



28 February 2010

Ref: OSG 2010.010

Dear Amrita Chhachhi, Sara Hossain and Sunila Abeysekera

**AMNESTY INTERNATIONAL'S RESPONSE TO
"THE GLOBAL PETITION TO AMNESTY INTERNATIONAL:
RESTORING THE INTEGRITY OF HUMAN RIGHTS"**

The petition circulated on 13th February 2010, "The Global Petition to Amnesty International: Restoring the Integrity of Human Rights", raises a number of important points about Amnesty International's work with others and related issues, many of which I agree with.

I share much of your analysis, for instance, about this being a particularly sensitive time for human rights defenders, not least in the context of the "War or Terror". I concur too that human rights language is being co-opted by those with an anti-human rights agenda, among governments but also armed groups and even within civil society, and that we must be vigilant about the alliances we explore and establish with other groups.

You are absolutely right too that in the present context of "constructive engagement" with the Taleban, as proposed at the recent Conference on Afghanistan in London, it is our obligation to ensure that we criticize any attempts to barter away the human rights of minorities and of women. You may be aware that on the eve of that conference we appealed for human rights, including women's rights, not to be "traded away or compromised during any reconciliation talks with the Taleban" (please see, *Afghanistan: Human rights must be guaranteed during Taleban talks*, 26 January 2010, AI Index: PRE01/025/2010).

As you are all familiar with our work, I trust that I do not have to stress with you the importance that Amnesty International gives to women's rights in general – our campaign to end violence against women actually developed at the same time as our campaign to close Guantánamo. We are committed to enhancing our gender analysis in all areas of our work, including those relating to terrorism and counter-terrorism. As you know, Gita was making a valuable contribution to this work, and I do fear that the current media controversy is undermining what we have achieved by repeatedly suggesting that we are not sensitive to women's rights or that, worse, we are providing platforms for people with violent and discriminatory agendas.

This brings me to what is the central issue in this controversy, which, I think you agree, is how do human rights organizations work with others, and in particular how do they give voice to victims without promoting all their views?

This is a familiar debate within Amnesty International. We have been weighing relationships with individuals and organizations for decades. We do not claim to always have the best answers, and we value the best advice we can get internally and from partners like you. We know from experience that judgement calls in this area are difficult, but here are some considerations.

There are victims with whom we would not associate, while unreservedly campaigning against any abuses of their rights. For example, we denounced the waterboarding of Khaled Sheikh Muhammad, the Guantánamo detainee credited with the 9/11 and other atrocities. But we would never share a platform with someone like him who openly espouses an ideology predicated on hatred and the killing of civilians – in short, views that are clearly antithetical to human rights. The answer in this case is easy.

But in other cases the answer is not easy. For example, should we not work against the death penalty with an influential actor like the Catholic Church because we disagree with their stand on women's reproductive right and homosexuality? There are valid arguments for and against. We chose to work with the Catholic Church against the death penalty.

Let's look now at our joint advocacy for the Guantánamo detainees with Moazzam Begg and his group, Cageprisoners, which has earned us accusations of being pro-Taliban and promoting violence and discrimination against women. Most recently we spoke together with him in a coalition of NGOs to persuade European states to receive Guantánamo detainees who were cleared for release but risk further human rights abuses if returned to their home countries. The tour has ended and we have received initial positive feedback.

Moazzam Begg is one of the first detainees to have been released from Guantánamo and to disclose information when much of what was going on in the camp was shrouded in secrecy. He speaks powerfully from personal experience about the abuses there. He advocates effectively detainees' rights to due process, and does so within the same framework of universal human rights standards that we are promoting. All good reasons, we think, to be on the same platform when speaking about Guantánamo.

Now, Moazzam Begg and others in his group Cageprisoners also hold other views which they have clearly stated, for example on whether one should talk to the Taliban or on the role of *jihad* in self-defence. Are such views antithetical to human rights? Our answer is no, even if we may disagree with them – and indeed those of us working to close Guantánamo have a range of beliefs about religion, secularism, armed struggle, peace and negotiations. I am afraid that the rest of what we have heard against Moazzam Begg include many distortions, innuendos, and “guilt by association” to which he has responded for himself.

I wish to stress to you as I have done repeatedly in public that if any evidence emerges that Moazzam Begg or Cageprisoners have promoted views antithetical to human rights, or have been involved in even more sinister activities, Amnesty International would disown its joint advocacy. However, also at play is the old principle that anyone is innocent until proven guilty – not only in a judicial sense. To disown our work with Moazzam Begg on the basis of what we have been presented so far would betray basic principles of fairness which are also at the heart of what we stand for.

Finally, the choices we make on how best to work with other people and organizations are informed by frank internal debate. Like you we are committed to open internal debate – indeed with external partners as well – not censorship in any shape or form. We are an organization of activists with strong and different views on how best to achieve our common goals; dissent is inevitable, indeed welcome. Decisions are reviewed. No Amnesty International staff has ever been sanctioned for expressing their views on any matter.

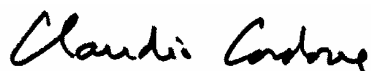
I am deeply sorry that Gita decided to express her dissatisfaction the way she did, as no internal avenues were close to her. Since I took over my position as interim Secretary General in January, I and my colleagues in the management team have made a special effort to listen to staff and encourage communications between staff and management. Indeed Gita wrote her 30 January memo cited in The Sunday Times on request of senior management, after she verbally raised her concerns. To make sure we had her concerns properly articulated and could act on them. While her concerns were not new, we nevertheless decided to look again into the issues she raised and informed her of such step. We regret that she decided to go to The Sunday Times only a few days later.

We suspended Gita in order to make clear that she was no longer speaking on behalf of Amnesty International once she made her disagreement public and in a context of misrepresentations in the media. The suspension is not a sanction: Gita remains employed on full pay pending an investigation according to our negotiated employment policies, which provide her with every opportunity to make her case. In order to protect all those involved in a personnel matter, our policies include a requirement of confidentiality on all parties. This is why we are speaking about this issue only to the extent required to respond to inaccurate information in the public domain.

Let me stress in conclusion that Amnesty International is committed to working in partnership and giving voice to victims, while maintaining impartiality and distinguishing between defending people's rights and promoting their views. Getting those judgments right is important and remains as challenging today as ever, particularly on divisive issues such as terrorism and counter-terrorism.

We regularly evaluate our work also in this respect, and are doing so as I write to you. I very much welcome the comments and advice of many in the human rights movement who share our goals while having to confront common but also different challenges in the specific environments in which we operate. I hope we can continue our debate on such an important issue, among others, so as to enhance or work for human rights.

With best wishes,

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "Claudio Cordone". The signature is written in a cursive, slightly slanted style.

Claudio Cordone
Secretary General (ad interim)