



**March 2023**

Our Next Meeting:  
March 9th on Zoom



### Join the Activist-led Advisory Group!

Amnesty International is launching applications to join the Activist-Led Advisory Group. This is an opportunity specifically for activists (not Amnesty staff), to come together at a global level and influence Amnesty International's activism work. This group will have 10 members from different countries, globally. The deadline to apply is 15th March 2023.

Activists from all national entities are welcome to apply. We accept multiple applications from each country. We are really excited about this initiative, and very grateful for your support in sharing this opportunity.

Click [here](#) for more information and the application for this new advisory group. Please email the Global Activism Team at [Activism@amnesty.org](mailto:Activism@amnesty.org) for any questions you might have!



*Riviera shopping mall after Russian shelling on May 9th, 2022.  
CC 4.0 State Emergency Service of Ukraine*

## One Year After Full-scale Russian Invasion of Ukraine, Victim's Rights Must be at the Heart of All Justice Efforts

February 21, 2023 The international community must develop a robust plan to secure justice for victims of Russia's war of aggression against Ukraine, Amnesty International said today, marking one year since the invasion.

On February 24, 2022, Russian military forces launched a full-scale invasion of Ukraine, a move that Amnesty International called "an act of aggression and human rights catastrophe". Since then, Russian forces have committed war crimes and other violations of international humanitarian law, including extrajudicial executions, deadly strikes on civilian infrastructure and places of shelter, deportations and forcible transfers of civilians, and unlawful killings committed on a vast scale through shelling of cities.

While the invasion continues and the full extent of the crimes committed in Ukraine remains unknown, demands of victims and survivors for justice and their rights must be prioritized. The international community has a clear duty to ensure that those responsible for crimes under international law know that accountability and justice will triumph over impunity.

"As Russian armed forces appear to be stepping up their offensive in Ukraine, the commitment to hold all perpetrators of human rights violations and war crimes to account is as urgent as ever," said Agnès Callamard, Amnesty International's Secretary General.

Since the beginning of the conflict, Amnesty International has documented war crimes, including the targeting of critical civilian infrastructure and blocking of aid for civilians. Civilians in conflict-af-

affected areas have been exposed to constant attacks and often cut off from water, electricity and heating. Many people living in Russian-occupied areas remain in dire need of humanitarian assistance or medical care, yet are being denied the right to travel to Ukrainian government-controlled territories.

“The people of Ukraine have suffered unimaginable horror during this war of aggression over the last 12 months. Let us be clear: the hands of Vladimir Putin and his armed forces are stained with blood. Survivors deserve justice and reparations for all they have endured. The international community must stand steadfast to see this through to the end so that justice is served. One year in, it’s patently clear more must be done.”

Tens of thousands of cases of war crimes have been filed, including of sexual and gender-based crimes, but the number of victims of the ongoing conflict will be much higher.

“In the wake of this conflict, countless human beings have been reduced to collateral damage. When a mortar hits, it doesn’t just tear through flesh, it takes livelihoods, destroys critical infrastructure and leaves many unable to exist in the rubble of their former lives,” said Agnès Callamard.

The immediate response to the conflict has been encouraging, including a number of international and national-level investigations into crimes under international law committed in Ukraine, but comprehensive justice for Ukraine will only be achieved by providing meaningful justice and reparations to victims. This will only be possible if the international community provides robust and sustained support to existing justice mechanisms.

There also needs to be consideration of new national and international mechanisms for more comprehensive justice – such as the welcome decision of the Human Rights Council to set up an independent commission of inquiry in March 2022. Ultimately these could strengthen the international justice response to the vast numbers of war crimes cases, as well as the crime of aggression which itself cannot be investigated by the ICC due to its jurisdictional limitations.

“As well as ensuring the right mechanisms are in place, we must ensure those individuals responsible for crimes under international law are brought to justice and face the consequences of their unconscionable actions. This includes investigating senior military commanders and civilian leaders for war crimes and the crime of aggression under international law,” said Agnès Callamard.

Building such cases can be complex, but it is

imperative that investigations consider not only low-level direct perpetrators but those higher up the chain of command. Wherever trials are held, they must adhere to international human rights and fair-trial standards, with the full participation and consideration of survivors and their needs.

“With wars raging in every corner of the world, inflicting untold civilian suffering, this must become a blueprint for all conflict. The initial unprecedented response of the international community, including the work of the International Criminal Court should be the minimum standard in the pursuit of international justice,” said Agnès Callamard.

“Time and time again, Amnesty International and other civil society groups have called for collective action, for people to come together for the greater good. This couldn’t be truer here. Every institution and authority involved in the pursuit of international justice, must work together to share insights and coordinate strategies, but also address gaps in expertise and capacity. Now is not a time for siloed working,” said Agnès Callamard.

The international community must support fair, effective and impartial investigations and states should urge Ukraine to ratify the Rome Statute, bringing its national law into line with international legal standards related to international justice, and to strengthen cooperation with the ICC. Finally, justice for Ukraine demands that countries with universal jurisdiction statutes explore how these can serve justice for Ukrainians.

When offering support, the international community must identify the specific needs of at-risk groups – such as women, older people, people with disabilities, and children – as well as recognizing that many



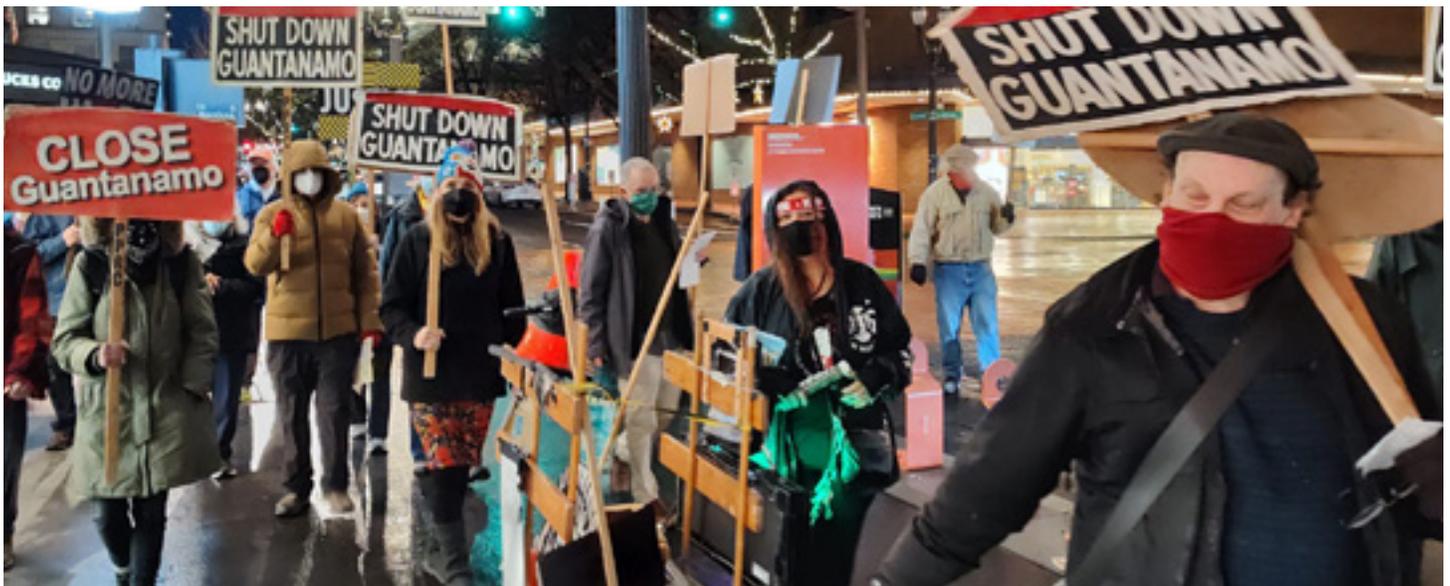
Ukrainians, including children, have been deported from Ukraine to Russia or forcibly transferred into Russian-occupied areas, and cannot return home safely. These particular groups must be among those prioritized, and all humanitarian assistance provided to them should be tailored to meet their specific needs.

Cooperation with Ukrainian civil society organizations will also be essential in prioritizing survivors' needs to ensure the practical application of economic and humanitarian aid. The international community must ensure this collaboration is done in such a way that it ensures transparency, effectiveness and vic-

tim-sensitivity throughout the processes focused on humanitarian assistance, recovery, justice and reparations.

“Acknowledging the immense physical, psychological and economic harm inflicted on civilians in Ukraine over the last year is crucial for securing justice and reparations for the survivors and victims of Russia’s aggression in Ukraine,” said Agnès Callamard.

Since 2014 and subsequently at the beginning of Russia’s full invasion, Amnesty International has been pursuing accountability in Ukraine, as well as documenting war crimes and other violations of international humanitarian law.



*Members of Group 48 joined Peace and Justice works activists on January 13th to mark the 21st anniversary of the opening of the Guantanamo Bay detention center. Photo by Megan Harrington*

## **Belarus: Sentencing of Human Rights Defenders a “Blatant Retaliation” for Their Work**

Responding to the sentencing of founder and chair of Viasna human rights centre and Nobel Peace Prize laureate Ales Bialiatski, who received a sentence of ten years in prison, his colleagues Valiantsin Stefanovich, deputy chair of Viasna and vice-president of the International Federation of Human Rights, who was sentenced to nine years, and Viasna’s lawyer Uladzimir Labkovich, who was given seven years in prison, Marie Struthers, Director for Eastern Europe and Central Asia said:

“This sham trial on politically motivated charges is a blatant retaliation for Viasna’s human rights work. Their sentencing represents a further blow to the already severely repressed civil society and the concerning state of human rights in Belarus. It’s a

vindictive act of injustice that requires the immediate attention of the international community.

“These brave human rights defenders were never given the chance of a fair trial. They were handcuffed when escorted in and held inside a cage throughout the trial. The judge conducted proceedings in Russian instead of Belarusian and they were given no time to familiarize themselves with the case materials, to say nothing of them being tried on fabricated charges. We cannot let them suffer under the reprehensible political agenda of the Belarusian authorities. We demand their immediate and unconditional release.”

See the full press release here: <https://www.amnestyusa.org/press-releases/belarus-sentencing-of-human-rights-defenders/>

## **Urgent Action: Morocco / Western Sahara Human Rights Defender's Conviction Upheld**

### **NAME AND PRONOUN:**

**Rida Benotmane (He/him)**

On February 20th, the Rabat Court of Appeal upheld the conviction against human rights defender Rida Benotmane, imposed by a lower court on November 7th, 2022, on charges relating to his social media posts and YouTube videos dating from 2021, in which he criticised the Moroccan government. On appeal, his sentence was reduced from three years to 18 months in prison. He remains held in solitary confinement in Arjate 1 prison in the city of Salé. He must be immediately and unconditionally released as his imprisonment stems solely from the exercise of his right to freedom of expression.

Rida Benotmane is a member of the Moroccan Association for the Defence of Human Rights (AMDH), a human rights group, a political activist and a journalist. He was already unjustly imprisoned for four years between 2010 and 2014 for online commentaries.

On September 9th, 2022, the National Judicial Police Brigade (BNPJ) in Casablanca interrogated Rida Benotmane over a Facebook post and two Youtube videos from 2021, in which he criticized the authorities. After interrogating him, the BNJP arrested Benotmane and ordered his detention pending investigations. On September 10th, 2022, the King's prosecutor in the Rabat First Instance Court charged Rida Benotmane with "insulting a body regulated by law", "insulting public officials while carrying out their duties", and "broadcasting and distributing false allegations without consent" under Articles 265, 263, and 447-2 of the Penal Code respectively. He was also convicted of breaching the decree law on the state of health emergency.

Rida Benotmane went on hunger strike for 18 days from September 9th, 2022 in protest of his arbitrary detention.

Moroccan authorities have increasingly targeted dissenting voices in recent months. In November 2022, Moroccan security agents arrested and detained prominent human rights lawyer Mohamed Ziane, on 11 separate charges in connection to different alleged offences including bogus charges of insulting public officials and institutions, defamation and marital infidelity. He remains detained Arjate 1 prison in Salé.



In August 2022, Moroccan blogger and activist Fatima Karim was sentenced to two years in prison and a fine for Facebook posts in which she made satirical comments about the Qur'an. In April 2022, a court sentenced Saida el Alami, a human rights defender and member of the "Femmes Marocaines Contre la Detention Politique" collective, to two years in prison for posting about her ill-treatment by the police and for criticizing the repression of journalists and activists. Blogger Rabie al-Ablaq was also sentenced during the same month to four years in prison for offending the king in two videos posted on social media.

The right to freedom of expression, as stated in Article 19 of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights and the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights, to which Morocco is a state party, includes the right to impart and receive information through any media and regardless of frontiers. The Moroccan constitution protects the right to freedom of expression in Chapter 25, which states that freedom of thought and expression is guaranteed in all its forms.

### **Sample Letter**

*I am writing to express grave concern about the ongoing arbitrary detention of journalist and human rights defender Rida Benotmane. On February 20th, his conviction on charges stemming solely from the exercise of his right to freedom of expression was upheld on appeal. The judge also reduced his sentence from three years to 18 months in prison after uphold-*

ing a lower court's conviction issued in November 2022 on charges of "insulting a body regulated by law", "insulting public officials while carrying out their duties", and "broadcasting and distributing false allegations without consent" under Articles 265, 263, and 447-2 of the Penal Code, respectively. The charges are connected to his Facebook posts and YouTube videos dating from 2021, in which he criticised abuses by the Moroccan security forces, called for the release of political detainees and accused the Moroccan government of oppressing and marginalizing free voices and failing to respond to the demands of the Moroccan people. He also warned against security forces' use of new technologies associated with Covid-19 passports for surveillance, in particular of human rights defenders and pro-democracy activists.

Rida Benotmane is held in conditions violating the absolute prohibition of torture and other ill-treatment. He has been kept in prolonged solitary confinement in a cell of around 2.5 by 1.8m in Arjate 1 prison in the city of Salé since his detention in September 2022. His parents told Amnesty International that these conditions weigh heavily on him psychologically, despite his attempts to keep up his morale and retain his dignity. He is only permitted to shower once a week, is isolated from other prisoners, and only allowed out of his cell for a maximum of half an hour per day to walk in a small courtyard accompanied by one other prisoner chosen by the prison administration. Unlike other prisoners, he is only permitted family visits once every 15 days for 15 minutes and with only two people at a time. He is only permitted to receive books and newspapers approved by the prison administration and is banned from having photographs of his wife. Rida Benotmane's lawyers asked for his provisional release, but the judges in the Rabat Court of Appeal rejected this request without providing any explanation. His verdict will next be reviewed by the Court of Cassation, Morocco's highest court.

I urge you to release Rida Benotmane immediately and unconditionally and quash his conviction and sentence as they stem solely from the exercise of his right to freedom of expression. Pending his release, he should be held in conditions meeting international standards for the treatment of prisoners and removed from solitary confinement. I further urge you to end the prosecution of and criminal investigations against journalists, bloggers, and human rights defenders for exercising their right to freedom of expression.

Yours sincerely,

### Take Action:

1. Write a letter in your own words or using the sample below as a guide to one or both government officials listed. You can also email, fax, call or Tweet them.
2. Click [here](#) to let us know the actions you took on Urgent Action 91.22. It's important to report because we share the total number with the officials we are trying to persuade and the people we are trying to help.

### Head of Government of the Kingdom of Morocco

**Mr. Aziz Akhannouch**

Palais Royale – Touarga

Rabat, Morocco

Twitter: @ChefGov\_ma ;

Facebook: @cg.gov.ma

Salutation: Your Excellency,

### Her Highness Princess Lalla Joulala

Embassy of the Kingdom of Morocco

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Twitter: @morocco\_usa

Please take action as soon as possible until April 25th, 2023. Please check with the Amnesty office in your country if you wish to send appeals after the deadline.

### Universal Declaration of Human Rights -- Article 19

**Everyone has the right to freedom of opinion and expression; this right includes freedom to hold opinions without interference and to seek, receive and impart information and ideas through any media and regardless of frontiers.**

## AIUSA Group 48

<https://aipdx.org>  
[www.facebook.com/aiustg48/](http://www.facebook.com/aiustg48/)

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## Amnesty International Applauds Michigan State Senate for Introducing New Common Sense Gun Laws

February 21, 2023 --Following the introduction of legislation in Michigan on background checks and extreme risk laws after the February 13 mass shooting on the campus of Michigan State University, Amnesty International USA's Program Director for Ending Gun Violence, Ernest Coverson, issued the following statement:

"The circumstances surrounding the recently proposed legislation from the Michigan State Senate are extremely unfortunate; however, this legislation is an important step toward preventing gun violence and ensuring that tragedies like the recent shooting at Michigan State University never happen again. Michigan legislators introduced over a dozen bills to curb gun violence in the state, such as universal background checks for all gun purchases and red flag laws that allow judges to confiscate guns from someone deemed a risk. While we commend the bold legislation from the Michigan State Senate, these bills would not have come without the activists and leaders long fighting on the ground in Michigan to protect their local communities."

"We urge Gov. Gretchen Whitmer to sign this package of gun safety bills as a commitment to the people of Michigan, to demonstrate that their state leaders are dedicated to creating laws that meet the needs of their constituents."

"While this package of bills is a crucial step in ensuring the safety of all Michigan residents, Amnesty International USA alongside the rest of the End Gun Violence Michigan coalition, is committed to remaining vigilant in the fight to ending this gun violence epidemic."

### NEW AIUSA's New Member Center is Coming!

For many years, members and staff have been working toward an update to the AIUSA Member Center. Coming mid-2023, we will have a new Member Center for communication, collaboration, and learning. The platform will serve the following purposes for members and activists:

- A communication platform to support collaboration across member networks, local groups, student groups, and member leaders. There will be issue- and region-specific "communities" to learn about the work, find resources, and connect with one another directly.
- An engagement platform An engagement platform to increase dialogue, debate, and consultation on AIUSA's culture and capabilities, governance (including resolutions and Board elections), and international policies.

- A repository for many organizational documents, discussions, and resources to support work with AIUSA that can be referenced historically.

The Member Center Working Group, which is a team of members and staff alongside a Board liaison, are working on a number of planning pieces to prepare for the launch of the Member Center in June 2023. This includes user groups, initial communities, moderation guidelines, interaction with the AIUSA website, and a training plan for new users.

## AI Group 48 Community Page

This month we inaugurate a new, occasional feature of the newsletter, where members share their thoughts on books, films, events or news related to issues of human rights. While it is our intention to highlight material that is in keeping with Amnesty's guidelines, these writings are the views of the writers, and should not be considered as official communications from the offices of Amnesty International. This month we feature a book review by Max White, long-time Amnesty member and Indonesia country specialist.

### King Leopold's Ghost A Review by Max White

I recommend King Leopold's Ghost by Adam Hochschild (Mariner Books, 1999). It describes what might be considered the first international human rights campaign. The sordid story of King Leopold, his exploitation of the Congo and slaughter of her people, illustrates an early instance of the inevitable human tragedy attendant on unchecked multinational profiteering.

Just before the end of the 18th century, Leopold of Belgium began an obsessive campaign to acquire a piece of the earth, a colony. He jealously noted that England, France, Holland and Portugal had successfully come into ownership of much of the world.

Greed. Leopold recognized that colonies were the source of great wealth. Dissatisfied with being monarch of a small and relatively minor country, Leopold mounted a decades-long campaign to acquire control of an enormous piece of real estate—the Congo. It was the Congo of Stanley and Livingston—both of whom are profiled. Through courting and flattering Stanley, the celebrity explorer, Leopold gained effective control of the Congo. Venal U.S. aristocrat Henry Shelton Sanford convinced the United States to become the first nation to recognize Leopold's claim on the territory. Ultimately Leopold came to control an enormous chunk of the earth, and exploited the Congo as his private enterprise, sharing it only symbolically with Belgium.

Terror. In the beginning, ivory was the source of most money which flowed to Leopold from Africa. Agents were lured to the territory by a system of commissions which encouraged slaughtering elephants wholesale. However, by a twist of technological fate, rubber ultimately became the mother lode. Rubber vines were tapped by Africans terrorized into slavery. A manual sent to agents described how to capture and hold the women of a village to force the men to gather

raw rubber. The system was controlled by a private army consisting of Africans dominated a few white officers. They burned villages and slaughtered villagers to show what would happen to any who resisted. Soldiers had to bring back severed hands to prove they had shot a human and not "wasted" a bullet on game. And so on. Numbers tend to numb us. But consider ten million persons killed in that gruesome heart of darkness to satisfy megalomaniac Leopold.

Heroism. Hundreds of missionaries, agents and others witnessed the holocaust authored by King Leopold. Only a minority spoke out against what they witnessed. The good news is that a few people devoted themselves to halting the torture and killing. Notable among them was young E. E. Morel, who analyzed what he saw, rubber unloaded from Leopold's ships at Antwerp, and what was sent back on the same ships (arms and ammunition). He surmised correctly that Leopold, who portrayed himself as humanitarian and enlightened, was becoming obscenely wealthy on slave labor and rampant terror-

ism.

Later, allies mounted a world-wide campaign to bring attention to the ongoing slaughter in the Congo. Ultimately their efforts paid off, inspiring participation of people as diverse as Mark Twain and the Archbishop of Canterbury. Leopold was disgraced into stopping his plunder and slaughter. For Amnesty activists, it is heartening to see how a few ordinary people were able to successfully stop a king. Unfortunately, two of the most effective activists went to prison for their efforts. Only one left prison alive.

*Editor's note: A documentary based on King Leopold's Ghosts, featuring Adam Hochschild, the author, can be seen on youtube here: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=8tSi4EZn-Kg&t=27s>*

