Organization's goal is to aid political captives

By Steve Varrone

6 March 1979

Attempting to persuade governments throughout the world to release political prisoners is the goal of Amnesty International (AI), winner of the 1977 Nobel Peace Prize.

AI, which started a chapter at OSU in January, works for the release of men and women imprisoned anywhere for their beliefs, race, language, ethnic origin or religion, said Thom Smith, co-coordinator for the OSU chapter.

AI has chapters not only on campuses throughout the world but also in most major cities, said Art Blaser, member of the Columbus chapter and graduate student at OSU.

Each city chapter is assigned three prisoners and follows their progress from the time they enter jail until they are released. Campus chapters only deal with "urgent cases where there is a turning point in a prisoner's case," Smith said.

"Amnesty (on campus) deals with cases just coming to trial or when somebody disappears," he said.

Campus chapters receive these "Urgent Action" cases. They include a prisoner's name, age, reasons for imprisonment and a brief history of the case, Smith said.

The most effective method used to release "prisoners of conscience" is writing letters to top political officials in the country where the prisoner is being held, Smith said.

The most recent case OSU's AI worked on was that of a 45-year-old engineer from Leningrad who reportedly was confined to a psychiatric hospital for political, rather than medical, reasons. He has allegedly been treated with aminazin, a drug used for emotional disorders, Smith said.

However, the organization has no way of knowing how many people are in prison because of their political beliefs, Smith said.

AI's home office is in London where it coordinates each chapter in the U.S. through an office in San Francisco.

AI in London learns of cases from priests near prisons, families of prisoners and other prisoners.

Jiri Hochman, 52, a graduate assistant at OSU, was helped by AI while he was in Czechoslovakia.

Hochman, a journalist and author of fiction, had been imprisoned four times by the Czechoslovakian secret police. Each time he was held for four to six months, but never tried for a crime.

Hochman said he is grateful to AI for taking care of his family while he was in prison.

Twice, he said, outside organizations like AI got him out of jail, but he is not sure why he was released the other two times.

Hochman said police harassed him because of his work on a liberal newspaper, The Prague, in the spring of 1968.

In 1974, secret police suggested Hochman leave the country or he would be jailed again. The police gave him a passport and he then fled with his family.

Hochman is currently working on a doctorate in history at OSU.
OSU Amnesty club celebrates
1 year; sends prisoners letters

by Jane Schmucker
assistant sports writer

While most people are still finishing their Christmas thank you notes, one OSU group is writing holiday greetings to prisoners.

The OSU Amnesty International chapter celebrated its first anniversary by sending holiday cards to prisoners, asking for the release of a mother and her child imprisoned together in South Africa and appealing to Iranian authorities to stop executions of political prisoners.

“I was sick of what’s going on in the world and wanted to help out,” said Jill Bodner, freshman psychology major from Pittsburgh. “I heard about Amnesty, and I found that Amnesty really works.”

Chastity Burkhart, a junior psychology major from Newark, a founding member of the OSU chapter, said: “I was interested in the organization because they were doing something for people, but for something very direct and very special. Many college students don’t have enough money to give to every organization, but they do have time to write a letter.”

“On a day this feels even better than giving money,” she said.

Kevin Sweeney, a junior from Columbus majoring in mechanical engineering and a founding member of OSU Amnesty said sometimes more than 75 people attend meetings. He considers 75 a large turnout for a campus organization.

“It started slow but by the end of last year there were people sitting on the floor because it was so full,” Sweeney said.

Campus amnesty groups work on special campaigns and educate their campus communities about human rights.

Local amnesty groups, such as the one in Columbus, often adopt a prisoner and work specifically to free that person.

Sandra Mitchell, assistant professor of philosophy and the OSU Amnesty faculty adviser, said Amnesty is a good way to help others and to meet people. “It’s being part of a network of people that share common goals,” she said.

Mitchell said part of Amnesty’s strength comes from its lack of political organization. She said Amnesty has a good track record of helping throughout the world.

Members cited a letter from a released prisoner of conscience in the Dominican Republic. “When the first 200 letters came, the guards gave me back my clothes. Then the next 200 letters came, and the prison director came to see me.”

“When the last pile of letters arrived, the director got in touch with his superior. The letters kept coming and coming. 3000 of them. The president was informed. The letters still kept arriving and the president called the prison and told them to let me go.”

Nicole Kelsey said: “Letters really make some countries act. They’re dependent on other countries and have to care what they think.” A senior from Dayton majoring in political science and international studies, Kelsey said she tries to make her letters to foreign officials polite and short.

“I usually start out saying I’m concerned about this person,” Kelsey told a new Amnesty member.

When writing letters to prisoners Kelsey’s approach is somewhat different. “I make it personal. I say I’m a student at Ohio State and I hear you’ve had a really hard time,” Kelsey said.

The group was beginning New Year’s greetings January 5, but Kelsey said prisoners wouldn’t care if the messages did not arrive on the holiday. “If I was in prison, I wouldn’t mind reading a New Year’s card in February.” Kelsey told the 40 letter writers.

According to Amnesty literature, the group works for the release of prisoners of conscience, fair and prompt trials for all political prisoners and an end to torture and executions in all cases. The organization has no government, political or religious affiliations.
Amnesty group to create awareness of injustices

By Eric Hagely
Lantern staff writer

The OSU branch of Amnesty International will hold a 36-hour vigil today and Wednesday to create public awareness about the current abuse of human rights in various countries.

Jim Laird, OSU group coordinator, said the vigil began at 6 a.m. this morning and will continue until 4 p.m. Wednesday and is being held between the Main Library and University Hall.

Laird, a senior from Columbus majoring in genetics, said a mock prison cell will hold group members and students who are representing current prisoners of conscience who are being held by the government because of their political beliefs.

“This is a good way of informing people about political injustice,” said Kevin Sweeney, a senior from Powell majoring in engineering. “It’s non-political, so you don’t take sides, you just work to help human rights injustice.”

Tables are set up to supply information about the group,” he said.

“THROUGH THE vigil, we’ll be encouraging passers-by to sign letters to have prisoners released throughout the world,” said Abe Bonowitz, a non-student member from Columbus. “These letters will be sent to heads of state, prison wardens or police chiefs, whatever the case may be.”

Sweeney said the key to the release of political prisoners is thousands of people working together.

“ONE OF the things Amnesty works for is to try and be balanced,” Laird said. “We will criticize any government including the U.S. and England if needed. Kenya and Czechoslovakia are two of the cases we are working on now, so we represent both sides of the ‘iron curtain.’”

Letters are being written today to political prisoners and will be sent to the governments holding these people, Laird said.

“Amnesty is set up like a grassroots organization which has groups in more than 150 countries. Most of those are known as adoption groups, like Columbus, where their membership is stable and can work for a prisoner for years,” he said. “The college group has a high turnover, so what they do is send us a newsletter with the names of three to six cases to work on for that month.”

There are about 1000 college groups across the nation, Laird said.
Oval Vigil

Marie Rybig, a freshman from Cleveland majoring in journalism, sits in a jail cell on the Oval as part of a 36-hour Amnesty International demonstration on Tuesday. Amnesty International is protesting torture and human rights violations throughout the world.
Seeking support

Members of Amnesty International and Students For Peace and Justice gathered signatures on the Oval Tuesday; Amnesty is urging the President to adopt a uniform human rights policy, while students for Peace and Justice are asking students to write their congressman to block most-favored-nation status for China.
Human rights vigil to raise awareness

By Sue Sowa
Lantern staff writer

The OSU chapter of Amnesty International begins a 36-hour vigil for human rights today at noon on the Oval.

"The event is meant to raise consciousness about human rights issues," said Angela Pitts, president of Amnesty International OSU.

Amnesty International's goal at the vigil is to collect 3,000 signatures on petitions for 10 different human rights violation cases worldwide, Pitts said.

A copy of each petition will then be sent to the U.S. ambassador in each of the nations where a violation is occurring, she said.

A copy of the petition will also be sent to an official in each country, Pitts said.

Pitts said sending the petitions will make those countries involved in human rights violations aware that the public knows of their actions.

It will embarrass these nations and make them look bad, Pitts said.

The vigil is composed of several events which include: a candlelight vigil at 8 p.m. on the Oval; a death penalty discussion Thursday at noon on the Oval, (rain site is Room 222 in the Ohio Union); and a speech by Dr. Rick Scarnati Thursday at 7:30 p.m. in Buckeye Rooms A and B to close the vigil.

Scarnati will speak on psychiatric abuses past and present in the former Soviet Union.
Amnesty has vigil to raise awareness

By Jennifer L. Peterson
Lantern staff writer

A mock tiger cage sat in the Oval Wednesday, but it wasn't there to hold a tiger.

Its purpose was to symbolize that political prisoners are kept in cages all over the world, said Chris Leedy from OSU Amnesty International.

OSU Amnesty International completed a 36-hour vigil Wednesday at 8 p.m. on the Oval.

It was held to raise awareness of human rights abuses across the globe, said Leedy, a junior from Mansfield and co-coordinator of the organization.

The goal of the vigil, which began Tuesday morning, was to collect as many signatures as possible for petitions. These petitions will be mailed to various international embassies in the United States and high government officials in foreign nations, Leedy said.

Leedy said the organization tries to stop children's suffering and abuse of human rights by sending letters and petitions that put pressure on various officials to release those imprisoned based on political views, gender, or sexual orientation.

Leedy said the group worked last year on behalf of several dozen women imprisoned in Syria because of the political views of their husbands. He said they were all released with Amnesty International's help.

The organization also had a table set up that offered literature about the causes and several petitions, which the group asked people to read and sign if they wanted to show their support. The organization was hoping to receive at least 3,000 signatures by the end of the 36-hour event.

"We've been really happy so far with the response we've received," Leedy said. Students, faculty, and staff have all stopped by to get more information about the organization, he said.

For a $1 donation, a person could receive a button that reads: "Love Is A Basic Human Right," or another that reads: "Torture Sucks."

Jen Obringer, a senior from New Washington, signed several of the petitions at the information table. She said she believes her

"Amnesty International fights absolutely the worst, horrible things that are done to people."

—Jen Obringer said
Amnesty holds vigil to highlight world abuses

By Jason Rocky
Lantern Staff writer

A 36-hour vigil continues on the Oval today by the OSU chapter of Amnesty International in hopes to increase students’ awareness of human rights abuses around the world.

The vigil, called “Voices for Freedom,” began Monday morning on the Oval and will conclude at 8 p.m. tonight. It focuses on two major Amnesty campaigns, “Disappearances” and “Breaking the Silence”.

The first campaign focuses on prisoners who have disappeared after being arrested by their governments, and the second raises awareness of human rights abuses against gays, lesbians, and bisexuals.

Amnesty International is a worldwide organization which works to keep governments from denying individuals their basic human rights.

Taema Weiss, co-coordinator of AI-OSU, said the vigil’s main goal is to collect students’ signatures for petitions calling for humane treatment of individuals by their governments and to “raise students’ awareness of the world around them.”

Last year, the chapter was able to collect more than 1,500 signatures during the 36-hour period, Weiss said. She said the petitions can be effective, because they can prove harmful to a country’s international reputation.

“There are thousands of members worldwide signing letters,” Weiss said. “As governments receive more and more letters, they realize that someone is watching out for these individuals.”

Amnesty works specifically for the release of “prisoners of conscience” men, women and children jailed for their beliefs, color, sex, ethnic origin, language or religion. The group also urges governments to provide fair and prompt trials for political prisoners, and to end the torture and executions of these individuals.

After hearing about the petitions in a Women’s Studies class, Jill McAlister, a sophomore, said “I just felt like I should do something. I wanted to help, even if it is indirectly.”

James Roberson, a student who stopped by the Amnesty display and discussed some of the organization’s actions with Weiss, said “I think it’s great, but I don’t believe in trying to change the laws of other countries.”

Amnesty International-OSU has about 20 active members and meets every Wednesday at 7:30 p.m. in the lobby of Taylor Tower.

Melissa Terry, a freshman, speaks with Taema Weiss, a coordinator for Amnesty International. The organization was on the Oval Monday trying to recruit new members.
Human rights group holds 36-hour vigil on the Oval

By Lori Axelrod
Lantern staff writer

Human rights abuses of women throughout the world were the main focus of Amnesty International’s annual 36-hour vigil that began Tuesday on the Oval.

Amnesty International-OSU is an independent human rights organization working for the release of prisoners who are being held primarily because of their beliefs, said Elizabeth Nesbitt, coordinator of the vigil.

“These are men, women and children who are in prison for their political and religious beliefs, gender, language, age, sexual orientation and race all over the world,” she said.

“We seek to end torture and executions in all cases and work for fair and prompt trials for all political prisoners,” said Taema Weiss, also a coordinator of the vigil.

The goal for the 36-hour vigil is to gain signatures for petitions about specific human rights cases, as well as an opportunity to promote awareness in the campus community, Weiss said.

“People are aware, but they’re not really aware,” Weiss said.

“It’s like you’re aware that there’s bad water problems, you are aware there’s droughts, but you’re not aware of all the details,” Weiss said. “People are aware that there’s human rights abuses, but they’re not aware of the details or what they can do.”

Students were asked to sign petitions that will be sent to heads of governments in hopes of getting prisoners released.

“The person (receiving the petition) sees that they are coming from all over the world and may be like, ‘Hey, you know people are watching, I better be careful what I am doing and let these people go, and stop torturing them,’” Nesbitt said.

Amnesty often receives rejections to their requests.

“Often what happens is we get responses where the government writes back to us giving some excuse or some detail like, ‘We’re investigating these allegations of torture,’” Weiss said. “It’s not really insignificant. If it was insignificant to them, then they wouldn’t have written.”

Kathryn Rogers, from Cleveland, said she hopes the petitions will stop the violence in other parts of the world.

“I hope that it ends some of the violence in the world and eradicates some of the eventual feelings people will have towards one another,” she said. “I think some people are gaining greater awareness, especially through Amnesty’s work and other human rights organizations.”

Philip Bump, a senior from Pennsylvania, said the vigil is a valiant effort, but it might be in vain.

“It’s a pathetic fact that human rights are not a top priority in many world governments,” Bump said. “Here, people are in bad shape if they have two TVs.”

Another theme of the vigil was a candle-lighting ceremony which paid homage to those women who have suffered throughout the world.

Nesbitt said the ceremony consisted of candles being lit and names of tortured or missing women in other countries being read.
Vigil addresses human rights conditions

By Hallie Cayne
Lantern staff writer

Amnesty International's Ohio State chapter held a 12-hour vigil Wednesday on the Oval focusing on human rights conditions in Kenya and Nigeria.

"Amnesty (International) hopes to promote awareness of atrocities around the world. The situation is really dire," said Elizabeth Nesbitt, co-coordinator of the OSU chapter.

"We need to speak out immediately so people can be free and stop being tortured."

The vigil raised awareness of human rights abuses in the African countries, Nesbitt said. Kenya has been taken over by ethnic violence, resulting in countless killings and displacement of people, according to Amnesty International literature passed out during the event.

There is evidence the violence was instigated by the Kenyan government, according to Amnesty International brochures.

The organization hopes to help free four political prisoners in Kenya who were investigating possible government involvement.

There is a similar situation in Nigeria, where the government instigated attacks on rival ethnic groups. This violence has destroyed countless villages and has led to over 100 political executions without trials, according to Amnesty International literature.

"Kenya and Nigeria are the most prominent and influential African countries, but they still have extraordinary human rights abuses," said Michelle Mohr, co-coordinator of the OSU chapter.

The organization, founded nationally in 1961, works to fight incidents like those in Kenya and Nigeria by working for the release of prisoners of conscience, fair trials for political prisoners, and an end to other human rights abuses, Nesbitt said.

During the vigil, members of the group passed out postcards, buttons and pamphlets detailing their concerns. Signatures were also collected for four different petitions focusing on human rights.

"There are so many things we can do as students to be involved. Simple things like writing letters or signing petitions can really help make a change," Mohr said.

"We feel the vigil is a really important way to be visible within the OSU community," Mohr said. The organization hoped to get 1,600 signatures.

The event ended at 9 p.m. Wednesday with a reading of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights and a candlelight ceremony. The organization plans to hold a 36-hour vigil in the spring.

The OSU chapter of Amnesty International meets every Wednesday night at 7:30 p.m. in the Ohio Union Buckeye Suite A and B. The meetings include signing petitions, writing letters and guest speakers.
Turkish activist denounces gay persecution

By Jill Boatman
Lantern staff writer

A Turkish human rights activist who is only the second person to seek homosexual political asylum in the United States spoke of his experiences at the Ohio Union last night.

"I was comfortable here (in the United States) and knew I would be persecuted (in Turkey) so I did not want to go back," said Serkan Altan, who applied for asylum two years ago.

Altan spoke of his experiences in his speech titled "Breaking the Silence." It was sponsored by the Ohio State branch of Amnesty International and the Bisexual, Gay, and Lesbian Alliance.

Altan said when he was 18 years old he came to the United States, it was then he realized he was gay.

He said there is no discussion of gay issues in Turkey.

When he became openly gay he realized he could not return to Turkey, he said.

If he were to go back he could be beaten, raped, or put in prison, he said. These acts are illegal in Turkey but are not enforced if a person is gay, Altan said.

Some movie stars in Turkey are gay, however; if you are not an affluent person you will be discriminated against, he said.

"He has a really great story and we wanted to bring him here," said Michelle Mohr, the regional representative for Amnesty International for gay and lesbian concerns.

Anyone should be able to say they are gay — in any place, Altan said.

He said no one should live in fear. Altan is the author of the upcoming autobiography "Live to Tell."

"Why should gays and lesbians risk their lives for love?" said Mohr, who was also a speaker at the event.

"Why should we face imprisonment for love?"

Lesbians and gays are targeted because of their sexuality and the discrimination is of a sexual nature, Mohr said.

"Even if you are not gay or lesbian you can learn a lot about what is going on in the world," Mohr said.

"Connecting through diversity can be the light of hope for our people."
Vigil spotlights rights

Amnesty group draws attention to Indonesians’ plight

By Ping Cai
Lantern staff writer

Despite the first attack of the winter cold, members of Amnesty International’s Ohio State chapter held a 12-hour vigil on the Oval Wednesday to petition for human rights.

Although warmly clad, members had to breathe into their palms from time to time to warm up as they stood on the Oval appealing people to sign a petition for the release of Muchtar Pakpahan, founder of the Indonesia Prosperity Trade Union.

Pakpahan was arrested on July 30 by Indonesian government under the Anti-Subversion Law. Amnesty International is concerned he is being detained for the non-violent exercise of his right to freedom of expression and association.

Students working on the Oval included Julie Derksen, a sophomore majoring in psychology and Pierre Kwan, a sophomore majoring in civil engineering.

The students began soliciting signatures for the petition at 9 a.m. and by 4:30 p.m. about 700 people had signed up for the petition, Derksen said.

“It’s pretty good turnout considering the cold weather,” Derksen said.

The group hoped for 1,000 signatures by the end of the day.

Wade Smith, a freshman majoring in botany, said he disagreed with the way the Indonesian go-

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ment was handling the situation.

"This is the way to stop it," he said.

Other students agreed.

"I believe human rights is a God-given thing," said Karl Ivy, a senior majoring in international business and Spanish. "Protection of it is the responsibility of everybody."

A candle light vigil began at 8:30 p.m. and about 20 members of the OSU chapter participated.

The chapter holds vigils every three months to raise awareness of human rights issues, Derksen said.

Their campaign this fall is focused on Indonesian human rights issues, she said.

Amnesty International was founded in 1961 and has over 1,100,000 members with supporters in over 150 countries.

The members work to free prisoners of conscience, people imprisoned solely for their beliefs, race, or ethnic origin who have neither used nor advocated violence.

The group also works for fair