

VOLUNTEERS OF CONSCIENCE

by Mónica Rhor

A group of New Yorkers meet in a spacious apartment off Central Park West to discuss the welfare of Paulus Kenop, an Indonesian arrested for raising a separatist flag outside a government building in his country. None of the thirteen people present has ever met Kenop and probably never will. None shares his political beliefs, yet all are willing to do their best to free him.

These educated, affluent professionals form one of Amnesty International's most effective New York "adoption groups"—Group 26. They are all volunteers who meet once a month to work on particular cases involving political prisoners. Their goal—and Amnesty's—is to bring relief to individual prisoners while furthering the cause of human rights in general. "This is not a forum for idealistic talk," says one member. "It is very much a working session."

For two hours Group 26 debates strategies aimed at securing Kenop's release from confinement and decides on a direct course of action. Promising ideas, such as requesting aid from foreign companies based in Indonesia, are accepted and refined; unsuitable ones are discarded. An all-out publicity campaign, for example, is deemed useless because of widespread illiteracy in Indonesia. By the end of the meeting each person has an assignment for the month: to research Indonesian culture, to contact Indonesians living in New York, to write letters to Paulus Kenop in the hope that he will receive them.

FOUNDING AND FUNDING

Amnesty International was formed in 1961 in the belief that such "working sessions" could have a concrete impact on worldwide human rights violations. Its founder, Peter Benenson, is a London lawyer with a long history of working for humanitarian ideals. Benenson was moved to action by a newspaper article about a group of Portuguese students who had been arrested for drinking a public toast to freedom. Appalled by the incident, he wrote letters of protest to the *London Observer* and to *Le Monde*, proposing a temporary campaign dedicated to human rights. Benenson urged newspaper readers "to unite these feelings of disgust all over the world into common action."

The letter, published in both papers on May 28, elicited overwhelming public response; and Benenson, encouraged by the outpouring of human rights sentiments, converted

the "Appeal for Amnesty" campaign into the volunteer institution Amnesty International.

Benenson hoped the organization, funded through private donations, fundraisers, and membership dues, could help political prisoners in a practical way—through material as well as emotional support. He based its mandate on the United Nations Declaration of Human Rights, especially Article 19: "Everyone has the right to freedom of thought, this includes the freedom to hold opinion without interference." This abstract statement was eventually encompassed in the four main objectives of Amnesty: relief and release of political prisoners, opposition to arbitrary detention, opposition to torture, and opposition to the death penalty.

In order to ensure impartiality, which Benenson considered vital to the movement's success, a system was devised whereby each adoption group is assigned three prisoners at a time—one a prisoner from a Communist nation, one from a non-Communist developed country, and one from a Third World country—and is prohibited from working on behalf of a prisoner in its own country. Perhaps the best testimony to Amnesty's impartiality are the critical statements issued by politically diverse governments. The Soviet Union has said that Amnesty is a "Western ideological saboteur" while Brazil has called it an "instrument of Communist terrorism."

Benenson also emphasized the international membership of Amnesty, encouraging its growth around the world. Within five months of its inception there were offshoots in five countries other than England, and at present there are 250,000 volunteers in 130 nations.

The International Secretariat, located in London, houses Amnesty's world headquarters and a paid staff of 150, which operates on a budget of \$4 million a year. It is the scene of the yearly meeting of the International Council, Amnesty's main governing body. The Council's two hundred delegates from national sections decide on long-term policies and review the activities of various sections, the Secretariat, and the International Executive Committee. This latter body is elected by the Council to implement policy and to approve and discuss Amnesty Special Missions—official trips taken to inspect prisons in various countries.

Amnesty's renowned research department is also found in the London office. Acclaimed for its reliability and thoroughness, the department is the starting point for all potential Amnesty cases. To qualify as an Amnesty Pris-

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oner of Conscience (POC) an individual must have been sentenced to a term of more than six months, be the victim of human rights violations (unsanitary conditions, false charges, torture, and so on), and, most important, in no way have used or condoned violence. After the prisoner's condition has been verified by at least three different sources (such as local newspapers, government officials, and recently released prisoners), he can be officially declared a POC. A case sheet is then drawn up, listing all available data on the prisoner, and the case is sent to the national headquarters of an Amnesty section for distribution.

National sections are responsible for supervising local chapters, coordinating their activities with those of the Secretariat, and staging publicity campaigns and fundraisers. Each section has a fair amount of freedom in these activities, and methods vary from country to country. The British section, for instance, regularly stages a "Secret Policeman's Ball," a concert featuring comedians and musicians, with a portion of the profits going to Amnesty. In New York a special premiere of the film *Sophie's Choice* was held to raise money for the U.S. section.

The national section is also in charge of assigning POC cases to the adoption groups that form the core of Amnesty's machinery. Each group is unique, differing in style, technique, and structure. Although all groups must adhere strictly to Amnesty's mandate, they function more or less autonomously under the guidance of a group leader, who maintains contact with the national office. There are now 250 adoption groups in the United States and regional offices in five cities. National headquarters are in New York. "It is a growing organization, and more than half the members have come in the last two years," asserts Louis Offerman, regional membership coordinator in the New York area. "The U.S. section is young, only ten years." Some adoption groups are helping this growth through contact with the public. One Manhattan group set up a display on a street corner this past spring, handing out leaflets and information. Group 26 did something similar at the New York premiere of the films *Missing* and *Gandhi*. Says Offerman, "People come out of these films wanting to do some good.... We give them a way."

TECHNIQUE

The main function of the adoption groups is to bring relief and attention to POCs. This requires initiative and inventiveness: Every member can relate at least one story of an especially bizarre method that did the trick—for example, the woman who telephoned the head of a Central American government every night until the man grew so exasperated

that, just to stop the calls, he released the prisoner she'd been enquiring about. The work also requires an almost iron determination, since it is nearly impossible to know whether one's efforts have succeeded. Most governments never respond to enquiries and rarely allow prisoners to do so.

Adoption groups, ranging from six to thirty members, often bring together a varied array of people, although the typical member holds a white-collar job and is a college graduate. Group 26's twenty-five members include a magazine publisher, several writers, a medical technician, and a market researcher. Group 26 is divided into three subgroups, each concentrating on one of its three POCs. These subgroups meet as often as necessary to work on their specific cases and report their progress to the entire group at the regular monthly meeting. Among Amnesty members, Group 26 is often jokingly referred to as the "superspies," because of their tendency to contact people who might be visiting the targeted country and ask them to drop in on their prisoner. Sometimes the result is reassuring, as in the case of a Sudanese POC who was reached easily by phone; at other times it is devastating, as in the case of a Tibetan POC who, it was discovered, had died in prison.

Another lobbying technique involves writing letters to the editors of newspapers in the POC's home country, mentioning the prisoner by name. "We make him into a VIP," says a member who once obtained the signatures of ten thousand psychologists on a petition requesting the release of a Soviet prisoner in a psychiatric camp.

Simple letter writing, however, remains Amnesty's basic and most powerful tool. A good deal of an adoption group's time is spent composing and mailing letters to heads of state, officials, and prisoners. In general the letters enquire about a prisoner's health and spirits and do so in a friendly rather than official manner. This accords with Peter Benenson's idea that "the most rapid way of bringing relief to POCs is through publicity"—the kind of publicity that often attends a sudden barrage of letters addressed to a seemingly unknown prisoner. These missives must be carefully worded so as not to offend the government and cause unintentional harm to the prisoner. Each piece of correspondence observes a certain protocol: It must be accurate, unfailingly polite, and definite.

Although Amnesty does not take direct credit for the release of any prisoners, there is a remarkable correlation between the POCs it has adopted and those later released. Of the 17,000 prisoners supported by Amnesty since 1961, 10,000 are no longer detained. Even more were given some sort of aid while confined; about \$250,000 a year is disbursed in financial assistance to prisoners and their families.

One of Amnesty's problems is created by its very success. "It's growing at a colossal rate...and it's becoming disorganized," says a concerned member. The lack of contact between the Secretariat and local groups is felt by the whole organization. At a recent International Council meeting several suggestions were made to remedy this, including visits by London staffers to random groups. Although members seem to agree they "need to feel plugged into London," they also believe that "helping groups feel less isolated shouldn't be Amnesty's first priority." That first priority is, and will remain, the prisoners themselves.

