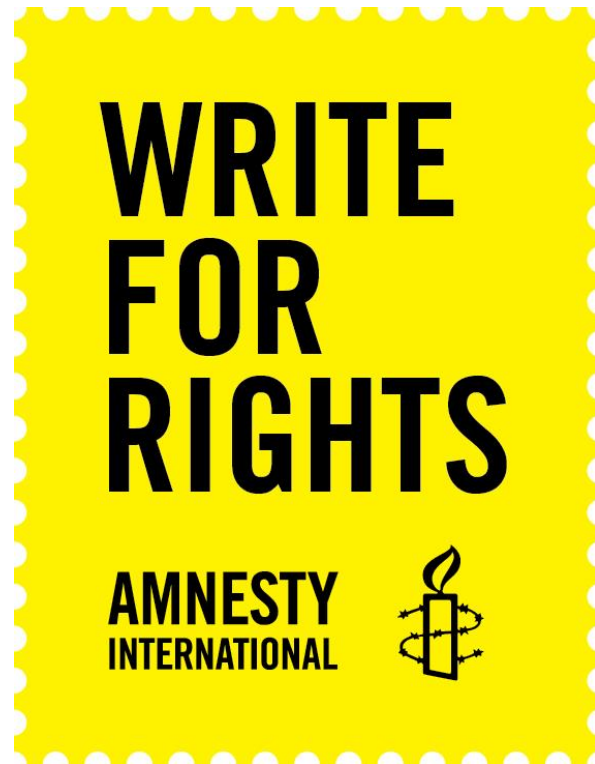


Letter Writing Marathon 2015



Write for Rights

Make a difference

Amnesty International Ireland is the country's largest human rights organisation with over 15,000 members and supporters. We are part of a global movement of more than 3.2 million people working in more than 150 countries around the world. Our sole concern is the protection of the fundamental human rights guaranteed to each one of us by the Universal Declaration of Human Rights.

The goal of the Letter Writing Marathon is to create change in situations where people's rights are being violated.

Each case has a target address for the authorities of the country, so that you can send an appeal urging them to take action. For some cases an address of the person at risk is also provided, so that you can send a card to encourage them.

You can write as an individual, or you can write with others by joining a Write for Rights event in your area.

This booklet contains 12 cases of people and communities whose rights are being violated:

- **Girls forced into marriage** Burkina Faso
- **Fred Bauma & Yves Makwambala** Congo
- **Teodora del Carmen Vasquez** El Salvador
- **Costas** Greece
- **Saman Naseem** Iran
- **Zunar Ulhaque** Malaysia
- **Yecenia Armenta** Mexico
- **Pyoe Pyoe Aung** Myanmar
- **Waleed Abu Al-Khair** Saudi Arabia
- **Rania Alabassi and her family** Syria
- **Albert Woodfox** USA
- **Muhammad Bekzhanov** Uzbekistan
- **Ibrahim Halawa** Egypt

The cases at a glance

Girls forced into marriage

At 13, Maria* was forced to marry a 70-year-old man who already had five wives. When she resisted, her father told her: “*If you don't go to join your husband, I will kill you.*” Across Burkina Faso, thousands of girls and young women like Maria are being forced into early marriage. One in three girls is married off before they turn 18. Some are as young as 11. They're expected to have as many children as their husbands want, regardless of their own wishes or the threat that early pregnancy poses to their health and life. Once married, many are set to cook, clean, fetch water and work in the fields, dawn to dusk. Very few have the chance to go to school. Some girls are doing all they can to escape forced marriages, despite huge pressure from their families and wider society. Maria walked nearly 170km over three days to seek refuge at a shelter for young girls.



Forced and early marriages are banned by Burkina Faso's Constitution and international law, but the authorities keep turning a blind eye.

*not her real name

Fred Bauma & Yves Makwambala

In March 2015, Congolese security forces stormed a press conference organised by Filimbi (“whistle” in Swahili), a youth movement that encourages people to get involved in peaceful political debate and action. Filimbi members Fred Bauma and Yves Makwambala were among 30 arrested. Others included youth activists from Senegal and Burkina Faso, international journalists and an American diplomat, who have since been released or deported. But Fred and Yves are still behind bars, facing serious charges.



After their arrest, they were held at a secret location for two weeks. They were also interrogated in secret – Yves for 40 days, Fred for 50 – and denied visits by friends or lawyers. They are now awaiting trial in a Kinshasa jail, accused of forming a criminal gang and attempting to overthrow the regime of president Kabila.

According to their lawyers, there is simply no criminal evidence against them. But this case is politically motivated and, if convicted, they could face the death penalty. The authorities have sought to label Fred and Yves as “terrorists and plotters”. They are quite the opposite: prisoners of conscience, locked up for promoting democracy and trying to hold the government to account.

Teodora del Carmen Vasquez

In 2008, Teodora del Carmen Vásquez was sentenced to 30 years in prison for 'aggravated homicide' after suffering a still-birth at work.

Teodora, mother of an 11-year-old boy, was expecting a new baby when she started experiencing increasingly severe pain. She called the emergency services and asked them to rush her to hospital, but her waters broke soon afterwards. She went into labour, and was unconscious when she gave birth. When she came round, bleeding profusely, her baby was dead. Police at the scene handcuffed her and arrested her on suspicion of murder. Only then did they take her to hospital where she could get the urgent treatment she needed. In El Salvador, women who miscarry or suffer a still-birth during pregnancy are routinely suspected of having had an 'abortion'. Abortion under any circumstance is a crime, even in cases of rape, incest, or where a woman's life is at risk. This makes women afraid to seek help with pregnancy-related problems, leading inevitably to more preventable deaths. Teodora's trial was deeply flawed. As in all similar cases in El Salvador, she was presumed guilty and, being from a poor family, could not afford an effective legal team to represent her. Her only option now is to appeal for her sentence to be changed so that she is released immediately.



Costas

In August 2014, Costas and his partner, who is a refugee, were badly beaten by a group of thugs in a homophobic and racist attack in central Athens. ***"I think they could tell we are a couple, and they targeted us because of that, and because of my partner's skin colour,"*** said Costas. Costas' leg was broken in three places after he was repeatedly punched and kicked. The mental trauma still won't go away: ***"My leg is okay now, but***



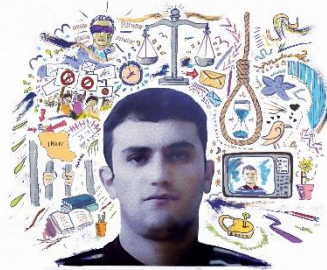
whenever I see any kind of violence, all the horror and fear comes back." Between 2014 and 2015, the number of reported attacks against gay, lesbian, bisexual, transgender or intersex (LGBTI) people in Greece has more than doubled, while racist attacks remain an ongoing issue. Across Greece, police and the government are failing to tackle rising violence motivated by hatred. And they're treating same-sex couples as second-class citizens. They consistently fail to properly investigate any hate motive behind attacks, and to protect everyone affected.

"When the police arrived, I was treated as if I'm contagious," says Costas. More than a year later, no suspects have been identified, let alone punished, and both Costas and his partner live in constant fear for their safety. In March 2015, Costas' partner was attacked again.

The lack of recognition of same-sex relationships makes Costas and the LGBTI community feel even more vulnerable: ***"It's like the government condones the attacks by not acknowledging we are real,"*** they told us. ***"It's as if we don't exist."***

Saman Naseem

Saman Naseem, a member of Iran's Kurdish minority, was captured after a gun battle in northwest Iran which led to the death of a Revolutionary Guard, a kind of government soldier. He was, he says, blindfolded, hung upside-down and tortured into confessing to a crime he did not commit. He was just 17 years old. Saman's treatment has been grossly unfair. The courts used his 'confession' as evidence against him, refusing to believe or investigate his allegation that it had been forced out of him. He was even made to confess on state television. In spite of the fact that Iran has signed up to an international ban on executing minors, Saman was sentenced to death in April 2013 for "enmity against God" and "corruption on earth", 'crimes' that simply wouldn't stand up under international law. However, there is hope. Huge campaigning efforts have secured Saman a retrial, and now continuing global pressure can prevent a repeat.

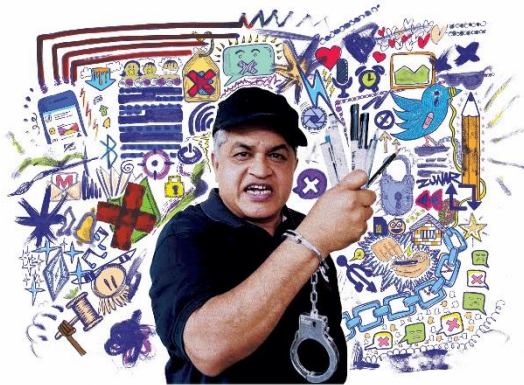


Zunar Ulhaque

Zulkiflee Anwar "Zunar" Ulhaque faces a lengthy jail sentence after taking to Twitter to condemn the jailing of Malaysian opposition leader Anwar Ibrahim. Zunar is a political cartoonist well known for his satirical attacks on government corruption and electoral fraud. He now faces nine charges under the Sedition Act, a draconian, outdated law from 1948 dredged up to grant the government sweeping powers to arrest and lock up its critics.

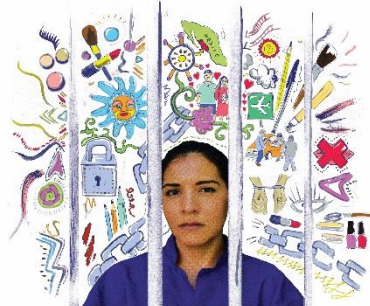
It's not the first time Zunar has fallen foul of the Malaysian authorities. Since 2009, when his offices were first raided by police, he has been intimidated, arrested and imprisoned. They also confiscated and banned his books, and threatened to close down his printers.

Zunar is not the only one. In the first six months of 2015, more than 40 journalists, academics, political activists and lawyers were interrogated, arrested or charged under the Sedition Act. The space for dissent and debate in Malaysia is disappearing fast.



Yecenia Armenta

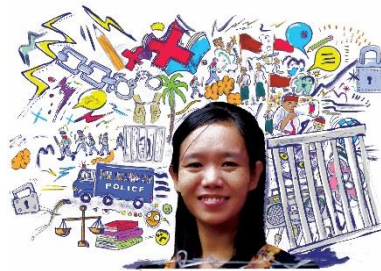
In July 2012, Yecenia Armenta was driving relatives to the airport when undercover police pulled her over. They forced her out of her car, blindfolded her and drove her away. They accused her of ordering her husband's murder, and they stopped at nothing to make her confess. Yecenia was hung upside down by her ankles, suffocated and beaten. ***"They said they would bring my two children, rape them and cut them up into pieces,"*** she told Amnesty. ***"After many hours of torture and after they'd raped me, I signed the confession. I was still blindfolded. I never even read what I had signed."*** Her ordeal lasted 15 hours. In detention, doctors from the same prosecutor's office that detained her examined Yecenia's injuries but failed to document them. Months later, medical forensic staff from the Federal Attorney General's Office also examined her, only to conclude that she had not been tortured because the previous doctors had found no signs. Since then, independent medical experts have examined her twice and both times concluded that she was indeed tortured.



Yecenia has spent the last three years in prison, charged without proof on the strength of her 'confession', for a crime she says she did not commit. Yecenia deserves to be free and to see her torturers brought to justice: ***"I don't want to spend another day here,"*** she says. ***"I want my story to be heard, and I'm asking you to help me."***

Pyoe Pyoe Aung

In early 2015, student leader Phyoe Phyoe Aung helped to organize a march against a new law in Myanmar, which students said limited academic freedom. In March, as the protestors got closer to Yangon, Myanmar's largest city, they were blocked by police who beat them with batons.



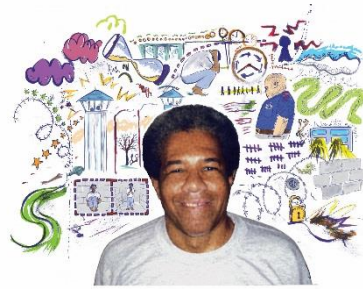
Phyoe Phyoe Aung and more than 100 other student activists – many of them injured – were arrested and charged with a range of questionable criminal offences. Many have been locked up ever since, with some held in solitary confinement and with limited access to lawyers. Some, including Phyoe Phyoe Aung, could face more than nine years in prison.

Across the country, young people and student leaders continue to be harassed and intimidated by police and other authorities in what appears to be a systematic clampdown on the student movement. Despite this, there is good reason to believe that the authorities can be pressured into releasing Phyoe Phyoe Aung and the others.

Myanmar's government is hungry for foreign approval and investment, and is coming under increasing international scrutiny as it prepares to hold general elections in November. President Thein Sein is keen to demonstrate that his country is still on the road towards political reform and respect for human rights.

Albert Woodfox

Albert Woodfox has spent 40 years in solitary confinement in the USA, locked up alone in a tiny cell with little natural light for 23 hours a day. He was convicted for the murder of a prison guard in 1972 while he was serving time for robbery. But Albert says he is an innocent man. There was no physical evidence linking him to the crime, and his conviction relied primarily on the dubious testimony of another prisoner, who received a pardon in return. Albert believes his conviction was politically motivated because he was a member of the Black Panther Party, the radical black rights movement.



Decades of isolation and deprivation have taken an appalling toll on Albert: ***“I do not have the words to convey the years of mental, emotional and physical torture I have endured.”*** Even the United Nations says Albert’s treatment amounts to torture.

The legal process was so flawed that his conviction has been overturned three times. In June 2015, a federal judge ordered his immediate release, but Albert’s freedom has been blocked at every turn by the Louisiana authorities.

The only person standing in the way of his freedom is Louisiana’s Attorney General, who is waging a campaign of vengeance against him.

“They might bend me a little bit,” says Albert. ***“They might cause me a lot of pain. They may even take my life. But they will never be able to break me.”***

Muhammad Bekzhanov

“I was lying there in a pool of blood for days – no water, no food. I was trying to remember all the good things in my life, my children, my wife. And mentally I was preparing myself that I was going to die.”

In 1999, Uzbekistani security forces tortured journalist Muhammad Bekzhanov, editor of a banned opposition newspaper. They beat him with rubber truncheons, suffocated him and gave him electric shocks until he confessed to “anti-state” offences.

Even though Uzbekistan has signed up to the UN Convention against torture which absolutely bans torture and the use of evidence obtained under duress, its courts routinely rely on ‘confessions’ obtained in the most brutal ways imaginable. At trial, a judge dismissed Muhammad’s allegations that he was tortured and used his ‘confession’ to sentence him to 15 years in prison.

Muhammad is now one of the world’s longest-imprisoned journalists. He was due to be released in 2014, but he remains in jail, sentenced to nearly five more years for allegedly violating prison rules. His wife Nina found him at breaking point when she was allowed to visit him last year: ***“He was unrecognizable. All hope was lost in his eyes, he was just trying to survive.”***



Ibrahim Halawa

Ibrahim Halawa, an Irish citizen, is a Prisoner of Conscience, held in an Egyptian prison solely for exercising his right to Freedom of Expression.

Together with 493 other people he is on trial for their alleged role in violence during protests that took place on 16 and 17 August 2013, in the Ramisis area of central Cairo. There is no evidence which suggests his involvement. At least 97 people died in the protests - most as a result of a reckless use of force by the security forces. If convicted, Ibrahim could face the death penalty.

Ibrahim was 17 years old at the time of his arrest. He is now 19. He has spent two years in prison. He did his leaving certificate in June 2013 and went to Egypt on holiday.

In the casefile, the prosecutor has failed to provide evidence that Ibrahim had used violence. The prosecutor has also depended

entirely on police witnesses and reports, and investigations by intelligence services, which put a question mark over the credibility of evidence used against the defendants. Most of the over 100 witnesses due to be called in the trial are police officers or government officials.

Ibrahim was shot in his hand when the security forces stormed the building, but was not given access to medical care for his injury, and the only treatment he received was from a cellmate who happened to be a doctor.



Good news from last year's Letter Writing Marathon

10 ways your words are changing lives

As we gear up for this year's Write for Rights, our global letter-writing campaign, we look at how your words and ongoing campaigning made change happen last year.

1. Freedom in Nigeria

The Governor of the Niger Delta responded to pressure from Amnesty supporters and granted a full pardon to Moses Akatugba, who had been sentenced to death aged 16 for stealing three phones. Thank you to everyone who took action!

"While before I felt all hope had gone, the story changed when Amnesty International came in. The messages I received overwhelmed me. I regained hope." Moses Akatugba

2. Investigating torture in the Philippines

The Philippines police announced that letters sent by a "human rights organisation" – which we can confidently say is Amnesty International – have prompted them to investigate the shocking torture of Jerryyme Corre, who was electrocuted, punched and threatened with death.

3. Changing the law in Norway

The Norwegian government said it will change the law for people who want to change their legal gender. It follows our campaigning for John Jeanette Solstad Remø, a transgender woman who was unable to change her legal gender without compulsory medical treatment.

"This is everything I have dreamt of and hoped for. It was worth the fight. It took a long time, but when the results of our work finally came, it felt great." John Jeanette Solstad Remø

4. Allowing prison visits in China

The daughter of Liu Ping, the activist jailed for fighting corruption in China, has finally been allowed to visit her in prison. The international attention on the case may have played a role in this positive development.

5. Fighting racism in Greece

Paraskevi Kokoni, the Roma woman beaten up in a vicious racist attack in western Greece, met with the Greek Minister of Justice to hand over letters collected during Write for Rights. The Minister said the current anti-racist legislation is "insufficient" and proposed measures to change it.

6. Improving healthcare in South Africa

Women and girls in Mkhondo, South Africa, now have better access to pregnancy healthcare. One clinic has increased its antenatal service from two to seven days a week, dramatically reducing waiting times.

7. Getting compensation in India

The Indian government said it will revise the number of deaths and injuries for which it is seeking compensation following the 1984 toxic gas leak in Bhopal. This could be a huge step towards ensuring the companies involved pay for the true scale of the disaster.

8. Giving strength in Uzbekistan

The family of Erkin Musaev, who was falsely accused of spying and jailed for 20 years after unfair trials in Uzbekistan, have told us your letters are giving him “strength, optimism and faith. Erkin passes on a huge thank you to everyone who is not indifferent to his fate.”

9. Supporting Chelsea Manning in the USA

Together, we took more than 240,000 actions for Chelsea Manning, who was sentenced to 35 years in prison after leaking classified US government material. *“I’m so thankful for having all of your support to keep me optimistic,”* she told us. *“I’m staying strong because of you!”*

10. Raising awareness in the United Arab Emirates.

You fought for Mohammed al-Roken, who was jailed for 10 years after a huge crackdown on political and human rights activists in the UAE. *“We are very hopeful that these kinds of campaigns might pressure the government into taking more positive steps in human rights,”* a local activist told us.

Tips on writing a letter

Solidarity action to the person at risk

- Please mind the guidelines in the case files.
- It's usually better not to mention politics or religion in your letter.
- Avoid mentioning Amnesty International in your card/letter, as it may put the recipient at risk if the authorities associate him with Amnesty's human rights work.
- Please write clearly.
- Add the date.
- Add your name and address to show that you are a real person. If you are worried about giving your full name and address, you can give your initials and the name of your city or country.

Suggestions:

- Let the people at risk know that you are thinking of them.
- Let the people know you have heard about the details of their case and how you feel about it.
- By referring to the situation as a violation of the law, you are letting the people at risk know there is a chance at justice and that a solution does exist.
- If you are also writing to the authorities, let them know.
- Assure them you won't give up and that they're not alone: you will fight with them to ensure they receive justice.

Target action to the authorities

- You should always be polite.
- Please mind the guidelines in the case files and base your request on the information provided.
- Build your appeals on international human rights standards, not political opinions.
- Human rights are based on international laws, agreements and obligations. Effective letters cite these obligations.
- Repeat the individual's name throughout the letter. This helps to ensure that the official will recognize the name and remember the letters sent on their behalf.
- Be brief. Letters are more likely to be read when kept short.
- Write in English, unless you are completely fluent in the language of the target country.
- Please write clearly.
- Add the date.
- Add your name and the name of your city or country to show that you are a real person. If you are worried about giving your full name, you can give your initials.

Possible structure:

- Salutation (as given in the case sheet).
- Start by saying on whose behalf you're writing and what you understand to be the situation.
- Say why you disapprove of the situation.
- Make an appeal using the points given in the case sheet.
- Ask for a reply.
- End with "Yours sincerely, (your name)".

SOME GENERAL POINTS

- Each person featured in Write for Rights has their own case sheet and sample letter. The case sheet provides background information on the individual, directions for whom to send your letters to, and key points to raise in your letters.
- If you are short on time, you can simply print off the sample letter for a case, sign and mail it to the government authority listed. However, your letter may have more impact if you write it in your own words. Handwritten letters can be especially effective.
- If you receive a reply from a government official or a prisoner, please send a copy to: mnugent@amnesty.ie
- Questions? Check the website or send an email to mnugent@amnesty.ie
- Available materials:
 - Stamp images of all cases (digital)
 - Sample letters
 - Poster
 - Templates and instructions for making lanterns. (digital)
 - Pens
 - Video's (digital)
 - T-shirts

Further information:

If you have any questions or if you want to find a Write for Rights group in your part of the country you can contact Amnesty International:

Pina Attanasio
Amnesty International Ireland
Sean MacBride House
48 Fleet Street
Dublin 2, Ireland
Tel: (+3531) 863 8351
Email: pattanasio@amnesty.ie
Website: www.amnesty.ie/letterwriting

Organising an event

Getting your friends and family involved in a Write for Rights letter-writing event is a fun and impactful way to share your passion for human rights. Remember, the more of us who write for rights during December 7-16, the more likely it is that we will make a difference.

➤ **In your community**

Host an event in a community centre, place of worship, bookstore, coffee shop, student union, or any other venue. Consider inviting your mayor, city council members, or other local government officials, and local celebrities to join your Write for Rights event.

➤ **At home**

Invite friends and family to join you for lunch or dinner.

➤ **At work**

Invite colleagues to gather together and write a letter over lunch or during a coffee break.

➤ **In school**

Get together during lunch or after class. Consider incorporating Write for Rights in your curriculum. If you are interested in the Letter Writing Marathon lesson plan please send an email to pattanasio@amnesty.ie