

The logo for Amnesty International, featuring the text "AMNESTY INTERNATIONAL" in a bold, sans-serif font on a yellow background. To the right of the text is a black icon of a lit candle with a flame, symbolizing human rights and freedom.

**AMNESTY  
INTERNATIONAL**



**Defending Prisoners of Conscience  
Tom Lantos Human Rights Commission  
February 15, 2018**

**Written Testimony of Andrew Fandino,  
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Amnesty International USA.**

Good afternoon. I would like to start off by thanking the Tom Lantos Human Rights Commission for holding this important hearing on the importance of freeing prisoners of conscience. In particular, I would like to thank Co-Chairs Hultgren and McGovern for their continued leadership on this issue, and Representatives Sheila Jackson Lee and Representative Lowenthal for their work on behalf of prisoners of conscience in Vietnam.

Your actions have helped change lives. Since the Defending Freedoms Project was founded in 2012, dozens of prisoners of conscience have been released, and that has been due in part to your continued pressure and commitment to these cases and people. These prisoners are now free to go back to their homes and families and to try to rebuild their lives again. I know they thank you and Amnesty International thanks you as well.

Amnesty International's work on behalf of prisoners of conscience dates back to our founding in 1961, when British lawyer Peter Benenson published an article in the *Observer* newspaper titled "The Forgotten Prisoners." Peter had been appalled by the fact that two Portuguese students were jailed solely for raising their glasses in a toast to freedom. His article in the *Observer* urged its readers to write letters on behalf of people around the world that were imprisoned solely because they exercised their basic human rights.

The response to Peter Benenson's article was enormous, and the letter was re-printed all over the world. That led to thousands of people writing their own letters to government officials. These groups of letter writers in different countries would form the backbone of the organization that became Amnesty International. Since then, thousands of prisoners have been released thanks in part to the letters and actions of our members, and thanks to the letters and actions taken by Member of Congress like you.

Amnesty International defines a prisoner of conscience as someone who has not used violence or advocated violence or hatred and is imprisoned or placed under other physical restriction (for example, house arrest) solely because of their political, religious or other conscientiously held beliefs, ethnic origin, sex, color, language, national or social origin, economic status, birth, sexual orientation or other aspect of her or his identity. Amnesty International calls for the immediate and unconditional release of prisoners of conscience.

Amnesty International's work on prisoners of conscience is supported by our over seven million members, supporters and activists worldwide. Their actions range from writing letters to heads of State to making calls to foreign embassies in the US, to visiting their members of Congress requesting support on a case.

Together these actions have sent a very clear message to governments across the globe. The world is watching. Countless messages have reached Presidents, Ministers, Governors, and in many cases, down to

the warden of a prison where a prisoner of conscience is being held. These concerted actions have led to prisoners being released, their conditions improved, and in some cases, investigations and accountability for their treatment.

Another critical role that these messages play, that cannot be emphasized enough, is that they bring much needed hope to prisoners of conscience. Many prisoners of conscience spend extended periods of time unjustly imprisoned, sometimes even for years in horrendous and cruel conditions. This is especially true for those in solitary confinement. For them, knowing that they are not alone, that someone in the outside world is fighting for them every day to get them released from prison, is all that keeps them going sometimes.

Amnesty International USA has a specific program that focuses on getting prisoners of conscience released, and that is the Individuals At Risk Program. The Individuals At Risk Program works to end human rights abuses by mobilizing ordinary people to take action on cases of prisoners of conscience, human rights defenders, and other individuals and communities that are at imminent risk of imprisonment, torture, or even death. The Program does this by three key initiatives:

- 1) The Urgent Action Network
- 2) Case Commitment Initiative
- 3) Write for Rights

The Urgent Action Network responds to human rights emergencies as they arise. When a person is at risk of arrest, has just been detained, or their health conditions become critical—our network of activists around the world springs into action. When long-term campaigning on a case is needed, our student and local groups make a commitment on the case and see it through to resolution through our Case Commitment Initiative. And for the past 15 years, Amnesty International has run an annual global campaign known as “Write for Rights.” Every year Amnesty chooses between 10-12 cases from around the world to highlight for mass, global letter-writing. This past year alone almost two million people worldwide have responded to our call for action.

But despite all these actions, prisoners of conscience are still behind bars around the world. Even when we finally see some progress in cases, we are sadly reminded on just how tenuous the status of prisoners of conscience is. We only have to look back these past two weeks, with the re-arrest of Amnesty International Turkey’s Chair, Taner Kilic; and the conditional release of Ethiopian journalist ESKINDER NEGA – only if he signs a false confession, which he refused – to see this all too well.

So the need to fight for the immediate and unconditional release of all prisoners of conscience is more important than ever. Freedom of expression, association, assembly and freedom of conscience are under attack around the world. These rights are critical to achieving a world that is free, just, and secure. Work for individual prisoners of conscience is in fact work for humanity.

This is why Amnesty International USA urges members of the House to co-sponsor and pass the House Resolution Expressing Support for Prisoner of Conscience Day, which will be introduced by Chairmen Hultgren and McGovern, and advocate for a Defending Freedoms case.

On behalf of Amnesty International, I would like to thank the Tom Lantos Human Rights Commission again for holding this important hearing, and for its commitment to the promotion and protection of human rights around the world. I look forward to any questions you might have and to working together to release all prisoners of conscience around the world.