

AMNESTY INTERNATIONAL PRESS RELEASE

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Death of Amnesty International founder

----- Peter Benenson, 1921-2005

Peter Benenson, the founder of the worldwide human rights organisation Amnesty International, died yesterday evening. He was 83.

Mr Benenson founded and inspired Amnesty International in 1961 first as a one-year campaign for the release of six prisoners of conscience. But from there came a worldwide movement for human rights and in its midst an international organisation -- Amnesty International -- which has taken up the cases of many thousands of victims of human rights violations and inspired millions to human rights defence the world round.

"Peter Benenson's life was a courageous testament to his visionary commitment to fight injustice around the world," said Irene Khan, Secretary General of Amnesty International.

"He brought light into the darkness of prisons, the horror of torture chambers and tragedy of death camps around the world. This was a man whose conscience shone in a cruel and terrifying world, who believed in the power of ordinary people to bring about extraordinary change and, by creating Amnesty International, he gave each of us the opportunity to make a difference."

"In 1961 his vision gave birth to human rights activism. In 2005 his legacy is a world wide movement for human rights which will never die."

The one-year Appeal for Amnesty was launched on 28 May 1961, in an article in the British newspaper, The Observer, called "The Forgotten Prisoners". That appeal attracted thousands of supporters, and started a worldwide human rights movement.

The catalyst for the original campaign was Mr Benenson's sense of outrage after reading an article about the arrest and imprisonment of two students in a café in Lisbon, Portugal, who had drunk a toast to liberty.

In the first few years of Amnesty International's existence, Mr Benenson supplied much of the funding for the movement, went on research missions and was involved in all aspects of the organisation's affairs.

Other activities that Mr Benenson was involved in during his lifetime included; adopting orphans from the Spanish Civil War, bringing Jews who had fled Hitler's Germany to Britain, observing trials as a member of the Society of Labour Lawyers, helping to set up the organisation "Justice" and establishing a society for people with coeliac disease.

At a ceremony to mark Amnesty International's 25th anniversary, Mr Benenson lit what has become the organisation's symbol -- a candle entwined in barbed wire -- with the words:

"The candle burns not for us, but for all those whom we failed to rescue from prison, who were shot on the way to prison, who were tortured, who were kidnapped, who 'disappeared'. That is what the candle is for."

Today Amnesty International is into its 44th year. It has become the world's largest independent human rights organisation, with more than 1.8 million members and committed supporters worldwide.

NOTE TO EDITORS:

Mr Benenson died at 10.45pm on Friday 25 February 2005 in the John Radcliffe Hospital, Oxford. There will be no funeral service. There will be a private ceremony, for family members only. Amnesty International will be holding a public memorial service -- further details will be announced shortly.

Further information on Peter Benenson is available from the Amnesty International:
Press Office +44 20 7413 5566
Duty Press Officer +44 7778 472 126 or +44 7795 628 315

Interviews can be arranged through the Press Office with:
International Executive Committee Chair Jaap Jacobson
Secretary General Irene Khan (from 27.2.05)
Deputy Secretary General Kate Gilmore
Please note that the Benenson family have asked not to be contacted by the media.

Public Document

For more information please call Amnesty International's press office in London, UK, on +44 20 7413 5566

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