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# Guest Opinion: Lift a Cup to Freedom: 25 Years for Amnesty International

Paul R. Ford

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# Lift A Cup to Freedom: 25 Years for Amnesty International

Paul R. Ford

Imagine sitting in a European cafe, enjoying an evening with friends. At a nearby table, two students raise their glasses in a toast to freedom. This may not appear to be a noteworthy event. However, in 1960 this simple gesture led to the arrest and imprisonment of two young students in Portugal. The two men were sentenced to seven years in prison for their exercise of free speech.

Incensed at this all-too-frequent denial of basic human rights, a British lawyer named Peter Benenson decided to confront the issue of human rights abuse. First he published an article in the *London Observer* called "The Forgotten Prisoner," to expose the persecution of individuals throughout the world who suffer imprisonment, mistreatment, and even death at the hands of government authority simply because of their beliefs, religion, or ethnic background. He argued that this need not continue, that ordinary citizens could mobilize, speak out, and force governments to stop violating human rights.

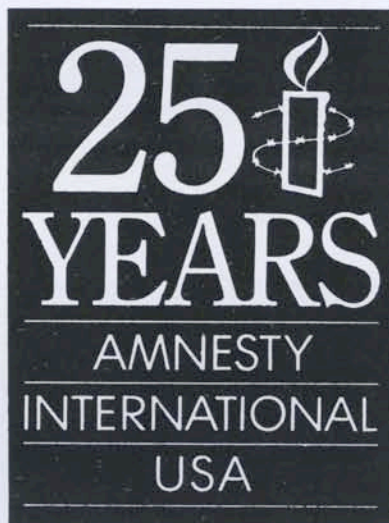
Benenson called for a year-long campaign to focus attention on prisoners of conscience. Within weeks, thousands of people from many countries contacted Benenson offering cash, influence, and hard work to secure freedom for prisoners of conscience.

Amnesty International began with international goodwill that fostered an international human rights movement. This movement has grown to include more than 500,000 members and subscribers in over 150 countries. In 1977, Amnesty International received the Noble Peace Prize.

The Universal Declaration of Human Rights, adopted by the United Nations in 1948, sets forth the basic principles that guide the work of Amnesty International. The movement has a limited mandate that clearly defines its objectives:

\*the release of all prisoners of conscience, i.e. those people detained for their beliefs, race, sex, language, religion or ethnic origin, who have neither used nor advocated violence;

\*fair and prompt trials for all political prisoners;



\*an end to torture and executions in all cases.

On the 25th anniversary of Amnesty International, we consider the evolving nature of the fight for human rights and some obstacles awaiting the human rights movement.

The growth of Amnesty International and the larger human rights movement has catapulted the issue of human rights into the main stream of domestic and international political dialogue and onto the main agenda of government foreign policy discussions. The human rights community must observe closely governments' treatment of these issues lest human rights be misrepresented or propagandized to achieve political goals.

Responding to the growth and success of the human rights movement, governments and critics often demonstrate two tendencies that are potential obstacles to the future achievement of human rights goals. First, government leaders attempt to co-opt the human rights issue as a way of advancing their foreign policy agendas. Second, critics of the human rights movement claim

that the movement has reached its full potential.

In Western democratic societies, government officials often criticize human rights organizations for not giving greater attention to human rights abuses by communist governments. For human rights organizations, the danger of this criticism is its implication that these organizations should work to hold the line on communism and support democratic political development. This implication represents a political attempt to co-opt the human rights movement in the strategy to achieve foreign policy goals.

Whether a democratic government is more desirable than a communist government is not a debate issue for the international human rights movement. The importance of that political debate is not questioned. However, human rights organizations try to rise above the chaos of political rhetoric and ideological rivalries and focus public attention on the rights of individual victims regardless of the political system that abuses them. The pain inflicted through torture has the same intensity if it is endured in a democracy as it does in a totalitarian or an authoritarian system. Human rights organizations do not advocate specific political change. Rather, they demand an immediate end to human rights abuses in all societies.

Political discussions that attempt to draw public attention away from human rights abuses and to focus concern on elections and democratic trends endanger the lives of vast numbers of human beings. Elections do not create democracy, and democracy does not guarantee the full observance of human rights. Human rights organizations must maintain their vigil and work to focus public attention on human rights conditions, not on elections, not on political systems, and not on political trends in the Third World.

A second danger confronting the human rights movement, particularly in the industrialized societies, is the claim that the movement has reached maturity and fulfilled its potential. Critics claim that human rights is on the docket of all international governmental discussions and that it is intrud-

ing unnecessarily in the process of international dialogue.

To the contrary, the human rights movement will not reach its potential until abuses end and all governments fully observe, and not merely endorse, the internationally-adopted human rights standards. The fact that human rights is on the agenda of inter-governmental discussions is a clear indication that human rights abuse continues. Political imprisonment, torture and extra-judicial executions continue in many countries. The human rights movement must not be lulled into passivity simply because the issue of human rights has entered the dialogue among nations. Human rights must play a central role in inter-governmental discussions. If the human rights movement assumes a passive stance, governments will address the human rights issue in an ideological context and weaken the protection of human rights everywhere. The potential and the goal of the human rights movement is to put an end to all human rights abuse. The achievement of that potential requires aggressive activism.

Amnesty International's 25th anniversary is a milestone that represents the sustained efforts of hundreds of thousands of people throughout the world to abolish the abuse of human rights. We celebrate this moral commitment and we rejoice in the recognition of lives saved and torture stopped. However, we also acknowledge the continuing struggle. We know of the willingness of many governments to subjugate human rights to political expediency, to imprison, torture, and kill ordinary citizens for the achievement of political goals. Amnesty International, as part of the larger human rights movement, reaches out to all corners of the world, enlisting the assistance of ordinary citizens. Human rights activism is expanding and growing, and much of this growth occurs in abusive societies. The movement will continue to grow as greater numbers of ordinary citizens recall the "forgotten prisoners" and demand their release.

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Paul R. Ford, Ph.D. is Co-Director,  
Washington Office of Amnesty International USA.

## The Bananas That Move North

The Bananas that move north  
in the holds of the ships of United Brands  
are green and tight as new wood.  
They curl like fat fingers  
in the cold bellies of the ships.

The fingers of the bananas,  
slipping through the Stream  
like the dreaming remains of hands,  
remember what we do not care to know:  
one day they took the place of human cargo  
in the ships of the captains  
of the North.

The bananas that move north  
in the ships of United Brands  
clutch their memories:  
bananas rotting on the quays  
in the harbor of New Orleans,  
the sniff of profit to be made.

They remember an exiled president  
returning to Honduras with "Machine Gun" Molony,  
and the concessions...  
the country owned by Cuyamel,  
parent of United Fruit,  
parent of United Brands.

The bananas of the Republics  
move north with their long memories.  
Spiders come slowly awake  
in the Norte Americano markets.  
Find places to hide.  
Hide in the drapes.  
Wait.

W. F. Bolton

Winston Bolton is a free lance writer whose poetry has appeared in *Folio* and in college literary magazines. His technical writing assignments include NASA's Apollo program, a radiation waste disposal project for the Pilgrim I power station, and nuclear power plant siting for New York State. He has a B.A. in English from Northeastern University and is currently doing graduate study at Bridgewater State College.