can use to take action. Please send your feedback to the Editor at aahmad@amnesty.ca.



March 2009



April 2019



June 2023

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www.amnesty.ca



Members of the National Youth Action and Advisory Committee (NYAAC)



Letter from the Secretary General



incredible gains we have made in our campaign to end immigration detention in provincial jails across the country – advances that would not have been possible without your determination and activism. You will meet advocates – young and old, in Canada and abroad – making remarkable changes in their communities. You will also read about our latest exciting project, *Rights Back at You*, which has taken the podcast world by storm. May all these endeavours spark new campaign and activism ideas in you for a more just world.

Amnesty's greatest strength is its people, and I am incredibly proud of our team and movement's resilience

over the past year. May this summer issue renew your resolve to be a candle in the dark and to open our movement's circle far and wide. A movement that embraces the rights, equality and inherent dignity of everyone excludes no one, and we will continue to work to be the most diverse, vibrant and affirming Amnesty we can be.

EVERY activist needs a place to go to replenish their hope. Over the past three years, many of us have needed to find something to hold onto as our world shook in turmoil, from one crisis to another. I have often found mine in the tireless actions of our Amnesty International Canada members, in the youthful faces at demonstrations and in the handwritten letters sent through our Write for Rights campaign. Nothing is more inspiring than people working together to make the world a better, more just place.

Finding hope is not a frivolous exercise. "Hope is being able to see light beyond the darkness," shared the wise Archbishop Desmond Tutu, a beacon of justice, even during the darkest times of his country's history. Hope is the fuel we need to keep driving our activism. To continue to advocate for refugee rights despite the recent and unjust closure of Roxham Road. To protect women's rights under unprecedented attack in Iran, Afghanistan, the United States and across our world. To counter the rise of anti-rights movements spouting hatred and exclusion. These actors have gained traction, in the wake of the COVID-19 lockdowns, through misinformation and by proffering reductive "solutions" to complex global problems.

I hope this refreshed *Activist* magazine replenishes and energizes you. In these pages you will read about the

**Hope is the fuel we need
to keep driving our activism.**

We are only as effective as we are hopeful. Never underestimate your power to effect change. I offer you the words of the great Harry Belafonte, the remarkable activist and artist and 2013 recipient of the Amnesty Ambassador of Conscience award, who left us this spring, yet whose fight for justice and human rights has forever marked our world: "Each and every one of you has the power, the will and the capacity to make a difference in the world in which you live."

In solidarity,

Ketty Niyabandi
Secretary General

Greetings from Board Chair Mohamed Huque



ON behalf of the Board of Directors, I would like to express my deepest gratitude for your unwavering support of Amnesty International Canadian Section (English Speaking). Your dedication has empowered our work during perhaps the most tumultuous time in the organization's history.

As we reflect on our recent past, we recognize that our Section looks very different than it did three years ago. Starting in 2020, the COVID-19 pandemic rearranged life as we know it, requiring us to find innovative ways to work while safeguarding the health and well-being of our staff and volunteers. Around the same time, we embarked on our journey to uproot racist attitudes and structures within the organization, an across-the-movement endeavour that continues today.

Then there was the targeted breach of AICSES's IT network by a group of sophisticated hackers believed to be connected to the Chinese state. Despite lacking server access for weeks last fall, our team still managed to launch AICSES's annual made-in-Canada Write for Rights campaign, research, write and edit our 2022 *Human Rights Agenda*, and coordinate Urgent Actions calling out human rights abuses around the world. None of this would have been possible without the tenacity of our leadership and staff, and the support and encouragement of Amnesty donors, members and volunteers.

Throughout the pandemic, AICSES members and supporters contacted us with words of support, questions and concerns. Some shared their worries about AICSES's anti-racism journey distracting from our human rights advocacy.

As this newsletter richly illustrates, AICSES's public-facing efforts to defend human rights are alive and well. It's also critical to understand that looking inward and embracing the deep, messy work of dismantling racist, colonial attitudes and structures within the organization is not separate from our mission; it's integral to it. How can we effectively partner with rights holders around the world while diminishing the rights and experiences of people within our own ranks?

Another often-raised concern was a dearth of opportunities for member engagement. As a Board, we acknowledge that we need to do more to unleash the expertise, passion, and vision of our activists. In response, the Board has struck a new Member Engagement Committee, whose mission is to invigorate our organization by tapping into our most valuable resource: the grassroots. New opportunities to shape AICSES's work will be announced in the months to come, and we hope we'll see you at our first in-person Annual General Meeting since 2019.

AICSES's public-facing efforts to defend human rights are alive and well.

In the meantime, please accept our sincere thanks for supporting AICSES during a period of intense reflection and renewal. While the Board, management and staff contemplated organizational change, you did much more than raise your voice online, in the streets and in letters to powerful decision-makers. You propelled the movement forward with your insistence on, and unfaltering commitment to, human rights for all.

In solidarity,

Mohamed Huque
Chair, Board of Directors



Immigration Detention

Closing the Chapter

How the campaign against immigration detention changed one activist's life – and Canada – for the better

SARA María Gomez Lopez was sitting in her Vancouver apartment when she learned the news. It was July 21, 2022, and the B.C. government had just announced that it planned to stop holding migrants and refugees detained by the Canada Border Services Agency (CBSA) in provincial jails. It was the first province or territory to go public with such a decision.

“When I heard about B.C.’s decision to stop jailing immigration detainees, I was overjoyed,” recalls Sara, a former refugee claimant from Mexico. “It felt like one of the most difficult chapters in my life finally closed.”

The summer sun streaming into her apartment, Sara reflected on the three months she spent in a series of B.C. jails after she sought asylum in Canada in October 2012. She was never charged with a crime. The experience disturbed her and shattered her image of Canada as a welcoming place.

Now a support worker for survivors of torture, Sara has advocated for years for the abolition of immigration detention in provincial jails. Her efforts and those of activists and human rights organizations across Canada – including Amnesty International Canada and Human Rights Watch – have brought the country closer than ever to making immigration detention a thing of the past.

And momentum is growing.

‘I came close to losing my hope’

Many Canadians have no idea that the CBSA detains thousands of migrants and refugees per year, holding them on “administrative grounds.” People in immigration detention may stay behind bars for as little as a few hours or as long as several years – often with little to no sense of when they will be released. In 2022, 40 per cent of all people in immigration detention were held in provincial jails. The rest were incarcerated in immigration holding centres, which are like medium-security prisons but only house people detained by the CBSA.

“People seeking safety or a better life come to Canada thinking they will be welcomed,” says Julia Sande, Amnesty



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PREVIOUS PAGE: Sara María Gomez Lopez is a Vancouver-based activist and survivor of immigration detention.

ABOVE: Activists with AICES and Human Rights Watch protest immigration detention outside a jail in Port Coquitlam, B.C., in June 2022.

International Canada’s Human Rights Law and Policy Campaigner. “Instead, they are arbitrarily detained in the most restrictive confinement conditions that exist in the country. It’s an appalling injustice.”

A 2021 report prepared by Human Rights Watch and Amnesty International Canada explores how immigration detention in provincial jails harms people’s mental health. Dr. Janet Cleveland, a McGill University psychologist who studies the impacts of immigration detention on people’s mental health, told researchers that even short periods of detention can result in post-traumatic stress, depression and anxiety. Detention can be especially traumatizing for people escaping oppression in their home country.

The mental health effects of immigration detention can be fatal. A few months after Sara was released, a woman named Lucia Vega Jimenez – she, too, was from Mexico – ended her life while in immigration detention in B.C.

“Behind those walls, I came close to losing my hope, but I held on,” Sara told reporters at a press conference in November 2022. “Lucia was not as lucky. And it hurts to think about how many others lose their hope, their faith in Canada, and even their lives, because of immigration detention.”

Immigration detention is also discriminatory. Racialized people, including Black men, are disproportionately likely to end up in immigration detention. And racialized people and people with mental health conditions are more likely than others to be detained in provincial jails or subjected to solitary confinement.

“The most marginalized people in our immigration and refugee-protection system are subjected to the worst treatment,” Sande says. “Canada has a responsibility to respect the rights of everyone who seeks safety or a better life here, without discrimination. It is failing to uphold its obligations under international and domestic human rights law.”

The first domino to fall

British Columbia’s decision to end its immigration detention contract with the CBSA didn’t happen out of the blue. The announcement followed years of grassroots mobilization, painstaking research, and government engagement on the part of advocates with lived experience in immigration detention along with human rights activists, religious leaders, health care providers, academics and a broad network of civil society organizations.

In May 2022, a coalition of groups in B.C. launched 14 Days of Action calling for an end to immigration detention in the province. This was while the provincial government was conducting a review of its immigration detention contract with the CBSA.

A diverse group of organizations – from sex-worker advocates the Supporting Women’s Alternatives Network (SWAN) to the queer-focused settlement group Rainbow Refugee – rallied together, each bringing their own distinctive skills and points of view. The B.C. Civil Liberties Association hosted a press conference on May 4. A group of concerned healthcare providers shared an open letter with the B.C. government. Sara penned a deeply personal op-ed for the *Vancouver Sun*, shining a light on her own experience in immigration detention. And she was one of the advocates who spoke at Vancouver City Hall the night councillors voted to urge the B.C. government to end immigration detention in provincial jails.

Their voices were heard. In July 2022, when B.C. Public Safety Minister Mike Farnworth announced his government’s

In the past 10 years, I experienced the best of what Canada has to offer. But I also experienced the worst of what authorities try to hide.” Sara María Gomez Lopez

decision to stop incarcerating migrants and refugees in its jails on administrative immigration grounds, he cited human rights concerns as a major factor in the policy shift.

Coincidentally, Amnesty International Canada volunteer Omar Chu was on a video call with other members of an Immigration Detention working group when someone in the meeting spotted a news alert about B.C.’s decision. Together, the working group had organized a rally outside the North Fraser Pre-Trial jail in Port Coquitlam, sent letters to provincial and federal decision-makers and participated in the B.C.-focused 14 Days of Action – all while grappling with the disconnection and dislocation of the COVID-19 pandemic.

“I didn’t think that that was what the decision was going to be,” Omar remembers. “It was a lot of collective work and a lot, a lot of effort. A lot of people put effort into pushing for this, and so to get that news together was a nice moment.”

As it turned out, B.C. was the first in a series of dominoes to fall across the country. By the end of October, three



From right to left: Sara María Gomez Lopez, former federal cabinet minister Allan Rock, activist Abdelrahman Elmady, Amnesty International Canada Secretary General Ketty Niyabandi, and Human Rights Watch's Samer Muscati in Ottawa on November 14, 2022.

more provinces – Nova Scotia, Alberta and Manitoba – had announced they too were cancelling their immigration detention contracts with the CBSA. Saskatchewan would join the list in April, and Ontario, Quebec and New Brunswick in June 2023. Suddenly, ending the practice of immigration detention countrywide felt within reach. Emboldened by the string of successes, and fuelled by the stories of people like Sara, advocates have shifted their focus to Ottawa.

On Parliament Hill

Sara was nervous, stepping into the National Press Theatre in Ottawa on a cloudy morning in November 2022. She reviewed the statement she had prepared for a press conference calling on the Trudeau government to eradicate immigration detention in provincial jails countrywide. Wearing a knee-length red scarf given to her by her mother, Sara dove into her remarks, fighting off tears, conviction surging in her voice. “I arrived in Canada in 2012 to seek asylum,” she began. “In the past 10 years, I experienced the best of what Canada has to offer. But I also experienced the worst of what authorities try to hide.”

Sara’s testimony, and that of Egyptian refugee claimant and human rights activist Abdelrahman Elmady, put a human face on the issue. Former cabinet ministers Lloyd Axworthy and Allan Rock implored their colleagues in government to take Sara’s and Abdelrahman’s experiences to heart. After the cameras stopped rolling, Sara, Abdelrahman, and representatives from Human Rights Watch and Amnesty International Canada traipsed across the street to Parliament Hill’s West Block to watch Question Period. There, B.C. MP Jenny Kwan rose to ask the government whether it would “put an end to this odious immigration detention practice and stop putting migrants and asylum seekers in provincial jails.”

The date, November 14, bore special significance for Sara. In 2012, Canadian immigration officials had scheduled her in for an eligibility interview for that day – a meeting she would never attend because she was unjustly incarcerated. “I was in jail that day, and 10 years later, I was addressing

the government. So for me, there are so many coincidental days that are like the closing of chapters.”

Participating in the campaign is part of Sara’s healing journey. Her activism has helped her process her trauma and better understand her work clients who endured immigration detention in Canada or abroad. It has also afforded her a sibling-like bond with Abdelrahman, one of the few other people in Canada to have spoken out so publicly about surviving immigration detention in provincial jails. “He’s my brother,” Sara says. “Anything I can do in order to be a relief, I’ll be there for him.”

Seizing the moment

As it stands in Spring 2023, the immigration detention campaign may be on the cusp of one of the most important made-in-Canada human rights wins in a decade. Amnesty International Canada launched a petition calling on Prime Minister Trudeau to revoke the CBSA’s provincial detention agreements immediately. And in response to findings in the coroner’s inquest into the 2015 death of Somali refugee Abdurahman Ibrahim Hassan in immigration detention, human rights defenders across Canada are amplifying the jury’s call for governments to take immigration detention out of the provincial corrections system.

“Every person who signs a petition, attends a rally, phones their MP or even shares an article brings us one step closer to a Canada where refugees and migrants are treated fairly and humanely,” says Amnesty’s Julia Sande. “And we would not be where we are without the courage of people like Sara and Abdelrahman to share their stories. They have galvanized a movement and captured the hearts and minds of Canadians.”

For her part, Sara says her involvement in the campaign is far from over. *Why stop at eradicating immigration detention in provincial jails when the practice of arbitrarily incarcerating migrants and refugees is so harmful to begin with?*

“[Resettling] is a very difficult moment in your life for any migrant,” she says. “It doesn’t matter if you are forcefully displaced or voluntarily displaced, it’s a shocking moment. And if you think that we, as Canada, are adding detention, it is another trauma. We need to do better.”

HELP CLOSE THE CHAPTER ON IMMIGRATION DETENTION FOR GOOD

Please take a moment to pull out, sign and send the postcard in this magazine to Prime Minister Justin Trudeau, urging his government to end the harmful practice of immigration detention in provincial jails. No postage is required – just drop it in a mailbox.



Take a few more moments to bear witness to “Shadows of the North” – a moving video with testimony from people who have experienced the harms of immigration detention.



Getting Involved and Staying Involved as a Young Activist

An interview with Avreet Jagdev,
Amnesty National Organizer



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Avreet Jagdev started her journey as an Amnesty volunteer in Grade 9. Now a second-year social sciences student at the University of Toronto and a member of Amnesty’s National Organizers program, she opened up to the *Activist* about what originally inspired her to take the plunge into human rights advocacy and what motivates her to keep on going.

What inspired you to become a human rights activist?

My very first introduction to Amnesty was in Grade 9. We were doing our letter-writing unit, and there were students, of course, who were not on board with doing whatever the teacher wanted them to do. They were like, “What is the point of all this? No one writes letters these days.” So our teacher actually pulled up Amnesty International’s website as an example to show us how powerful letter-writing could actually be. And I was like, “Oh my goodness, this is awesome. This is amazing.” And the most intriguing part to me was that it was something I could be a part of. I could write a letter or I could sign a petition.

Was there a cause or campaign that you were most passionate about?

Yes, I recall the very first letter I wrote was to free Narges Mohammadi from jail. I was very passionate about women’s rights. I still very much am, but I remember I would read a lot about issues, particularly in the Middle East, when it came to rights that women had and didn’t have and punishments that they got just for very simple things like demanding their basic human rights. Even at that age, I recognized that I’m all the way over here and have this immense privilege to be able to write these letters and to be able to advocate for [human rights defenders] from the safety of my home.

You are a National Organizer with Amnesty. What does that involve, for people who don’t know?

A lot of what we do is plan events and campaigns in our own communities or help plan Write for Rights. I still do a little bit with the campus club at the University of Toronto. But my main involvement with Amnesty is just through the National Organizers program. You get to contribute what you’re able to in the time you have. We understand that a lot of people are in school or beginning their career, so there’s not always tremendous capacity. If there is, that’s wonderful. If there’s not, that’s something everyone understands. We just do the work that we can, and we always do the work that we’re each passionate about, which I really enjoy.

For young people looking to get involved, but who are intimidated or overwhelmed by the enormity of it, where would you recommend they get started?

I don’t know what it was about me when I was young, but I never felt too much intimidation from anything. I was like, “Oh, this is cool, I’m going to do it.” But now I do face that and I recognize a lot of people face it. Especially with an organization as large as Amnesty, it can be scary. I would recommend starting by going on the website and seeing what opportunities are available. They’re also posted on social media, and they’re posted in newsletters.

Then, honestly, I am such an advocate for cold-contacting and cold-emailing. Find an email address and email someone. If you don’t email the right person, it will get forwarded to the right person. But put yourself out there. Open that door for yourself. So if you are paying attention to the newsletters and the social media and you don’t particularly see anything for you, but you know you still want to get involved, go out there and write that email and find that opportunity for yourself, because that strategy has worked wonders for me.

From left to right: National Organizers Aroni Nur Ahmed, Elaheh Sajadi, Natalie Khallouf, Avreet Jagdev and Rachel Lim at the Toronto Amnesty Youth CAFÉ 2022.



Much of your time as an Amnesty organizer has occurred during the pandemic. How do you think that has shaped your advocacy, if at all?

Yeah, I think it most definitely has. I started when the pandemic was very fresh, and now things are moving a lot more to in-person. But for the first two years of my activism with Amnesty, it was purely on Zoom. We still got a lot done. Of course, the pandemic was and is horrible, but one of its upsides is that it has allowed us to connect with people across Canada, even internationally.

I work a job right now as a writer and an interviewer with this resource called Jobs People Do, which is an educational organization for K-12 schools across Canada. And I actually had the honour of interviewing Shahnawaz Chowdhury, one of our Write for Rights cases this year. He was all the way in Bangladesh, and I was sitting in my dorm in Toronto, and it was so wonderful. And the pandemic kind of introduced us to Zoom, which we didn't have much of before. I didn't know what Zoom was. So that's one of its upsides. It's really allowed me to connect with people all over Canada and all over the world.

Do you have a human rights hero or role model, famous or not, living or not, whose example has shaped you as an activist?

Recently, with the coursework I've been taking on, I've been looking at American history and history in North America. I really love what I'm learning about Malcolm X and Angela Davis. I think we learn about them a lot less because their work was a lot more radical than other civil rights activists' – who, of course, also did amazing things and paved the way for what we have today. But specifically, I would have to say people like Angela Davis and Malcolm X inspired me because they were incredibly fierce about what they wanted to get done.

Human rights work can be intense. What do you do to recharge your activist batteries?

Oh, that's a great question. Sometimes you just need to take a step away, and it can be very hard to do that. Right now, I'm helping with the National Youth Consultation Strategy. We're looking to revitalize our strategy when it comes to engaging youth. And one of the questions we're asking

people is how can we make sure that, among young activists in particular, there's a balance when it comes to advocacy and wellbeing.

A lot of the people who get involved in this type of work, especially those who get involved young, are the same types of people who will work and work and work until they hit complete burnouts. And they won't recognize that it's okay to take a break and when it's time to take a break. It's beginning by reminding yourself – but also us, as an organization, by reminding each other – that it's not only okay but it's important to take breaks and it's important to take a step back.

That's great. And are there particular activities you do or media you consume that help you recharge or put you in a good place?

I love very easy watches. I'm obsessed with *Never Have I Ever* on Netflix. I've watched it a million times because it's so easy to just put on and laugh. So yeah, the media I do consume, I will admit, is usually stuff I can watch and then look away for 10 minutes and I still know what's going on. I can just sit there and enjoy and laugh and just not have to worry.

Finally, what gives you hope?

I think it's seeing people show up in whatever way they can. I do a lot of pro-choice advocacy here on campus. We see anti-abortion protesters with very graphic imagery all the time. So one of the initiatives that we do through a club that I run is we actually go out and we block the imagery. We physically stand in front of it so that students don't have to see it.

But sometimes I won't even know that our members are out protesting. I won't get the messages. I'll just be walking by, and I'll see someone else doing it. And I'm like, "Wow." That gives me so much hope. Because people are doing the work. People are showing up.

This interview has been edited for length and clarity.

If you know of an Amnesty member who should be featured or profiled in the Activist, please let us know by writing to aahmad@amnesty.ca.



Members in Action

Despite the pandemic, Amnesty members continued to organize together for human rights. Check out some inspiring images of our members in action across the country!



1. Amnesty Regina at the Queen City Pride Parade, 2022

2. Amnesty supporters participate in the tree planting ceremony to honour the memory of Indigenous environmental defender Berta Cáceres in Ottawa, September 2022.

3. Students at Woodlands High School in Mississauga, Ontario, participate in Write for Rights, 2022.

4. Artist Claudia Salguero sits in front of the “River of Life” she helped the community paint and plant around Berta’s tree.



1

1. Regina's "Amnesty Rocks the Boat" team won a trophy at the Regina Dragon Boat Festival, 2022.

2. Amnesty Regina's "Spring Free from Racism" event.

3. Alexa Guerrier, member of the Immigration Detention Specialized Team, protesting at an immigration detention facility in Toronto, June 2022.

4. Amnesty youth and the Secretary General meet in Ottawa to deliver hundreds of petition signatures for Palestinian human rights to the Prime Minister's office, September 2021.

5. The Secretary General unveils the plaque for the tree planted to honour Berta Cáceres at AICSES's National Office, September 2022.

6. Amnesty members in Halifax participate in Write for Rights, 2022.



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1. Setting up for Write for Rights in Victoria, B.C.

2. Amnesty National Organizer Rachel Lim (designer of the poster in this magazine) at the University of Ottawa's 2021 Write for Rights event – credit Amnesty International uOttawa.

3. A member of Amnesty Kitchener-Waterloo at their Write for Rights event, 2022.

4. Amnesty Toronto members gather at Write for Rights 2022.



3

4

Rights Back at You Tackles Racial Justice

AMNESTY Canada's new podcast *Rights Back at You* has generated a level of buzz that is rare for a brand-new production launched into a very crowded podcast universe. And for good reason; the stories are compelling and the production outstanding. So much so that Apple Podcasts made it an Editors' Choice and gave it high marks in not one but two categories, "Best of Society and Culture" and "New and Noteworthy."

Rights Back at You is also regularly recommended by media outlets, social media influencers, and the featured community members themselves.

Season 1 is an unflinching look at anti-Black racism in the post-2020 era. Host and Amnesty Digital Activism Coordinator Daniella Barreto led the research and writing, but passed the mic to activists and other changemakers so they could tell their own stories.

"Our goals for the podcast are to centre and amplify the voices of advocates who refuse to be scared into silence," says Barreto. "We want to inspire and challenge listeners to think differently about public safety and how it relates to human rights."

The focus on racial justice comes directly from Amnesty Canada's 2022-2030 Strategic Plan and our commitment to work to ensure that Black people are safe from police violence and have agency to define safety in their communities.

During a podcast listening party in Vancouver to celebrate the launch of the podcast, Secretary General Ketty Nivyabandi acknowledged that, although Amnesty has always stood up against injustice, it was often at the individual level and did not make the connection between



Illustration by Sasha Mbabazi



EPISODES

- 1 "Facial Recognition and Policing Protesters"
- 2 "Street Surveillance and the War On Drugs"
- 3 "Don't You Be My Neighbour"
- 4 "Walking While Black"
- 5 "Access Denied – Tech at the Border"

Rights Back at You is available for free download wherever you find podcasts. A discussion guide for educators and Amnesty clubs and groups is also available.



who those individuals were and the systems that enable oppression. She told the gathering that Amnesty is beginning to make those critical connections and understand, name, and uproot systemic racism wherever it occurs.

"That's why this podcast is critical: it falls directly in the line of the work that we're hoping to do; it addresses racial injustice in bold and innovative and accessible ways."



The Book Club is Coming Back This Fall!

In the next issue of the *Activist*, we'll feature inspiring book selections and a pull-out discussion guide to take you through the fall and winter months. If you haven't talked to your book club circle recently, let them know!

Questions or suggestions for the Amnesty Book Club? Please contact the Editor at ahmad@amnesty.ca.



Campaigns We Love

Public Space Network

DANDORA, an urban settlement located in Nairobi, Kenya, is home to one of the largest landfill sites in the African continent. The 30-acre landfill was opened in 1975. Although it was declared full in 2001, it continues to accumulate more than 2,000 metric tons of unregulated waste a day (Kyalo, 2022). It lacks a protective liner system, facilitating soil absorption of hazardous materials and toxins causing detrimental impacts on the environment and, according to a United Nations Environmental Programme report, greatly increasing the exposure of Dandora's 140,000 inhabitants to the risk of cancer, skin disorders, respiratory abnormalities, and blood disorders (Kimani, 2007).

The degradation of the environment is not happening in isolation; instead, it is systematically orchestrated. In a city where five per cent of the population lives on 75 per cent of the land, the mechanical dumping of waste into densely populated informal settlements is part of what Oyunga Pala calls the “environmental apartheid” of Nairobi, a continuation of the British colonial system where the bulk of the city was reserved for white settlers while the African population was forced to live in the periphery (Pala, 2018). Today the social and housing disparities created by the colonial government persist. While the Kenyan elite are privy to lush greenery, fresh air and clean water, most of the population lives in communities neglected by the state, often overcrowded, lacking in communal amenities, green spaces, and adequate sanitation systems. The dearth of state intervention has fueled innovation, with community initiatives filling in the gaps and implementing community-based solutions to increase people's survival in a system otherwise designed to frustrate their potential.

Charles Gachanga, who has lived in Dandora since 1979, was inspired by the movie *Swades: We the People*, where scientist Mohan Bhargava uses his skills, creativity, and determination to transform his village in India. He started strategizing how he could use his knowledge to create the change he wanted to see in his community.

This section of the *Activist* is dedicated to profiling the work of amazing activists and grassroots movements. If you would like to suggest future profiles, please contact the Editor at aahmad@amnesty.ca.



TOP: Nairobi's public libraries are situated in areas that are not easily accessible for those living in Dandora. Understanding the importance of education, Evans and his team transformed a former landfill into a community library where members can borrow from a diverse selection of books.

ABOVE: Public Space Network repurposes waste from the Dandora dumpsite into a variety of things, such as furniture, decorations and garbage bins. Pictured here: garden chairs that members from Believers Transformation League designed from tires.

Looking at a small landfill within the community, Charles and two of his friends started to visualize the possibilities that lay within that space. In 2014, for four months, they spent every day cleaning it up with an unwavering vision: to create a green space that could model, inspire, and unlock the community's potential. After removing the garbage, they discovered that toxins from the waste had seeped into the ground and turned the once rich and fertile soil into black, dry dust, incapable of supporting any form of life. They dug out the earth and replaced it with fresh soil, planted grass, cleaned out the drainage, and installed swings and trampolines for the children.

The results caught the eye of Awesome Foundation, a group of young professionals in Kenya that contributed money to fund hubs of innovation in Kenya. They supplied finances that allowed Charles and his colleagues to purchase landscaping materials to replicate the concept in more areas within Dandora. Aligned in vision, Robinson Esialimba, founder of Awesome Foundation, and Charles Gachanga partnered up and co-founded Public Space Network (PSN) with the mission to alter mindsets and transform the community.

PSN created Changing Faces, a competition where youth groups were challenged with transforming their spaces for a cash prize. The first year saw five community groups competing to transform their spaces in a beneficial way for their community. This concept had a ripple effect in Dandora, and the next year, 200 groups registered to compete. To date, PSN has created jobs for youths who maintain rejuvenated public spaces and provide security, implemented an ecological-justice educational program for children, increased food security, decreased crime significantly and created communal green spaces where residents can relax, play, and connect with nature. PSN is driven by a deep commitment to improving people's quality of life through creating greater access to quality public spaces. As Robinson, a founder of PSN, notes, "There is no faster, more efficient and impactful way of improving one's quality of life than through improving the quality of public spaces around them."

By transforming spaces designed to unlock community members' full potential, PSN is creating cracks in the system orchestrated to oppress and marginalize them. Evans Otieno, chairman of Believers Court and a member of the PSN, spoke of the meticulous selection process for everything that goes into their space: fruit trees and urban gardens increase food security, medicinal trees connect residents to their ancestral ways of healing, libraries enhance the transfer of knowledge, and swings and trampolines create an environment for children to play. Nurturing these spaces goes beyond watering plants and cleaning up the area; it requires unlearning the myths that neoliberal policies have conjured. Our relationship with nature is reciprocal and we need to learn how to take care of our environment for our own survival instead of commodifying and destroying it to meet capitalistic needs. In return for planting seeds and taking care of the environment, the soil can provide us with food, medicine and change the quality of our air.



ABOVE: One of Believers Transformations League's current projects. They are cleaning up and revamping a dumping site into a community park. From left to right: David Gathoni, Peter Kiarie, Ephantus Njeru, Antoni Mwangi and Evans Otieno.

Today, PSN comprises a network of 5,000 environmental activists across Nairobi revamping ecosystems and changing the quality of life for the citizens in Kenya. In total, they've rejuvenated 600 public spaces in informal settlements, turning them into spaces that are serving the community, ranging from urban gardens to libraries to children's playgrounds. Evans, Charles, Robinson and so many of those involved in Public Space Network are on the frontlines of the climate justice movements in Nairobi's urban settlements. Their work contributes massively to the global climate justice movement, reminding us of the interdependence between our fundamental human rights and our natural environment. Even though our surroundings hold the story of our past, they also contain the potential for new and improved realities.

As Octavia Butler says, "All that you touch, you change. All that you change, changes you."

CONTACT INFORMATION FOR PSN AND BELIEVERS TRANSFORMATION LEAGUE

Facebook: Believers Transformation League

Instagram: @publicspacenetwork

Web: www.publicspacenetwork.org

Email: chairman@publicspacenetwork.org
evansotieno235@gmail.com

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Meet the Fieldworkers

On the ground for Amnesty – grassroots leaders and organizers

Kim Thorsen

Chair, Amnesty International Edmonton Group,
Amnesty member and activist since 1987

THERE are several national volunteer structures within our section: Fieldworkers, Coordinators, National Organizers, and the National Youth Action and Advisory Committee (NYAAC).

How did the Fieldworker program come to be? We began 35 years ago as an education network for members. We have evolved over the years from educators, to leaders, strategists, representatives of Amnesty Canada, public speakers and member support. Our program is self-governing by our own volunteer coordinating team. We recruit, train, and collaborate with activists across the country! We have initiated our own Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion (DEI) and anti-oppression work. We write and implement policies and accountability procedures. Some of us have been in this work for a very long time; we have two Fieldworkers that have been a part of the program since its inception in 1984!

Fieldworkers are volunteer organizers. We help local activists and groups organize events, campaigns, meetings, and more.

- Fieldworkers were instrumental in organizing a nationwide conference held online during the height of the pandemic. At this “Sparking Connections!” conference, Amnesty members were able to attend workshops and hear speakers on a wide variety of human rights issues.
- A Fieldworker in Ottawa has built connections between local Amnesty International groups to work together on events and campaigns.
- We are bridgers. We help members connect with staff and the National Office. We help volunteers find the information they need.

Fieldworkers are the volunteer grassroots leadership throughout Canada. Fieldworkers act as catalysts for making things happen! We are well-versed in Amnesty International’s strategic plan and Canada’s role in



TOP: Fieldworker Kim Thorsen speaks to the media on International Women’s Day, March 8, 2021.



ABOVE AND RIGHT: Fieldworkers partnered with community organizations during the pandemic to protest anti-Asian hate.



A Fieldworker-hosted “Human Rights 101” workshop for international students at the University of Alberta.

implementing it. We are informed on current campaigns and must be ready to provide timely and relevant positions on human rights situations as they happen.

- We’re public speakers. We are often the public face for Amnesty Canada, speaking on a wide variety of issues to local media, human rights groups, community leaders, and social justice groups. All of these diverse organizations contact us to discuss current events, human rights campaigns, and statements regarding Amnesty International’s position on relevant issues.
- Fieldworkers are educators! Our training team has developed and delivered training on everything from coordination and facilitation, event planning, and public speaking, to activist self-care, anti-oppression, and digital activism. We’ve always used a train-the-trainers model. Our coordination team educates new (and seasoned) Fieldworkers, and they in turn train other activists doing grassroots work.
- In fact, Fieldworkers are something of a leadership development program. Many of us take on other key roles within the Canadian branch: former Fieldworkers have served on our national Board of Directors, national and international committees, and represented Amnesty Canada at the Amnesty International global assembly.

We are here to support local groups and individuals that want to take action to defend human rights. We have the resources and the experience to help members and volunteers that want to get more involved. We’re available to help with whatever grassroots activists and members need to do their work.

- A Fieldworker can help start a local Amnesty group.
- We support existing local groups with their needs, whether information on campaigns, how to attract media attention, how to keep groups going, and more.
- Fieldworkers can be there on the front line with grassroots activists.
- Many Fieldworkers are rights holders ourselves and can provide perspective and vital information on anti-oppression strategy.
- Fieldworkers can advise on problem-solving, conflict resolution, and group dynamics.

How did we fare during the pandemic? During the height of the pandemic, Fieldworkers were ready to pivot in our support of local human rights work. We became innovators in online activism. For example a Fieldworker in Edmonton conducted and recorded interviews with activists from many different organizations, offering learning and inspiration. This interview series also helped maintain connections with outside organizations during that hard time when we couldn’t get out in our communities.

NEED A FIELDWORKER?

Please visit www.amnesty.ca/what-you-can-do/fieldworkers/. You’ll find all the information you need to help you connect with someone near you.

INTERESTED IN BECOMING A FIELDWORKER?

Please apply online at www.amnesty.ca/what-you-can-do/fieldworkers/. You must have been a member of Amnesty Canada for at least six months before you apply. We especially encourage applicants in some of our underserved areas, such as the Territories, Manitoba, and the Atlantic provinces.



Write for Rights 2022 Members Kept Mobilizing

WRITE for Rights 2022 was a massive success thanks to Amnesty groups, members, volunteers and activists across Canada. Even though the Section experienced a technical shutdown, delaying the official launch of Write for Rights (W4R), members kept organizing and mobilizing. They made sure the 10 cases received meticulous attention and support, showcasing the importance of solidarity and people-powered movements.

Excitingly, for the first time in three years many of us hosted or attended in-person W4R events in our communities. Individuals and groups raised awareness of the cases in their communities, wrote to stakeholders demanding justice for the 13 individuals at risk, and engaged in creative initiatives that shed light on our shared humanity and the power of solidarity. In total, 132 events across Canada were initiated, 599 people registered to write on their own, and more than 35,000 actions took place.

Canada

132
events

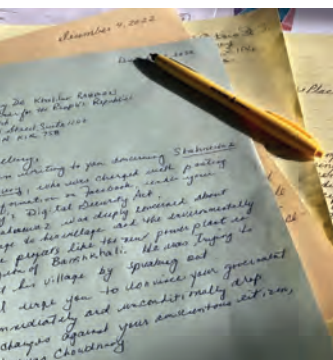
35,000+
actions

Globally

5,000,000+
actions

234,801
solidarity
cards

58%
increase in
supporters



Write for Rights 2023

December 10, 2023 marks the 75th Anniversary of the *Universal Declaration of Human Rights* and we would like to engage in capacity-building workshops with those who'd like to participate. We would like to hear from you! How can we make this year bigger and better? What do you need? Send an email to afry@amnesty.ca with your comments and suggestions!



Amnesty member Jasmin Smith during Amnesty International Toronto's Write for Rights event on December 10, 2022.

**WRITE
FOR
RIGHTS**

AMNESTY
INTERNATIONAL



Updates in case stories

DORGELESSE N'GUESSAN

- Dorgelesse and her 22 co-detainees' prison conditions have significantly improved.
- The appeal hearing against the conviction of all the protestors was finally scheduled.
- Dorgelesse and her family expressed immense gratitude to all participating in W4R. The global support for their case boosted their morale, courage and hope.

JOANAH MAMOMBE, CECILLIA CHIMBIRI AND NETSAI MAROVA

- The case against Joanah and Cecillia has been postponed indefinitely.
- Increased solidarity on their case has brought some relief to Joanah, Cecillia and Netsai, who before thought they were alone and felt no one wanted to associate with them.

MARIANA SEPÚLVEDA AND YREN ROTELA

- After four years of stagnation, the application of Mariana Sepúlveda to have her identity recognized was finally unblocked and passed to the relevant national level.
- Yren and Mariana said they had never felt so much support, encouragement and love from so many people.
- Yren and Mariana's campaign was met with a wide-reaching and positive response in Paraguay. Organizations that do not normally advocate for the rights of trans people heard about the duo's demands, got informed and joined in.

ALEKSANDRA SKOCHILENKO

- Conditions of Aleksandra Skochilenko's detention appear to have improved. She's now allowed to receive food parcels sent to her from outside and threats she initially faced from her cellmates have also ceased.

CHOW HANG-TUNG

- Chow Hang-tung successfully appealed one of her charges, "inciting others to take part in an unauthorized assembly." However, Chow is also accused of "inciting subversion" through her entirely peaceful actions and could face 10 years' imprisonment.
- In April, Chow Hang-tung was announced the winner of the 2023 Gwangju Prize for Human Rights, a prestigious award in South Korea.



A Lifetime of Service

Long-time activist Margaret John reminds us that joining Amnesty Canada changed her life and that's why our work will be part of her own legacy.

MY journey with Amnesty started nearly five decades ago. I remember growing up wanting to make life better for someone else. But I didn't see myself as a leader, and kept asking, "What could I do?"

At first, I simply worked on the local Amnesty group newsletter and letter-writing. Then our group was assigned a Singaporean prisoner of conscience for action, on whose dossier I was made responsible – a daunting task. Later I was asked to become Amnesty Canada's permanent Country Coordinator on Singapore and Malaysia.

The same questions kept leaping to mind: "*But what could I do?*"

But my path along the Amnesty trail helped show me that I could scale mountains. I never thought, for example, that a former President of Singapore would become a dissident, leave Singapore, choose to live 10 minutes away from me, join Amnesty and become my friend.

I remember priceless moments such as when prominent human rights defender Dr. Munawar Anees from Malaysia

asked to meet me. Tears filled his eyes. "Amnesty saved my life," he told me.

Of course, there have been many difficult moments. But sad moments do not shake my faith in Amnesty. Over the years I've seen momentous worldwide change in attitudes to human rights.

I want Amnesty to continue its amazing, ground-shaking work. Leaving a gift in my will enables me to do just that. I can think of no better way of ensuring justice and dignity for future generations.

LEGACY GIFT

Many of our devoted volunteers and activists have chosen to support Amnesty's work well into the future by leaving a gift in their will. If you are interested in learning more, please contact Hala Al-Madi at (613) 744-7667 ext. 223 or halmadi@amnesty.ca, or visit www.amnesty.ca/legacy.

Amnesty Toronto Members Campaign for the Release of Huseyin Celil



Amnesty activists Brian Deming, Kara Dawson, and Michael Kanter fill out postcards for the campaign to support Huseyin Celil and his family. The goal is to send more than 2,000 cards to the Chinese ambassador.

WHEN the "two Michaels," Canadians Michael Spavor and Michael Kovrig, were incarcerated in China in 2019, they became the focus of national attention. After nearly three years – 1,019 days, to be exact – they were set free.

But another unjustly imprisoned Canadian still languishes behind bars in China. He is Huseyin Celil, imprisoned now for 17 years and counting.

To remind Canadians and the Chinese government of this ongoing injustice, Amnesty International Group 164/123, comprised of members largely from the Beaches and elsewhere on Toronto's east side, is campaigning to win his release. They are asking all Amnesty members to take part in their postcard campaign to bring Huseyin home.

Postcards can be obtained from Group 164/123 or from either of the three regional offices – AI Vancouver, AI Toronto (AITO), or AI Ottawa (see back inside cover of this magazine for contact information). The postcard is addressed to China's ambassador to Canada and urges him to press his government to release Huseyin.

Amnesty International Group 164/123 meets the first Tuesday of every month. If you would like to get postcards or contact Group 164/123, email ai164toronto@gmail.com.



URGENT ACTION
NETWORK

**JOIN THE URGENT
ACTION NETWORK
AND TAKE ACTION
TODAY!**

50TH ANNIVERSARY

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