

Amnesty International

Group 524

January 2020

Next Meeting: Tuesday, January 21 – 7:00 p.m. – Providence Heights

Write for Rights 2019: Hundreds of Letters!

On Monday, December 9th, dozens of human rights activists from all around the Pittsburgh area got together at Calvary Episcopal Church in Shadyside for Group 39's annual Write for Rights event. Working from case materials distributed by AIUSA, we wrote hundreds of letters to government officials in ten different countries, with copies to the appropriate embassies in DC. The ten target countries were: Belarus, Canada, China, Egypt, Greece, Iran, Mexico, Nigeria, Philippines, and South Sudan.

During the event, our group made Amnesty merchandise available for sale to the participants. As he does each year, John Belch managed the sale, which raised \$145 to help cover the postage for the letters written that night.

Meanwhile, at Providence Heights, Sister Bernie managed an effort which produced 60 letters. Working from their homes, other members of our group contributed additional letters to Amnesty's worldwide Write for Rights campaign. That campaign concludes this month, with one more letter-writing opportunity, on the Iran case. See Pages 2-4 for details.

January 21st at Providence Heights

Heading the agenda for our group's January 21st meeting is good news about the release of one of our Vietnamese prisoners, **Tran Thi Nga**. She and her children are now in Atlanta! See Pages 5-6 for photos and a news story.

The January meeting will be the first for our group since the death of one of our long-time members. **Sister Maura Anne Dunn** died on December 26th, at the age of 90. She was a dear soul, beloved by all who knew her, and we miss her.

Amnesty International Group 524

Meeting Schedule: Third Tuesday of the month, at 7:00 p.m.

Meeting Location: Providence Heights
9000 Babcock Blvd., Allison Park, PA 15101



Contact John Warren (jf.warren@verizon.net or 412-766-2506) for more information on material in this mailing, or visit the Amnesty USA website (www.amnestyusa.org) or the website of Amnesty International Group 39 (amnestypgh.org).

Write for Rights 2019: Iran – Yasaman Aryani and Monireh Arabshahi



Here are **Yasaman Aryani** and her mother **Monireh Arabshahi**, photographed at a train station before they began their protest on International Women’s Day 2019.

As shown in the video captured below, they removed their head coverings and then walked slowly through the train, distributing white flowers to the other passengers, speaking about the hope that women might gain the freedom to decide on their own what they should wear.

For committing this “crime,” Yasaman has been sentenced to 16 years in prison. Her mother is also a prisoner. See the next page for Amnesty’s description of the case.



Write for Rights 2019: Iran – Yasaman Aryani and Monireh Arabshahi (continued)

A white flower generously shared, a scarf gently removed: two simple gestures that **Yasaman Aryani** dared to make on a public train in Iran. It was International Women’s Day 2019 and Yasaman, an actor who loves mountain climbing, stood up to Iran’s forced veiling laws in a brave act of defiance.

With her mother, she walked through a women-only train carriage, hair boldly uncovered, as she handed out white flowers. She spoke of her hopes for a future when all women would have the freedom to choose what to wear, so that one day they could walk together “me without the hijab and you with the hijab”.

These moments, captured on video, went viral in March 2019.

On 10 April, Iran’s authorities arrested Yasaman, holding her alone in a cell for days while interrogators questioned her. They told her to “confess” that foreign elements were behind her activism and to “repent” her actions.

If she didn’t, they said, they would arrest her friends and family. On 31 July, Yasaman learned to her shock that she had been sentenced to 16 years in prison. She must serve at least 10 years.

Yasaman’s cruel punishment is part of a wider crackdown on women campaigning against forced veiling laws in Iran. Since 2018, dozens of women, including Yasaman’s mother, **Monireh Arabshahi**, have been arrested.

The Iranian authorities must not be allowed to rob Yasaman of the best years of her life – simply because she believes women should have the right to choose what they wear.



Write for Rights 2019: Iran – Yasaman Aryani and Monireh Arabshahi (continued)

Along with the Write for Rights case materials, AIUSA provided this model letter.

Head of the Judiciary, Ebrahim Raisi
c/o Permanent Mission of Iran to the UN
Chemin du Petit-Saconnex 28
1209 Geneva, Switzerland

Dear Mr. Raisi,

Yasaman Aryani and her mother, Monireh Arabshahi, were sentenced to a shocking 16 years in prison for campaigning against discriminatory forced veiling laws. They were arrested in April 2019 in relation to a video that showed them without headscarves on a women-only train, handing out flowers on International Women’s Day. This brave act, where Yasaman spoke of her hope for a future when all women in Iran would have the freedom to choose what to wear, was shared in a video that went viral on social media.

I urge you to release Yasaman Aryani and her mother Monireh Arabshahi, immediately and unconditionally, as they are prisoners of conscience, jailed solely for their human rights work. Until they are released, please ensure that they have regular contact with a lawyer of their choosing. I also urge you to stop criminalizing the work of women’s rights defenders and abolish forced veiling laws.

Yours sincerely,

cc: Iranian Interests Section
Embassy of Pakistan
2209 Wisconsin Avenue NW
Washington, DC 20007

Vietnam: Tran Thi Nga has been Released!

Last fall, Kathy Herbst (our group's case coordinator) obtained from AIUSA an additional prisoner case for our group to work on. She received the case documentation for a Vietnamese prisoner of conscience named **Tran Thi Nga**.

Katy then prepared this introductory paragraph about our new prisoner:

Tran Thi Nga is a Prisoner of Conscience, sentenced to nine years imprisonment in 2017, to be followed by five years of house arrest. She was a prominent activist in the aftermath of the environmental disaster caused by the industrial waste spill at the Formosa Steel plant. She took part in demonstrations in Hanoi and used social media to urge the government to help local communities. In response, she was arrested for her "propaganda against the state."

Our first action on the case was a petition to the prime minister, which Kathy brought to our October meeting. The petition was then adapted into a model letter, which was included as a letter-writing opportunity in the November newsletter.

This month, our group would have resumed work on the case, but now we have learned that **Tran Thi Nga** has just been released from prison! According to the report below, her freedom was contingent on accepting exile in the United States. She and her two children landed safely in Atlanta, and were welcomed by members of that city's Vietnamese community.



Vietnam: Tran Thi Nga has been Released! (continued)

The international organization Reporters Without Borders published the story of her release on January 10th. They picked up the story from a Vietnamese-language website.

Vietnamese Blogger Released But Forced into Exile

Reporters Without Borders (RSF) is extremely relieved by Vietnamese blogger Tran Thi Nga's release after three years in prison, but regrets that she has been forced to live abroad and that she will be cut off from her family.

Released on condition that she leave Vietnam immediately, Tran Thi Nga boarded a flight for the US city of Atlanta today with her two children, the SBTN news website said. The United States had granted her asylum.

After her arrest at her home in the northern province of Ha Nam in January 2017 for posting information about the situation of migrant workers, she had to wait five months before seeing her lawyer. She was sentenced in July 2017 to nine years in prison followed by five years of probation on a charge of "anti-state propaganda" under the Vietnamese penal code's notorious Article 88.

She has always refused to recognize her guilt. She told her husband in August 2018 that she was being subjected to psychological torture, death threats, and physical violence by fellow inmates and prison guards.

"We are deeply relieved to learn of the release of Tran Thi Nga, who was convicted at the end of a sham one-day trial, but it is unacceptable that she has been forced into exile and will not have the right to return to her country to see her family," said Daniel Bastard, the head of RSF's Asia-Pacific desk. "We urge Vietnam's trade partners, above all the United States and the European Union, to continue to press the Vietnamese authorities to release other unjustly detained bloggers."

Long near the bottom of RSF's World Press Freedom Index, Vietnam is ranked 176th out of 180 countries in the 2019 Index.



Tran Thi Nga and family's arrival to Atlanta, Georgia. Source: BPSOS