

Fighting to free the victims of injustice

Over the past ten years, the Shrewsbury group of Amnesty International has sent thousands of letters campaigning for the release of prisoners of conscience.

With just 15 regular members, it's a small group, but the effects of its work are felt globally.

Once of their recent campaigns – for the release of British man Mirza Tahir Hussain – hit the national headlines. They had been working for months, with Amnesty International branches in Britain and across the world, to help Mr Hussain escape a death sentence and last November it was announced that he was to be freed after 18 years in a Pakistani jail.

Mr Hussain was convicted in 1989 of murdering a taxi driver, something he always said was in self-defence, but Amnesty International insisted his trial was 'unfair' and saw the case as a breach of human rights.

Roy Dolton, a member of Amnesty International for more than 20 years, says about the prisoner of conscience campaigns: "It does not work every time but it works in quite a good way. We might have letters to go to four or five prisoners of conscience on the stall in the town at a time."

Roy, 76, says their successes make their hard work worthwhile: "We do feel like we are making a difference because we get letters from prisoners of conscience who are released and are thankful for their lives."

The current Shrewsbury group, which was formed ten years ago, meets every month in the Hobbs Room in the town's library. It has 15 to 20 members who attend regularly, but there are around 200 people who belong to the group in Shropshire.

The work of the group stretches further than prisoners of conscience, with members also involved with Stop Violence Against Women and Control Arms campaigns. Roy says: "Amnesty International is widening its remit these days. Primarily, it was about prisoners of conscience but now they are delving into things like violence against women", Roy says.

Widespread ignorance

At the end of 2005, the branch called for the public to support their campaign following a poll by ICM research, which group members say showed widespread ignorance of the extent of rape.

And Roy says a new survey by ICM Research of 16 to 20 year olds, published this month, showed that 42 per cent of young people knew girls or young women whose boyfriends had hit them, and 40 per cent who knew girls coerced or pressurised into having sex.

"These are things that we are working on within the Shrewsbury Group" says Roy.

They are now pressing the Government for more action to combat rape and sexual violence. The group is also supporting an Amnesty International Control Arms campaign, and want to fight poverty, conflict and human rights abuses which they say are brought about by the lack of control over the arms trade.

Fundraising is another important aspect of the group's work, and money raised by them is always sent to the charity's headquarters. Once a month the group has a stall outside the Unitarian Church on High Street, Shrewsbury, where donations are collected and petitions can be signed. The next stall will be on February 17.

Every year members sell Christmas cards in the town centre, and Shrewsbury College of Arts and Technology has been involved in designing the cards which will be sold in 2007.

Roy said: "When I joined there were things happening and when I started I wanted to be doing something. I suppose we like to see a bit of justice in the world. This campaigning is happening not just here but all over the world. We just hope that there will be an effect."

Prisoners of conscience

One way people interested in the work of Amnesty International can help is by signing up to a scheme organised by the group to get more letters sent out to campaign for prisoners of conscience.

Members are able to write letters on behalf of others who don't have the time, in return for a £10 donation. For this, ten letters a month are written by group members on their behalf.

To join the letter writing campaign, people are asked to send a cheque for £10 made payable to 'Amnesty International Shrewsbury Group' to Ian L'argent, 2 Red Barn Lane, Shrewsbury, SY3 7HR.

The next meeting of Amnesty International is on Tuesday, February 6 at 7.30pm when the topic of discussion will be the Stop Violence Against Women campaign.