

Laudatio Amnesty International and Irene Kahn 24.01.2008

Browsing through a recent copy of the London Review of Books, I came across what struck me as a strange advertisement. Side by side with invitations for courses at various Universities and adverts offering assistance for aspiring writers, stood an advert "BOOKS FOR AMNESTY". Advertised were shops whose specialty was listed as; books donated for sale for the funds of Amnesty International. It welcomed donations of books to protect The Human.

Intended or otherwise I made the link to Amnesty International's iconic symbol; "**A CANDLE IN BARBED WIRE**".

The symbol first appeared on a Christmas card in 1963 and is now recognized across the world as an emblem for hope, a sign of optimism over repression and our collective ability as free citizens to change the world. A bold challenge to the many perpetrators and forces of darkness that still hold millions under control by oppressive means and an absence of basic human rights which all free people honor and cherish.

Better to light a candle than to curse the darkness.

I understand that motto to mean; "action is necessary" and not just the usual hollow words that we are so used to hearing and repeating. So many of us are lost in our own daily darkness and need to be confronted with the brutality that goes unreported and therefore continued. We must be awakened to the injustices, repression and crimes against humanity that exists side by side with our comfortable often unquestioned liberty and our lives of plenty.

In 1961 the British lawyer, Peter Benenson, launched the first APPEAL FOR AMNESTY with the publication of an article in the Observer newspaper with the title "The Forgotten Prisoners". The article was concerned with the imprisonment of two Portuguese students who had raised their wine glasses in a toast to freedom, something that offended the authorities of that time. Peter Benenson's article kindled the candle that was to spread a thirst for action across the free world. Swiftly the cause was taken up by willing people from several European countries and the USA and it was decided to establish a "Permanent International Movement in "Defense of Freedom of Opinion and Religion". The "Threes Network" was established and each group from different countries adopted three prisoners from different geographical and political areas emphasizing the impartiality of the group's work.

On Human Rights Day, 10 December, 1961, the first Amnesty candle was lit in London and has been burning brightly ever since.

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It is now January 2008. Almost 63 years to the day that a first glimmer of light shone into the lives of the few who survived the Holocaust. The years when almost all light was extinguished in a Europe overshadowed by the darkness of an evil Nazi machine that took control of so many lives and eventually destroyed them.

In the course of its 47 years of activity Amnesty International has raised the consciousness of millions of people throughout the free world to the fate of millions of others living in the non-free world. It has exerted influence on governments and individuals to take positive action and not to stay with hollow words and well intended wishes.

Activities such as attending the trial of Nelson Mandela in 1962 to assure fairness and justice for him, to being active in partnership with the World Coalition Against the Death Penalty in 2007, which is working toward a global stop on executions, Amnesty International has now more than 2.2 members, supporters and subscribers in over 150 countries and territories in every region of the world.

The darkness of ignorance, superstition, discrimination and prejudice still has its grip on too many governments, dictators and even everyday people. Amnesty International's candle burns bright but has yet to burn brighter and the one person who will help to further that process is our speaker today, Irene Kahn, Secretary general to that organization.

In 1977, Ms. Khan co-founded "Concern Universal", a UK-based development organization whose objective was to alleviate poverty in Africa.

Before joining Amnesty International she worked for the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees for a period of 21 years, serving in many different parts of the world, including as; Deputy Director in the Department of International Protection, Chief of Mission in India, Senior Legal Advisor for Asia and Senior Executive Officer to the High Commissioner.

Irene Khan then took up the leadership of Amnesty International in its 40th anniversary year as the organization began a process of change and renewal to address the complex nature of contemporary human rights violations, and confronted the challenging developments in the wake of the attacks of 11 September.

She has been Secretary general since 2001 and has overseen a period of change in the organization, including a broadening of remit to encompass economic, social and cultural rights plus internal reform that enables us to respond more flexibly and rapidly to world events. She has sought also to promote the issues of women's human rights and violence against women.

Born in Bangladesh,(I am not permitted to give the date,) she is a graduate of Harvard Law School, USA and the University of Manchester, UK. In 2002 she was awarded the Pilkington "Women of the Year" award and in 2006 she received the Sydney,(Australia) Peace Prize for her work in the field of human concerns and its implementation.

Today we welcome as our guest of honour and speaker Irene Khan. She will receive the Nooit Meer Auschwitz, Annetje Fels Award, for her personal contribution and the work of Amnesty International in their continued efforts to spread the light of individual freedom and human rights, where yet the darkness of oppression and ignorance still abounds.