

## AI Controversy : Not worth amnesty

Sunday 21 March 2010, by [DRISCOLL Margarette](#) (Date first published: 21 March 2010).

### **Gita Sahgal, who questioned Amnesty International's links with Islamic radicals, fears for her safety**

Amnesty International has made its name as a champion of free speech, campaigning on behalf of prisoners who have spoken out against oppressive regimes around the world. But when it comes to speaking up about the organisation itself, the story is quite different. Recently, Gita Sahgal, head of Amnesty's gender unit, was suspended after she told The Sunday Times of her concerns about Amnesty's relationship with Cageprisoners, an organisation headed by Moazzam Begg, a former Guantanamo detainee.

Since his release in 2005, Begg has spoken alongside Amnesty at a number of events. Sahgal felt the relationship between Amnesty and Cageprisoners, which appears to give succour to those who believe in global jihad, was a threat to Amnesty's integrity. "To be appearing on platforms with Britain's most famous supporter of the Taliban, whom we treat as a human rights defender, is a gross error of judgment," she wrote to Amnesty's leaders.

Now Sahgal fears for her own and her family's safety. She rang human rights lawyers she knew and all have declined to help citing a conflict of interest. "Although it is said that we must defend everybody no matter what they've done, it appears that if you're a secular, atheist, Asian British woman, you don't deserve a defence from our civil right firms," says the 53-year-old grandniece of Jawaharlal Nehru.

Apparently, no one in the human rights world wants to cross swords with Amnesty. "I know the nature of what I'm up against," she says. "I didn't do what I did lightly."

She is feisty, unrepentant and by no means without support: we meet, for instance, in an office lent to her by a family friend of Peter Benenson, the lawyer who founded Amnesty in 1961. "People are shocked," she says. "There is a lot of disquiet in the organisation and that's been quite heartening."

Amnesty and Begg have joined issue. "Amnesty International works with Moazzam Begg as a former detainee of Guantanamo Bay and as a victim of the human rights violations," said Claudio Cordone, Amnesty's interim secretary general. "Moazzam Begg has never been tried or convicted of any terrorism-related offences and has publicly rebutted accusations against him in this respect."

Cordone objected to people like Begg being subjected to "trial by media", but part of Sahgal's point is that human rights organisations have to be super-scrupulous about the people they choose to support. In his autobiography, Begg describes becoming interested in Islamic politics in his twenties and later running a bookshop that stocked Islamist writing. He travelled to Bosnia and Afghanistan and admits giving money to Muslim combatants, but denies being involved in any fighting.

In 2001, he took his wife and children to live in Afghanistan to fulfil a dream of being a teacher. He helped to establish school with sections for boys and girls and installed water pumps. When the

allied attack on Afghanistan started later that year, the family fled to Pakistan, where Begg, now 42, was picked up.

In his book, he says the Taliban were better than anything Afghanistan had had in the past 25 years. "I was talking about something I believed at the time," he says now. "That is what I understood from my knowledge of the country, that there had been no law and order, there had been warlords that had taken over the country, children used as sex slaves, drug production was very high and the Taliban put a stop to all this. It was the best of the worst."

He believes it is right to be talking to the Taliban now. Says Begg: "Ultimately, what we're doing now as part of our foreign policy is we're talking to the Taliban, we are engaging with the Taliban, the people we've been demonising for the past nine years, and that is precisely what we did in Northern Ireland. "I've never said we should give the Taliban money, that is what the government is doing. But we need to be engaging with people who we find most unpalatable. So the dialogue with the Taliban is something I not only welcome, but something I have been saying for a long, long time."

As for human rights abuses committed by the Taliban, Begg says: "I've seen them because I lived there. But I've seen Americans commit more human rights abuses, I can promise you. But I haven't said we shouldn't talk to the Americans."

He counters Sahgal's view by saying she is a fundamentalist: "She advocates the government shouldn't even be engaging with the Muslim Council of Britain. It's not a normal position." And he rejects her description of him as Britain's most famous supporter of the Taliban: "That is a ridiculous thing to say. I have toured the country with former US soldiers several times... that doesn't seem to be a very Taliban al-Qaeda thing to do, does it?"

The bigger picture is how human rights organisations and society more widely should view Islamic radicals. There has been much debate over whether, spurred by a sentimental knee-jerk anti-Americanism, white liberals have sympathised with Islamic radicals, thereby implicitly tolerating their intolerance, particularly towards women. "For me that's a form of racism," says Sahgal, "because what it does is wipe out the experiences of the people they oppress. And it's not helped by a discourse about a 'clash of civilisations', which elides jihadi ideologies and treats them as normal Muslim thinking. That's devastating for ordinary Muslims."

If the men incarcerated in Guantanamo were white fascists, she says, "I hope we would defend them. We would have to defend them, but we wouldn't necessarily put them on 50 or 100 platforms after that." The problem, she believes, is that human rights organisations want to believe they represent "perfect victims".

"But a victim can also be a perpetrator," she says. "It's a very simple thought."

**By Margarette Driscoll**

---

**P.S.**

\* From The Week, March 21, 2010:

<http://tinyurl.com/yksmu9t>