

# what can amnesty do?

Amnesty is essentially a case working organisation; individual prisoners are allocated to groups of Amnesty members throughout the world - in Holland, America, Japan, Bangladesh or Sweden - who then plead for their release. The idea is a simple one: it is invariably misunderstood.

In 1971, the Soviet newspaper *Isvestia* carried a strongly-worded article denouncing the 'malignant slanderers' who were then publicising Soviet treatment of political dissenters. 'Especially zealous', it noted, 'is the notorious Amnesty International'. In May, 1972, the Indonesian army paper *Angkatan Bersenjata*, criticised Amnesty in equally hostile terms for its reports on political imprisonment in Indonesia. Amnesty was 'an organisation of the New Left', it lacked objectivity and had never 'made accusations against happenings in the Socialist countries'. The ideology was different, but the articles shared a common feature: both saw Amnesty's efforts as directed solely against their own governments: neither understood the cardinal principle of Amnesty's work - to press for the release of prisoners of conscience regardless of politics or belief.

## HOW IT WORKS

How does the system work? Prisoners are selected by the International Secretariat but a case is never adopted if there seems the slightest risk that this could hamper a man's situation or chances of release. As soon as it receives a case sheet, the Amnesty group writes to the Government asking for the prisoner's release, and explaining that this case is only one of three for whom they work. A representative group might be working for an Indonesian, a Russian and a Spanish prisoner. The aim of this arrangement is to ensure political balance and to prevent any part of Amnesty from becoming politically partisan. In the case of the USSR and Indonesia, the group's letters will probably go unanswered. When an Amnesty delegate raised this with one civilian Minister in Jakarta, the reply was revealing. Although the Minister normally replied to all enquiries, he had stopped even acknowledging

Amnesty's letters after he had been formally censured in a Cabinet meeting for 'corresponding with communists'; his colleagues had assumed that anyone concerned with the rights of political prisoners must be acting from a political rather than a humanitarian motive - in their view political prisoners had forfeited their claim to rights. In Spain, Amnesty's work is better understood; since 1970, prisoners can correspond, receive parcels of books and clothing and - most important - Amnesty members may arrange to visit their adopted prisoner in prison.

## THREE DEFINITE AIMS

Even in Indonesia there are exceptions to the general rules of silence. Last year, the Commandant of Buru authorised a New Zealand group to correspond with their adopted prisoner. In response, the group have written to their prisoner monthly but, have, as yet, received no reply. In real terms, what, then, can an Amnesty group do? The difficulties are clear, but there are three definite aims. The first and most important is to create a growing awareness within the Indonesian state administration, military as well as civilian, that a country which imprisons its opposition and uses political imprisonment as an instrument of government, must forfeit foreign confidence in the quality of its government. To this end, Amnesty groups publicise their cases, alerting economists about the detention of an economist, journalists about journalists, doctors about a doctor, parliamentarians about an elected MP. Amnesty groups proliferate in the major aid-giving countries - 420 in West Germany alone. Secondly, the group must arouse the conscience of people inside Indonesia - lawyers, the press, the prisoner's former colleagues. Thirdly and of equal

importance, the groups must ensure that the prisoners know they are not forgotten. It is clear that here there has been some success: Christmas cards have reached Buru; Amnesty postcards have been seen by women in Bukit Duri Prison; on one of the smaller islands, prisoners have made emblems to symbolise their appreciation of Amnesty's efforts; in Java, a prisoner has written asking the organisation to 'continue and intensify its activities to protect the interests of all political prisoners in Indonesia in accordance with Amnesty International's principles of human rights and its objectives of protecting those who are deprived of justice and human dignity or who have been victimised by abuses of the law.'

## TWO ANSWERS

Criticisms can, of course, be levelled at this apparently piecemeal approach to such an enormous problem, since only a fraction of those in prison can be adopted. Is it just - or indeed desirable - to single out a hundred or so prisoners and ignore the others? There are two answers. Each adopted prisoner is a symbol of his 54,999 fellows, and while group work is providing continuing low-key pressure, it is the job of Amnesty's International Secretariat and national sections to take general initiatives on behalf of the prisoners as a group. These can take many forms. The two missions in 1969 and 1970 have been mentioned elsewhere; both were led by internationally-respected lawyers and both met Indonesian legal and military officials specifically to discuss political imprisonment. Before official contacts between the Indonesian Government and the governments of other countries, Amnesty briefs Ministers of the countries concerned. Its consultative status at the United Nations enables it to draw the attention of human rights and technical agencies to the Indonesian problem. Journalists are regularly briefed and when the international press reports on Indonesia, its information on detention - whether accredited or not - has often come from Amnesty's files.

Utopian though it may seem, the aim of Amnesty's work is thus to apply persistent, informed and courteous pressure which, cumulatively, will persuade the Indonesian authorities to look again at the tens of thousands of prisoners, now cut from society, and recognise them as men and women to whom human and legal rights are as much due as to a head of state - or to an army officer.