

AHMED MANSOOR

LOCKED UP FOR SPEAKING

TRUTH TO POWER

United Arab Emirates

WRITE
FOR
RIGHTS

AMNESTY
INTERNATIONAL



WRITE FOR RIGHTS

MORE THAN 20 YEARS OF WRITING
LETTERS THAT CHANGE LIVES

When just a handful of people unite behind someone, the results can be amazing.

Some 20 years ago, a small group of activists in Poland ran a 24-hour letter-writing marathon. Over the following years, the idea spread. Today, Write for Rights is the world's biggest human rights event.

From 2,326 letters in 2001 to more than 5.3 million letters, tweets, petition signatures and other actions in 2022, people the world over have used the power of their words to unite behind the idea that geography is no barrier to solidarity. Together, these individuals have helped transform the lives of more than 100 people over the years, freeing them from torture, harassment or unjust imprisonment.

Once again, this year's campaign features people from around the world, all connected because their human rights have been violated. Some by their governments, others by the police, or even big corporations. All because of who they are or because they simply exercised their rights. Together, we can fight for their rights. Through Write for Rights, they will receive personalized messages of solidarity from thousands of people across the globe. The awareness that their situations are gaining public attention offers reassurance to them and their families that they are not forgotten. And by writing directly to the authorities to demand they take immediate action to remedy injustice we can create a more just and equal world.

Alongside the letter-writing actions, Amnesty International speaks to those who have the power to change these people's situations, such as politicians in their countries. Write for Rights also gives visibility to these injustices through public events, and garners international attention on social media.

Individuals and groups featured in the campaign in previous years report the difference that these actions make, and often describe the strength they derive from knowing that so many people care about them.

Often, there is a noticeable change in the treatment of these individuals, and of other people and groups in a similar situation, by the country's authorities. Charges may be dropped and people released from detention. People are treated more humanely, and new laws or regulations addressing the injustice are introduced.

"From the bottom of my heart, this campaign has kept me alive, it's what has stopped them from killing me because they know that you are there"

Jani Silva,
environmental defender, 2021

BEFORE YOU START

This **human rights education activity** can take place in a variety of online or offline settings, such as a school classroom, a community group, a family or an activist group. As a facilitator, you can adapt the activity to best suit the context and group you are working with. For example, you may want to consider what knowledge the group already has about the issues discussed, the size of your group and how to best organize the activity to allow for active participation, the physical setting of your activity, delivering it in-person or online, and any limitations. When participants want to take action on a case, discuss whether it is safe for them to do so.

The activities are all based on **participatory learning methods** in which learners are not merely presented with information; they explore, discuss, analyse and question issues relating to the cases. This methodology allows participants to:

DEVELOP key competencies and skills

FORM their own opinions, raise questions and gain a deeper understanding of the issues presented

TAKE CONTROL of their learning, and shape discussions according to their interests, abilities and concerns

HAVE THE SPACE required for them to engage emotionally and develop their own attitudes.



Letter writing event in Antwerp, Belgium, for Write for Rights 2022.

Read about the people we're fighting for:
amnesty.org/writeforrights

Contact the Amnesty team in your country:
amnesty.org/countries

Tweet your support to
[@Amnesty](https://twitter.com/Amnesty) using the hashtag #W4R23

If you are not familiar with participatory learning methods, look at Amnesty International's **Facilitation Manual** before you start: amnesty.org/en/documents/ACT35/020/2011/en/

Amnesty International offers online human rights education courses, including a short course about human rights defenders which introduces the **Write for Rights** campaign: academy.amnesty.org/learn



YOUR WORDS ARE POWERFUL

ACTIVISTS ACQUITTED

After leading an anti-government protest in May 2020, Cecilia Chimbi, Joanah Mamombe and Netsai Murova were arrested, taken to a police station, forced into an unmarked car, and driven out of the city of Harare, Zimbabwe. They were subsequently beaten, tortured and left on the side of the road. While hospitalized, the women were charged with criminal offences relating to the protest. Later, they were also charged with communicating falsehoods and obstructing the course of justice, for speaking about their ordeal. Netsai fled Zimbabwe following the attack. After featuring in Write for Rights 2022, where more than half a million actions were taken on their behalf, Cecilia and Joanah were acquitted by the High Court on 4 July 2023.



© Amnesty International/Vongai Chikwanda/ Kuvanaah Moodley

FREED FROM DEATH ROW

Magai Matiop Ngong from South Sudan was just a schoolboy when he was sentenced to death on 14 November 2017 for murder. Magai recounted how he told the judge the death was an accident and that he was only 15 years old at the time. Yet Magai was tried for capital murder without any access to a lawyer. More than 700,000 actions were taken for Magai during Write for Rights 2019. In March 2022 the High Court agreed that, because he had been a child at the time, he should be released. Magai is now safely out of the country and determined more than ever to help people like him.



HUMAN RIGHTS DEFENDER FREED

Bernardo Caal Xol, a teacher and father, worked tirelessly to defend communities affected by hydroelectric projects on the Cahabón river, in northern Guatemala. In November 2018 he was sentenced to more than seven years in prison on bogus charges aimed at preventing his human rights work. During Write for Rights 2021, more than half a million actions were taken for Bernardo and, in March 2022, he was released from prison.



© Simone Dalmaso

ABOUT HUMAN RIGHTS

Human rights are the basic freedoms and protections that belong to every single one of us. They are based on principles of dignity, equality and mutual respect – regardless of age, nationality, gender, race, beliefs and personal orientations.

Your rights are about being treated fairly and treating others fairly, and having the ability to make choices about your own life. These basic human rights are universal – they belong to all of us; everybody in the world. They are inalienable – they cannot be taken away from us. And they are indivisible and interdependent – they are all of equal importance and are interrelated.

Since the atrocities committed during World War II, international human rights instruments, beginning with the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, have provided a solid framework for national, regional and international legislation designed to improve lives around the world. Human rights can be seen as laws for governments. They create obligations for governments and state officials to respect, protect and fulfil the rights of those within their jurisdiction and also abroad.

Human rights are not luxuries to be met only when practicalities allow.



Launch of Write for Rights 2022 in Lomé, Togo.



THE UNIVERSAL DECLARATION OF HUMAN RIGHTS (UDHR)

The UDHR was drawn up by the newly formed United Nations in the years immediately following World War II. Since its adoption on 10 December 1948, it has formed the backbone of the international human rights system. Every country in the world has agreed to be bound by the general principles expressed within the 30 articles of this document.

The UDHR itself is, as its name suggests, a declaration. It is a declaration of intent by every government around the world that they will abide by certain standards in the treatment of individual human beings. Human rights have become part of international law: since the adoption of the UDHR, numerous other binding laws and agreements have been drawn up on the basis of its principles. It is these laws and agreements which provide the basis for organizations like Amnesty International to call on governments to refrain from the type of behaviour or treatment that the people highlighted in our Write for Rights cases have experienced.

UNIVERSAL DECLARATION OF HUMAN RIGHTS



CIVIL RIGHTS AND LIBERTIES

Right to life, freedom from torture and slavery, right to non-discrimination.

- Article 1** Freedom and equality in dignity and rights
- Article 2** Non-discrimination
- Article 3** Right to life, liberty and security of person
- Article 4** Freedom from slavery
- Article 5** Freedom from torture



LEGAL RIGHTS

Right to be presumed innocent, right to a fair trial, right to be free from arbitrary arrest or detention.

- Article 6** All are protected by the law
- Article 7** All are equal before the law
- Article 8** A remedy when rights have been violated
- Article 9** No unjust detention, imprisonment or exile
- Article 10** Right to a fair trial
- Article 11** Innocent until proven guilty
- Article 14** Right to go to another country and ask for protection



SOCIAL RIGHTS

Right to education, to found and maintain a family, to recreation, to health care.

- Article 12** Privacy and the right to home and family life
- Article 13** Freedom to live and travel freely within state borders
- Article 16** Right to marry and start a family
- Article 24** Right to rest and leisure
- Article 26** Right to education, including free primary education



ECONOMIC RIGHTS

Right to property, to work, to housing, to a pension, to an adequate standard of living.

- Article 15** Right to a nationality
- Article 17** Right to own property and possessions
- Article 22** Right to social security
- Article 23** Right to work for a fair wage and to join a trade union
- Article 25** Right to a standard of living adequate for your health and well-being



POLITICAL RIGHTS

Right to participate in the government of the country, right to vote, right to peaceful assembly, freedoms of expression, belief and religion

- Article 18** Freedom of belief (including religious belief)
- Article 19** Freedom of expression and the right to spread information
- Article 20** Freedom to join associations and meet with others in a peaceful way
- Article 21** Right to take part in the government of your country



CULTURAL RIGHTS, SOLIDARITY RIGHTS

Right to participate in the cultural life of the community.

- Article 27** Right to share in your community's cultural life
- Article 28** Right to an international order where all these rights can be fully realized
- Article 29** Responsibility to respect the rights of others
- Article 30** No taking away any of these rights!

ACTIVITY

UNFAIR TRIALS AND TORTURE

KEY CONCEPTS

- Freedom of expression
- Arbitrary detention
- Unfair trial
- Torture and other ill-treatment

ABOUT THIS ACTIVITY

Participants will learn about freedom of expression and what happens when this right is violated, through the real case of Ahmed Mansoor who is being arbitrarily detained in dire conditions and in prolonged solitary confinement that amounts to torture. As part of the activity, participants are encouraged to write letters to the authorities in the United Arab Emirates (UAE) to demand his immediate and unconditional release and to show solidarity with Ahmed.

AGE: 14+

TIME NEEDED

60 minutes – you may want additional time for the **Take Action** section.

LEARNING OUTCOMES

Participants will:

- **explore** the importance of freedom of expression and the implications of it being violated.
- be able to **identify** what constitutes torture and other ill-treatment and how it relates to human rights.
- **learn** about Amnesty International's Write for Rights campaign.
- **write** letters in support of and showing solidarity with Ahmed Mansoor.

MATERIALS

- **Handout: Ahmed's story** (page 11)
- **Handout: Universal Declaration of Human Rights (UDHR) simplified version** (page 5)
- **Paper, pens and envelopes** (if sending letters)
- Optional: Video of Ahmed Mansoor: [amnesty.org/w4r-videos](https://www.amnesty.org/w4r-videos)
- Optional: Template letters from [amnesty.org/writeforrights/](https://www.amnesty.org/writeforrights/)

PREPARATION

- Print the handouts for each participant/group.
- Read the background information on page 10 and Ahmed's story on page 11.

MORE INFORMATION

- For more information on freedom of expression: [amnesty.org/en/what-we-do/freedom-of-expression/](https://www.amnesty.org/en/what-we-do/freedom-of-expression/)
- For more information on torture: [amnesty.org/en/what-we-do/torture/](https://www.amnesty.org/en/what-we-do/torture/)
- 20-minute course on Write for Rights: academy.amnesty.org/learn/course/external/view/elearning/145/write-for-rights-a-short-guide

PRECAUTIONS

This lesson plan discusses sensitive topics such as torture and other human rights violations. It may evoke strong emotional responses or be distressing for individuals who have experienced or are sensitive to such issues. Facilitators should provide a safe space for participants to express their feelings and should be prepared to offer support as needed, or research a verified resource to which they can direct participants for support if they are distressed by the topic.

1. POEMS OF EXPRESSION AND FREEDOM

Welcome participants and ask them to close their eyes and think for a minute about how they express themselves, their ideas and their concerns. Give them some prompts to organize their thoughts, such as:

- What are some of the ways that you like to express your ideas?
- Why is it important to be able to express yourself?
- How do you feel when you express your opinions?

Ask participants to write a short poem about how they express themselves or why freedom of expression is important. It could be in the form of a haiku, for example:

*"I speak my own truth
Words flowing like a river
Freedom in each drop"*

Alternatively, participants can draw a word cloud and write down key words in response to the questions posed.

After a few minutes, ask for some volunteers to share their poem or word cloud. Discuss the different themes and images that come up in the poems or word clouds.

 15 MINUTES

A **haiku** is a traditional form of Japanese poetry that consists of three lines. The first and third lines have five syllables each, and the second line has seven syllables.

Ask participants if they can think of a person who has expressed themselves and made a positive change in the world, but where their freedom of expression or the change they aspired to create was also met with resistance. Discuss a few examples, highlighting the specific outcomes these individuals experienced. This could include legal repercussions like imprisonment, fines or charges of defamation, as well as social repercussions like public backlash, threats or harassment.

Explain that we will be exploring the real-life case of someone who has been unjustly imprisoned and subjected to torture and other ill-treatment solely for exercising their right to freedom of expression to protest against government policies and to highlight violations of human rights. Explain that, to understand this case, we will look first at what torture means.

2. MYTH BUSTER – UNDERSTANDING TORTURE AND OTHER ILL-TREATMENT



15 MINUTES

Use the statements from the table below.

Read each statement out loud, one by one. After each statement, invite participants to indicate whether they believe it to be true or false. Encourage a few volunteers from both perspectives to share their reasoning. Provide a short explanation to confirm or debunk the statement after hearing from participants and before moving on to the next statement.

For participants to indicate whether they think a statement is true or false, you could use coloured cards (green for true, red for false), or ask them to move to different sides of the room (one side for true, the other for false).

STATEMENT	TRUE OR FALSE	EXPLANATION
<i>"Prolonged solitary confinement is considered torture."</i>	TRUE	The United Nations has stated that solitary confinement beyond 15 days can amount to torture due to the severe mental pain or suffering it can cause.
<i>"Some forms of torture are not that bad."</i>	FALSE	All forms of torture are inhumane and degrading. The severity doesn't negate the fact that it is a violation of human rights.
<i>"Only a handful of the worst governments use torture."</i>	FALSE	Torture is unfortunately used by many governments, not just the most oppressive ones. It is a global issue.
<i>"Torture can include acts that don't cause physical pain, like humiliation or threats."</i>	TRUE	Torture is not only physical pain, it can also be psychological, such as humiliation, threats or prolonged solitary confinement, causing severe mental suffering.
<i>"Inhumane prison conditions are not a form of torture."</i>	FALSE	Inhumane conditions, like overcrowding or a lack of sanitation or medical care, can constitute torture or other cruel, inhuman or degrading treatment.
<i>"Torture can be justified under certain circumstances."</i>	FALSE	Torture is never justified. It is illegal under international law, regardless of the situation or the intended goal. It is not permitted even in times of emergency.
<i>"Torture is used as a tool for discrimination."</i>	TRUE	Torture is disproportionately used against certain groups, such as political dissidents, ethnic minorities or marginalized communities, serving as a tool for discrimination and oppression.
<i>"Torture is an effective method for obtaining information."</i>	FALSE	Research shows that torture is not effective for obtaining reliable information. People under torture might say anything to stop the pain.
<i>"Torture victims can be socially and economically vulnerable people who are innocent and have committed no crime."</i>	TRUE	Anyone can become a victim of torture, including socially and economically vulnerable people. It is not limited to political activists, suspected criminals, or prisoners of war. Torture is often used on people who haven't been proven guilty of any crime.



15 MINUTES

3. SPEAKING TRUTH TO POWER – AHMED'S STORY

Hand out copies of **Ahmed's story** (page 11) and the simplified version of the **Universal Declaration of Human Rights (UDHR)** (page 5).

Divide the participants into small groups, give them a few minutes to read the two handouts and ask them to discuss Ahmed's story using the following questions:

- What shocks or surprises you about Ahmed's story?
- Which of Ahmed's human rights are being violated?
- How does his story relate to the right to freedom of expression?
- What happens when governments censor or silence people in that way?
- What should happen for Ahmed to receive justice?

Bring the participants back together and ask groups to share some of their findings and discussions. Take answers from a couple of people. You can use the **background information** (page 10) to help guide the conversation.

If this is the first time that participants have been introduced to the UDHR, you should first focus on building a shared understanding of what it is, using the information starting on page 4.

4. TAKE ACTION

Explain about Amnesty International's Write for Rights campaign. Explain that Amnesty International is encouraging people to demand justice for Ahmed Mansoor and call for his immediate and unconditional release. You can give examples from last year's campaign (page 3) demonstrating how successful writing letters and taking other actions can be, or watch this one-minute video from Moses Akatugba who was freed from death row thanks to the actions of people during Write for Rights 2014: youtu.be/8cU6EPY5r_c (available in English only).

If there isn't enough time for participants to take action within the time allowed, encourage them to organize how to do so afterwards or divide the actions among the groups. Encourage them to be creative.



15 MINUTES

Show participants the video of Ahmed which can be found here: www.amnesty.org/w4r-videos (available in English).



WRITE A LETTER

Encourage participants to write to the President of the United Arab Emirates using the contact information on the right.

- Tell the president something about yourself to make this a personal letter.
- Tell him what shocks you about the case of Ahmed Mansoor.
- Tell him why you think it is important that governments respect and uphold the right to freedom of expression.
- Tell him that **Ahmed Mansoor must be immediately and unconditionally released, as he has been imprisoned solely for his peaceful human rights activism.**

For the best chance of the president seeing your letters, please also take photos of them and post the photos on Twitter and Instagram, tagging the president.

President of the United Arab Emirates

Sheikh Mohamed bin Zayed
Al Nahyan

Send your letter via the UAE embassy in your country.
If your country does not have a UAE embassy, send it via the UAE embassy in a country near you.

Salutation: Your Highness

Twitter / X: [@MohamedBinZayed](#)
Instagram: [@mohamedbinzayed](#)

Hashtags: #FreeAhmed #W4R23

SHOW SOLIDARITY

Show Ahmed that you believe in him. Send him your message of solidarity and hope. Be creative! Then post your message to the address to the right.

Some tips:

- Say where you are sending your messages from, to show Ahmed and his family how far and wide they are supported.
- Your message could include poetry (perhaps the poems from the first exercise) as Ahmed is also a poet.
- It is advised that no religious messages be sent.

Ahmed speaks Arabic and English. Here is an example message to include:

You are not alone (English)

أنت لست وحدك (Arabic)

Please post photos of your cards and letters for Ahmed on social media, so his family can see them.

Ahmed Mansoor

c/o Ms S.F.
Gulf Centre for Human Rights
P.O. box 245
Saida
Lebanon

Twitter / X: [@Ahmed_Mansoor](#)

Hashtags: #FreeAhmed #W4R23

BACKGROUND INFORMATION

FREEDOM OF EXPRESSION

In many countries it is dangerous to speak in support of human rights and expose the truth about violations. Instead of addressing pressing concerns and promoting dialogue to find solutions to injustice, abuses and discrimination, governments often respond by stigmatizing and cracking down on critical voices, peaceful protesters and human rights defenders. Since 2011, the UAE authorities have mounted an unprecedented crackdown on the rights to freedom of expression and association in the country. The space for dissent has shrunk severely and many people, both Emiratis and non-Emiratis who have criticized the UAE authorities, government policies or the human rights situation in the country have been harassed, arrested, tortured or otherwise ill-treated, or subjected to unfair trial and imprisonment.

Many governments abuse their authority to stifle criticism and silence peaceful dissent by passing laws criminalizing freedom of expression. Critical speech, dissent and protest are routinely censored, punished or otherwise obstructed, online as well as offline. This is often done in the name of counterterrorism, public order, national security or religion. But respect for human rights is part of national security and public order, and the right to freedom of expression is protected under international human rights law.

The right to freedom of expression applies to ideas of all kinds and protects the ability of people to protest even if their message might be considered offensive, shocking or disturbing. Any restriction on these human rights must be legal, proportional and necessary.

TORTURE

Torture is when somebody in an official capacity inflicts severe mental or physical pain or suffering on somebody else for a specific purpose. Sometimes authorities torture a person to extract a confession for a crime, or to get information from them. Sometimes torture is simply used as a punishment that spreads fear in society.

Torture methods vary. They can be of a physical nature, like beatings and electric shocks. They can be of a sexual nature, like rape or sexual humiliation. Or they can be of a psychological nature, like sleep deprivation or prolonged solitary confinement. Amnesty International's research shows that torture can happen to anyone – petty criminals, people from ethnic minorities, protesters, student activists, and people who were simply in the wrong place at the wrong time. It is most often poor and marginalized people who get beaten, humiliated or raped by police and other officials when there is no one to protect them or hear their cries for help.

Under international law, torture and other forms of ill-treatment are always illegal. They have been outlawed internationally for decades. The existence of various definitions of torture and other ill-treatment under international law can be confusing, but there are common elements to most definitions of torture, namely:

- Torture results in physical and/or mental pain or suffering serious enough to be considered severe.
- Torture is inflicted intentionally.
- Torture is inflicted for a purpose or on the basis of discrimination.
- Officials are involved, either directly or indirectly, in the infliction of torture.

The prohibition of torture and other ill-treatment is absolute, meaning that there can never be any justification for subjecting a person to torture or other ill-treatment. It is also part of what is known as customary international law. This means that it is legally binding on all states, regardless of whether or not they have signed the treaty that contains the prohibition. But many states have failed to criminalize torture as a specific offence in their national laws, and governments around the world continue to defy international law by torturing people. Between January 2009 and May 2013, Amnesty International received reports of torture in 141 countries, from every region of the world.

AHMED'S STORY

United Arab Emirates

Ahmed Mansoor is a loving father and husband. He's a poet, blogger and human rights defender. Right now, he is locked away in a cell in al-Sadr prison, Abu Dhabi, in the United Arab Emirates (UAE). He spends his days in an isolation cell, with no access to books, pens or paper. He does not even have a bed.

His crime? Speaking the truth. Before his arrest, Ahmed was one of the few voices within the UAE providing the rest of the world with credible independent information about human rights violations in the country. He regularly raised concerns about the detention, torture and unfair trials of dissenting voices. He spoke about problems with the justice system and of domestic laws that breach international ones.

For this Ahmed is paying a high price. In March 2017, UAE security forces raided his home and arrested him. For over a year, no one, not even his family, knew where he was detained. In May 2018, Ahmed was sentenced to a decade in prison on charges including "insulting the UAE and its symbols".

Protesting about his prison conditions, Ahmed has twice resorted to hunger strikes, losing dangerous amounts of weight and putting his life at risk. Despite this he is only allowed outside three times a week, when guards remove all other prisoners from the yard and Ahmed spends the little time he has in the sunlight, alone.



© Martin Ennals Foundation



© Private



© Private

Top: Ahmed Mansoor.

Middle: Families wait outside the Federal Supreme Court, Abu Dhabi, to catch a glimpse of their detained relatives.

Bottom: Sketch of a typical solitary confinement cell in the secret detention facilities in the UAE.



ABOUT

AMNESTY INTERNATIONAL

Amnesty International is a movement of 10 million people which mobilizes the humanity in everyone and campaigns for change so we can all enjoy our human rights. Our vision is of a world where those in power keep their promises, respect international law and are held to account. We investigate and expose the facts, whenever and wherever abuses happen. We lobby governments as well as other powerful groups such as companies, making sure they keep their promises and respect international law. By telling the powerful stories of the people we work with, we mobilize millions of supporters around the world to campaign for change and to stand in the defence of activists on the frontline. We support people to claim their rights through education and training.

Our work protects and empowers people – from abolishing the death penalty to advancing sexual and reproductive rights, and from combating discrimination to defending refugees' and migrants' rights. We help to bring torturers to justice, change oppressive laws, and free people who have been jailed just for voicing their opinion. We speak out for anyone and everyone whose freedom or dignity are under threat.

© Amnesty International 2023

Except where otherwise noted, content in this document is licensed under a Creative Commons (attribution, non-commercial, no derivatives, international 4.0) licence.

<https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc-nd/4.0/legalcode>

For more information please visit the permissions page on our website: www.amnesty.org

Where material is attributed to a copyright owner other than Amnesty International this material is not subject to the Creative Commons licence.

First published in 2023
by Amnesty International Ltd
Peter Benenson House,
1 Easton Street
London WC1X 0DW, UK

September 2023
Index: POL 32/7065/2023
Original language: English

All images © Amnesty International
unless otherwise stated.

Cover photo: © Martin Ennals
Foundation

amnesty.org

WRITE FOR RIGHTS

AMNESTY
INTERNATIONAL

