Forty years of Amnesty

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By Jonathan Power

AMNESTY International, founded forty years ago, was almost immediately dubbed "one of the larger lunacies of our time". The then bizarre idea was to collect information on people incarcerated in prison solely for their political views and then, by means of an army of volunteer activists, bombard the offending governments with massive numbers of letters, postcards and telegrams, calling for the prisoner's swift release.

Other critics called it "subversive" and "an agent of Satan". Iran's Ayatollah Khomeini, Uganda's Idi Amin, Iraq's Saddam Hussein, Chile's Augusto Pinochet, Britain's Margaret Thatcher and France's President Jacques Chirac are all heavyweights who have gone into the ring to try and squash it.

In the 1990s and the new century the criticism has been subtler. The attacks came not only from government leaders but from sceptics in the media as well. Some have argued that Amnesty has become respectable, a part of the international establishment. Others have claimed it has lost its unique profile and been submerged in a plethora of other human rights groups. Perhaps the unkindest cut of all has been the allegation that Amnesty publicity campaigns have resulted in the development of even more insidious methods of torture and repression, designed to avoid the calumny of global exposure.

But the prisoners, often enough, have been released. The postcards, telegrams and parcels do get through. Letters come back, many smuggled out of prison or past airport censors. The same week that a young law student was sentenced to three years' imprisonment in an eastern European country — he had been arrested after collecting signatures calling for the release of political prisoners — his During the ordeal she died of a heart attack. The prisoner himself survived and eventually he was allowed to go into exile with his children. He told Amnesty: "They killed my wife. They would have killed me too, but you intervened and saved my life."

The most unexpected challenge came from the United States. Successive post-Vietnam War governments, starting with the administration of Jimmy Carter, took up human rights as a geo-political crusade. Suddenly US officials around the world were brandishing Amnesty International reports as they waged highly selective campaigns against their enemies, whilst often enough remaining tight-lipped or, at least reserved, about torture and "disappearances" in the regimes they supported for "reasons of state" in the cold war age.

Famously, during his campaign to build up the coalition against Saddam Hussein prior to the Gulf War in 1990, President George Bush Senior took to quoting Amnesty reports on Iraq, even letting it be known he was sharing them with his wife, who said they made her very upset and angry. Yet at the same time, the US authorities were steadfastly ignoring Amnesty's critique of the role of the Central intelligence Agency (CIA) in torture in Guatemala or the use of capital punishment at home. Amnesty was being used in one-sided, high profile diplomatic war that threatened to poison international human rights efforts. In what must surely be one of the most extraordinary dialogues for a human rights organization, Amnesty sent one of its top people to Washington to plead with US officials to stop quoting from the organization's reports.

By the beginning of the 1990s the question was not whether Amnesty would survive, but whether it could adapt to a changing world. On the economic front, growing disparities of income, the severe impoverishment of a number of countries and the danger of economic collapse in some of the new states of Central and Eastern Europe held the explosive potential for widespread political instability. Armed conflicts in Europe and Africa were seen to be spinning out of control, increasing tensions in the surrounding countries and creating vast refugee populations, while international peace-keeping efforts were often proving impotent. Many observers both inside and outside Amnesty were worried that Amnesty might be becoming overstretched, perhaps even developing a tendency in the face of large-scale atrocities to shoot from the hip.

Some claimed that Amnesty was moving too quickly and merely publishing rumours. Picking up the rumblings, the New York Times charged that there was a new culture in Amnesty which was "a response to CNN — members who see atrocities on television demand to know what Amnesty has to say about them — and to a growth in a number of rights groups putting out reports in the middle of conflicts". The mass killings in Rwanda brought the debate to the boil. Pierre Sane, Amnesty's Senegalese-born Secretary-General, determined that the genocide in Rwanda should not engulf the entire region, was passionate. "The objective of our report is to force governments to conduct their own investigations quickly". He sensed that time was running out in Central Africa. And even without all the research completed, as was the norm in a more slow-moving situation, Amnesty had to fire all its can-

of political prisoners — his father wrote to Amnesty: "I have experienced the blessing of your appeal for you have raised your voice in defence of my son... Amnesty International is a light in our time, particularly for those on whose eyes darkness has fallen, when the prison doors shut behind them. By your selfless work this light shines on the ever-widening circle of those who need it".

Among the many victims was a teacher in Latin America. While he was being tortured by the police they opened a telephone line between the torture chamber and the prisoner's home, forcing his wife to listen to her husband's screams.

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