

AMNESTY INTERNATIONAL: FILMMAKERS ARE AN IMPORTANT PILLAR TO AN OPEN SOCIETY

By Kaleem Aftab



Markus N. Beeko

Amnesty International is a non-governmental organisation focused on fighting human rights abuses, bringing torturers to justice, changing oppressive laws and freeing people jailed just for voicing their opinion. Founded in 1961 with its headquarters in the United Kingdom, the global movement has sections in more than 60 countries and more than seven million members.

Markus N. Beeko is the Secretary General of the German Amnesty Section. The German human rights activist has been working for Amnesty International in managerial functions in Germany and internationally since 2004. He has regularly been a member of the jury for the Amnesty International Film Award at the Berlinale. The award, presented since 2005, went this year to David France's **WELCOME TO CHECHNYA**.

Why is it essential to help filmmakers around the world?

I want to acknowledge and pay respect to filmmakers in particular and artists in general. Amnesty, as a human rights organisation and as a movement, is very much aware of the value and the progress filmmakers who are speaking truth to power bring to societies. They take risks when highlighting human rights issues to the public. Filmmakers act to get stories about human beings and human rights across in a way we wouldn't be able to do with a report. Filmmakers tell stories about people we can't imagine, or wouldn't ordinarily identify with, and make us realise that while we are all different, we are all human beings. That bridges a lot of prejudice and is an important pillar to an open society.

Filmmakers, like journalists, and other artists, dare to say or show things which those in power might not like raised. They look behind the curtain. They know what it means to exercise that freedom of expression – article 19 [of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights]. It's why often in societies when human rights are challenged, artists are targeted first.

How do you go about helping filmmakers?

Amnesty was founded around supporting prisoners of conscience: people jailed because they speak up and defend human rights, exercising their rights peacefully. Be it a musician, filmmaker, journalist or trade unionist – we generally don't separate – when someone is prosecuted for defending human rights and expressing themselves, we step up. Amnesty focuses a lens on artists whose rights are being violated, who are detained or tortured, presenting what is happening to them. We get active on their behalf when we get knowledge of a case.

What action can you take?

We have urgent actions that we raise if somebody is under immediate threat to be executed or tortured or has forcefully disappeared. An urgent action means people across the globe who are with Amnesty or follow Amnesty get a call to action. In most cases, they will get active on behalf of the person in danger, raising the issue with the authorities who are responsible for the human rights violation.

Then, at the same time, we as an organisation can use our channels to protest. Right now, I'm in Berlin, when an Iranian filmmaker in Tehran is being prosecuted or is at risk, I get in touch with the Iranian Embassy to raise this, and I would also get in touch with the German government. If the German government has a delegation meeting with the Iranian government or they are doing a state visit, we would inform them about people who are at risk so they can take this up with the Iranian government.

So, these are different ways of raising awareness. One method is information and public awareness, and another is behind-the-scenes – silent diplomacy. We can also help by making sure detainees get legal support and by supporting the family because if somebody is detained, it is probably the person making the financial income.

How did Amnesty get involved in the case of Ukrainian filmmaker Oleg Sentsov?

For people detained for a more extended period, we also encourage our supporters to reach out to the person who is in prison or to their family. We did this for Oleg Sentsov, the Ukrainian filmmaker, who was detained in 2014 and was released in September 2019. Upon release, he wrote us a letter, which we shared with people active on his behalf writing to the authorities, and to the many people who wrote to him. He left prison carrying a suitcase full of letters. Sentsov thanked people in his message and said it was so crucial for him to know that people are aware of what was going on. They were giving him faith and hope.



Director David France (second from right) was awarded the Amnesty International Film Award at the Berlinale 2020 for his documentary WELCOME TO CHECHNYA by Amnesty jury members Anke Engelke, Maryam Zaree and Sebastian Schipper (Berlin, February 29, 2020)
Photo courtesy Amnesty International, Photographer: Henning Schacht

When can Amnesty become active in a case?

Amnesty only gets active if we are in touch with the family or relatives or the person or their lawyers to make sure that anything we do is with consent and that the person concerned believes it to be for their good.

Before we get active and we call a government, or we ask people to get active, we need number one to make sure that we have the facts right. One thing is to get the information from lawyers of the people, and we have sources where we could double-check.

It is different depending on the circumstances. People get in touch with us because they receive death threats. Sometimes, someone might be taken into custody for a day or two and questioned, or part of their family is interviewed and then released. If there are filmmakers and their movies are being censored, we generally publish a report about censorship and freedom of expression in the country. Still, we wouldn't be able to get actively involved with single films. In Iran or China, for instance, filmmakers are not arrested, but the authorities try to build pressure by questioning them or trying to prevent them from working and making films. They keep their passports or make it difficult for foreign financing to help with their projects. They can be stigmatised. This is also enough for us to get involved if they get in touch with us.

How do people get in touch?

There are many ways how people can get in touch with us at our regional offices. Of course, in countries like China or Iran or North Korea, where we cannot have an office, our researchers are in touch with people in the civil society there, with lawyers, with journalists, with other organisations which are on the ground. And people can call them anytime.

How do you work with film organisations?

We also communicate with groups like the European Film Academy or the German Film Academy, and this also helps to exchange information with colleagues who would know when a filmmaker is in trouble. Across the globe, we support the Human Rights Film Festival (in Hong Kong), and at the Berlinale we also present the Amnesty International Film Award. So, we try to interact with filmmakers; we do screenings of films that raise human rights issues and also, from time to time, we create educational material around films for work in schools. We also try to use screenings to create information events. For instance, at the Berlinale, we, together with the festival, have often used the opportunity to stage protests or create petitions. We did this for Oleg Sentsov and some Iranian filmmakers. It's good to reach out to the filmmaking community, to those viewing films and a larger group of society. Together we are stronger.

Why do you think forming the International Coalition for Filmmakers at Risk is a good idea? How will Amnesty work with the Coalition?

We see across the globe that governments oppressing fundamental rights and freedom of expression are more and more targeting anybody who dares to speak up or raise their voice in a way those in power dislike. And filmmakers, like other artists or journalists are therefore increasingly at risk. That's why this Coalition is so important. Amnesty is looking forward to raising our joint voices for filmmakers and standing in solidarity with them and their families.

Polymath Kaleem Aftab is a writer, festival strategist and film programmer based in London. Sometimes, he even produces too.