

HISTORY: How it all began

Amnesty International (AI) was founded in 1961 by British lawyer Peter Benenson. He became angry after reading a newspaper report about Portuguese students who had been sentenced to seven years in prison. Their crime: raising their glasses in a toast to freedom.

Benenson began to think of ways to persuade oppressive governments to release such victims of injustice. His idea was to bombard the authorities with letters of protest.

To draw public attention, Benenson and several other activists organized a one-year campaign. They called it “Appeal for Amnesty, 1961”.

The campaign was launched in a newspaper article printed internationally on May 28 1961. The article “The Forgotten Prisoners” called on people everywhere to protest – impartially and peacefully – the imprisonment of men and women around the world for their political and religious belief. These detainees were called “Prisoners of Conscience”.

Within a month, more than a thousand readers had sent letters of support. Six months after the publication of the article, Benenson announced the conversion of a brief publicity effort into a permanent international movement.

www.amnesty133.org/about/index.html