

Amnesty International celebrates 50th anniversary in Edinburgh

To mark Amnesty International's 50th anniversary, Scottish campaigners, artists and politicians will be raising a 'Toast to Freedom' at an Edinburgh event on Wednesday 1st June.

Speaking at the event will be Jack Mapanje, writer, poet and academic, who was imprisoned without trial or charge by the Malawian government in 1987. His case was highlighted by Amnesty International, who together with many prominent Scots, including the late Scottish parliamentarians Donald Dewar and John Smith, Janey Buchan, then MEP, and author, James Kelman, campaigned successfully for his release. He was freed in 1991.

In speaking about his arrest, imprisonment and eventual release, Jack Mapanje said:

'News of my arrest got to a friend at York University who passed the information on to Amnesty International. That's what saved my life. What the authorities used to do was arrest you and put you in prison without telling anyone. Then they monitored the radio stations to find out if anybody was talking about it. If nobody was, they could kill you.'

'Amnesty and other organisations sent letters of protest almost every week to the Malawian government. They didn't forget about me – and so many Scots were involved in that campaign. I will never forget what they did and Scotland holds a very special place in my heart.'

On his release, Jack Mapanje was invited by John Smith to a civic reception in Edinburgh ... for haggis.

Jack Mapanje is one of 50,000 individual cases Amnesty International has campaigned for since it began in 1961. Its formation followed the publication of a newspaper article 'The Forgotten Prisoners' by British barrister Peter Benenson in which he highlighted the plight of political prisoners who had been jailed around the world.

In an impassioned plea, he coined the term 'prisoner of conscience' and called for like-minded people across the world to unite in an appeal for amnesty on their behalf. The response was immense, and within weeks Amnesty International, a coordinated movement of ordinary people standing up for justice, had been born.

The Edinburgh event will also be an opportunity to look back at half a century of human rights campaigning, as well to look forward to the next 50 years and what that means for the people of Scotland and around the world.

John Watson, Programme Director of Amnesty International in Scotland, said:

"Half a century on, the same feelings of outrage which moved Amnesty's founding members to act against injustice are still proving to be powerful catalysts for our millions of members and supporters.

"There have been many successes over the last half century, holding governments to account and highlighting injustice in all corners of the world. We have achieved so much but, as we see with the treatment of those fighting for human rights in countries across the Middle East and North Africa, there is so much more to do.

"We must also remain vigilant about what is going on in our backyards. As our recent campaign on Scottish Gypsy Travellers shows, prejudice and discrimination occurs here at home as well as in countries on the other side of the globe."

“If the bad news is the world still needs Amnesty, the good news is Amnesty is going strong.”