

Europe Solidaire Sans Frontières > English > Movements > Human Rights & Freedoms  
(Movements, World) > Non-State Actors (Movements, World) > **“Defensive Jihad not antithetical to Human Rights” says Amnesty (...)**

# **“Defensive Jihad not antithetical to Human Rights” says Amnesty International: Rights Activists Respond**

Tuesday 6 April 2010, by [ABEYSEKERA Sunila](#), [Amnesty International](#), [CHHACHHI Amrita](#), [CORDONE Claudio](#), [HOSSAIN Sara](#), [Human Rights For All](#) (Date first published: 1 April 2010).

## Contents

- [AMNESTY INTERNATIONAL’S \(...\)](#)
- [Initiators of “The Global \(...\)](#)

## **PRESS RELEASE**

April 1, 2010

Amnesty International responds to the global petition and a response from the petitioners

In a letter in response to the Global Petition to Amnesty International, the Secretary General of Amnesty International makes a shocking and incredible claim that “Defensive Jihad not antithetical to Human Rights”. If this is the official position of the world’s leading human rights organisation, this would gravely undermine the future of the human rights movement.

The rationale and call for ‘defensive jihad’ runs through many muslim fundamentalist texts. It is precisely ‘defensive jihad’ that the Taleban use to legitimise its anti human rights actions such as the beheading of dissidents, attacks on minorities, attacks on schools and religious shrines and the public lashing of women. A similar logic based on ‘defence of religion’ is used by the Christian right to justify the killing of doctors providing abortion services as well as by Hindutva fundamentalists to justify their violent attacks against Muslims and Christians in India.

We are revealing and making public (see documents below) the full text of the letter received from secretary General of Amnesty international in response to the ‘Global Petition to Amnesty International: Restoring the Integrity of Human Rights’ and also the Response sent by Initiators of Global Petition

The highlights of the response sent to Amnesty International by Initiators of Global Petition are:

\* Endorsement of the concept of ‘defensive jihad’ by an organization such as Amnesty International calls into question its commitment to research the ideological underpinnings of acts of terrorism and its commitment to the eradication of discrimination on the basis of sex/gender and religion.

\* In the present climate, within the mainstream human rights world, a serious challenge is being posed to the principles of universality and equality by a host of concessions to ‘traditional values’ and ‘cultural rights’.

\* Amnesty International should make public the following information - Investigative research which

informs decisions on partnerships and alliances:

o What process of investigation was carried out to determine whether Moazzam Begg was a suitable partner for Amnesty International?

\* Allow real internal debate and give individuals within Amnesty International including at the level of National Sections, the right to act according to their conscience and to exercise their freedom to dissent.

\* *Released to the media by Human Rights For All Campaign* (Press Release URL: <http://www.human-rights-for-all.org/spip.php?article53>)

“They came first for the Communists, And I didn’t speak up because I wasn’t a Communist; And then they came for the trade unionists, And I didn’t speak up because I wasn’t a trade unionist; And then they came for the Jews, And I didn’t speak up because I wasn’t a Jew; And then... they came for me... And by that time there was no one left to speak up.” —Martin Niemöller

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## **AMNESTY INTERNATIONAL’S RESPONSE TO “THE GLOBAL PETITION TO AMNESTY INTERNATIONAL: RESTORING THE INTEGRITY OF HUMAN RIGHTS”**

28 February 2010

AMNESTY INTERNATIONAL INTERNATIONAL SECRETARIAT

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Ref: OSG 2010.010

Dear Amrita Chhachhi, Sara Hossain and Sunila Abeysekera

The petition circulated on 13<sup>th</sup> 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 counterterrorism. 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-Taleban 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 Taleban 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,

**Claudio Cordone**

**Secretary General** (ad interim)

*\* Letter from Claudio Cordone, Secretary General of Amnesty International Full Text original in PDF  
Date: 28 February 2010 - PDF - 101.7 kb (Located at: <http://tinyurl.com/ybd2ep5>)*

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## **Initiators of “The Global Petition: Restoring The Integrity of Human Rights” Respond to Amnesty International**

To,  
Claudio Cordone  
Secretary General (ad interim)  
Amnesty International International Secretariat  
Peter Benenson House, 1 Easton Street  
London WC1X 0DW, United Kingdom

29 March 2010

Dear Claudio,

Thank you for your letter of February 28, responding to the Global Petition to Amnesty International launched by us on February 13, 2010.

Our response is on behalf of ourselves, as the three initiators of the Petition. Given the public debate that the Petition has generated, we will make this response, as well as your letter to us, public in the interests of clarifying our position further.

We appreciate the fact that you acknowledge the importance of our concerns. As you have seen, a significant number of individuals and organizations from around the world, well known for their commitment to human rights and to the principle of universality of rights, have signed in support of the petition (see list below). The list of signatories represents a wide range of geographic and sectoral identities, and continues to grow every day. Some of the signatories are also taking the debate forward in other arenas. This is an acknowledgement of how critical the issues raised in the petition are in the present juncture and how deeply this controversy has touched the core of our commitment to the universality of human rights.

Through the Global Petition, we placed on record our concerns regarding the alliance between Amnesty International and Cageprisoners, which seems to us to have the potential to seriously undermine AI's commitment to the principles of equality, in particular gender equality, and to a genuinely intersectional analysis of discrimination. It is with some alarm, therefore, that we see that Amnesty International has, since the controversy that evoked our concerns first emerged, continued to respond to the issues raised by Gita Sahgal, by us and by other concerned actors, with no clarification on the questions of principle that we raised through the Petition.

The three of us who initiated the petition are South Asian women and human rights defenders who have for many years confronted a range of challenges posed to democratic institutions and human rights values, in our region and throughout the world, by religious extremists who deny the equality of women and minorities and espouse an overall anti-democratic authoritarian agenda. On many occasions we have partnered with Amnesty International and other national and international human rights organizations to work collectively to advance the principle of all human rights for all. We respect the work of Amnesty International and have excellent relationships with colleagues working within AI at the international and local levels. All of us have at one moment or the other actively supported the various campaigns launched by AI to

defend the rights of victims of torture, of women and other communities that face discrimination and violence because of their status or identity.

It is this experience and these relationships that form the basis on which we articulate our concerns.

You are correct in saying that the central point of the present controversy relates to the policies and frameworks used by AI to determine the nature and limits of its partnerships and alliances.

In our Petition we have voiced concerns regarding the alliance between Moazzam Begg and CagePrisoners and AI, using this case as an example of the potentially treacherous waters that lie in wait for any human rights defender or organization that fails to clearly and publicly state the basis on which decisions are made regarding partnership. Unfortunately this and other issues raised in the Global Petition are far from resolved. In fact, we are concerned that in seeking to clarify its position, Amnesty International has continued to shy away from the fundamental questions of principle raised by us and by others who have been involved in the discussions on these issues. As women's rights and human rights defenders working in environments in which all forms of extremism and identity-based politics dominate our region, we are consistently called upon to define boundaries and draw lines of engagement that call for investigation and for stringent and rigorous criteria to be put in place that do not allow for the trade off of one set of rights for another. We welcome your recent call for an inquiry into allegations of the UK government's involvement in human rights abuses like renditions, unlawful detention and torture overseas. Victims of violations committed by states in abusive counter-terror operations need justice and accountability. So too do victims of terrorism, especially in circumstances where several states and non-state actors with transnational networks might be involved. As human rights defenders we consider it our obligation to monitor such situations with the utmost care and ensure that what is considered to be 'strategic' does not become 'opportunistic'.

What we call for in the Petition and what we wish to reiterate in this letter is the imperative today for the public accountability of an organization such as Amnesty International.

The South Asian region is in a vortex of conflict and we are affected by this as well as by positions taken by international human rights organisations in relation to such conflicts. It is hence very important that Amnesty International respond to all who have expressed their concerns regarding this controversy and clarify AI's position. We wish to reiterate here that this issue is relevant not only within but beyond the South Asian or even Asian region, as is borne out by the experiences of colleagues and fellow human rights defenders in Africa and other regions. We are hence extremely concerned and shocked by the double standard being applied by Amnesty International - in response to the objections raised by Sam Zarifi, director of Amnesty's Asia-Pacific program to associating with Begg, Widney Brown is quoted in the article in *The Nation*, April 5, 2010 as saying, "Sam's view was that, no, he was not the right person for [our South Asia campaigns]. He raised the concern, and he was heard." On what basis can you justify an alliance on such an issue that is legitimate in Europe and not in South Asia?

We must also state here that this is NOT the first time that we and many others have raised our concerns regarding the partnerships established by international human rights groups, including Amnesty International, with groups that are considered to be misogynist and inimical to women's rights and minority rights. On previous occasions similar concerns were raised by other signatories to the petition, for example, with regard to alliances made by Amnesty International with those supporting fundamentalist armed groups from Algeria.

In the present climate, within the mainstream human rights world, a serious challenge is being posed to the principles of universality and equality by a host of concessions to 'traditional

values' and 'cultural rights'. The most recent resolution on the 'defamation of religion' at the Human Rights Council is but one example that strengthens our concerns in this area. We believe that Amnesty International, as a leading opinion-maker in the human rights arena, has a particular responsibility at this point in time to clarify its rationale and criteria for partnership, in particular the principled reasons which formed the basis on which it decided to enter into a partnership with CagePrisoners and Mr. Begg.

Regretfully your response does not provide clear answers and in fact has raised even more critical and troubling questions elaborated below on which we request you to respond further:

### **1) The concept of 'defensive jihad':**

We believe that the question you raise in your letter as to whether the concept of 'defensive jihad' is antithetical to human rights, and your categorical statement that the response of Amnesty International to this question is 'NO', raises very serious concerns.

We are dismayed by this statement. Our considered opinion is that this is a highly contentious issue and not one which can be answered as firmly as you have done. The call for 'defensive jihad' is a thread running through many fundamentalist and specifically 'salafi-jihadi' texts. It is mentioned by Abdullah Azzam, mentor of Osama bin Laden, and founder of Lashkar e Tayyaba.

It is the argument of 'defensive jihad' that the Taleban uses to legitimise its anti human rights actions such as the beheading of dissidents, including members of minority communities, and the public lashing of women. It is a similar logic of 'defence of religion' that is used by Christian groups to justify the killing of doctors providing abortion services as well as by Hindutva organisations seeking to justify their actions to 'liquidate' Muslims and Christians in India.

In your own organization, research done by Gita Sahgal and others for the last two years into the complex intersection between the preservation of the universality of human rights, terrorism and counter-terrorism in general as well as in relation to this specific case provides enough evidence of doubt and hence the need to proceed with caution. This is essential in order to maintain the integrity of human rights and indeed of the organisation in each and every campaign as well as in each region it works. It has been shown that 'defensive jihad' results in indiscriminate attacks on civilians, attacks which are disproportionate and attacks which are targeted for the purpose of discrimination such as those on schools, shrines and religious processions. As you know, international humanitarian law prohibits all such attacks under Common Article 3 of the Geneva Conventions. Given this it is shocking to us that in your letter you appear to endorse 'defensive jihad' as a public position of Amnesty International position. Any human rights defender or organisation, which pledges commitment to the universality of human rights cannot confuse resistance against oppression with espousal of a political ideology committed to indiscriminate use of violence. Endorsement of the concept of 'defensive jihad' by an organization such as Amnesty International would call into question its commitment to research the ideological underpinnings of acts of terrorism and its commitment to the eradication of discrimination on the basis of sex/gender and religion.

Clarification of Amnesty International's position on the concept of 'defensive jihad' is extremely urgent. In particular, the following questions must be addressed:

1. On what grounds did you decide that 'defensive jihad' and its aims are not antithetical to human rights?
2. Can you elaborate your examination of both the ideology of 'defensive jihad' and acts



committed in its name for compliance with international humanitarian law, human rights law and international criminal law?

3. On what opinions did you rely? Which experts were consulted?

## **2) Investigative research which informs decisions on partnerships and alliances**

We also seek clarity regarding the manner in which Amnesty's own investigation into the human rights credentials of CagePrisoners and Mr. Begg was carried out. Even if the process is confidential, it is important for Amnesty International to give a full account of its findings and of the evidence thrown up by the research. In your letter you refer to certain websites and to public statements by the concerned individuals themselves. We call upon Amnesty International, as an organization, to make public the following information:

1. What process of investigation was carried out to determine whether Moazzam Begg was a suitable partner for AI?
2. If the response is based simply on Begg's public statements, please explain why you find these persuasive in themselves, and not needing any confirmation from any other source?
3. Which experts did you consult in order to make your judgement?

With reference to Mr. Begg, you put forward the argument of AI's reluctance to 'betray the basic principle of fairness'. We too would like to reiterate our own commitment to this principle and point out that in fact our appeal to AI is to act with fairness in this case.

It is also in the interests of 'fairness' that we call on Amnesty International to open up spaces for internal dialogue and debate within the organization both at the level of national sections, with other human rights organizations, and within the International Secretariat in London regarding the questions raised by Gita Sahgal.

## **3) Continued suspension of Gita Sahgal**

As Gita's colleagues in the global movement of women human rights defenders, we also remain gravely concerned regarding her continued suspension. We cannot concur that making public her concerns undermines her work or indeed that of AI. In fact, Gita's speaking out has created a space to begin a critically important public debate on the issues she has raised.

We understand that Gita decided to go public only when she felt that her concerns were not being addressed adequately within the organization. Indeed, as you state in your letter, she and others have raised the issue within the organisation several times in the last two years. If you say that AI values her contribution to the work of AI in the area of gender, human rights and counterterrorism,

it would be only fair to respect the right to be heard, not only in respect of Gita, but also others within Amnesty International who have also raised their concerns in this regard, in respect of this particular case of CagePrisoners and Moazzam Begg, and throughout the debates on issues of counter-terrorism and human rights. It is unfortunate that now Amnesty International is making public statements discrediting her work. Although all this raises considerable concern, we still hope that you will be scrupulous in your internal processes to ensure that she has a fair hearing.

We call on you to allow real internal debate and give individuals within the organisation including at the level of National Sections, the right to act according to their conscience and to

exercise their freedom to dissent. We call for the reinstatement of Gita Sahgal and an independent public inquiry into the concerns she has raised.

We are glad to note your affirmation that AI 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. It is exactly the basis and reasoning used by AI to make the above distinction that we are calling on you to make known to us, and to the public, as supporters of Amnesty International and much of its work.

We hope that AI can respond to our concerns in a manner that establishes a principled and transparent framework for making decisions regarding partnerships and alliances, moving beyond a focus on any specific individual or organization. We hope and expect that Amnesty International will act in a manner that could reaffirm its commitment to universality of human rights and enable continuation of the important work it has done in many areas for so many years.

**Amrita Chhachhi**  
**Sara Hossain**  
**Sunila Abeysekera**

*On the Global Petition:* List of prominent signatories, see [World Wide Outcry To Make Amnesty International See Reason and Make Amends](#)

\* *Response to Amnesty International from the Initators of the Global Petition Full Text original in PDF* Date: 29 March 2010 - PDF - 152.5 kb (URL: <http://tinyurl.com/ydmet8g>)

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