

## Let us not forget tortures

By George Kosmopoulos, Head of Amnesty International Greek Office



It has been over forty years since the Athens Polytechnic uprising that contributed decisively to the fall of the seven year military dictatorship (junta) in Greece. Amnesty International, a 6-year-old organization only then, immediately mobilized and rushed to the side of the junta political prisoners. In 1975, people who were "adopted" by Amnesty International as prisoners of conscience, with different social and political background but with the same faith in human rights, founded the Greek office of Amnesty International. Our first president was Amalia Fleming.

### "22 methods of torture"

Already in 1967, an urgent mission to Greece was organized and visited the country for the first time on December 30. Initially, access to detention facilities was not allowed but our investigators spent four weeks taking statements. The findings confirmed the worst fears of the organization. The delegates of the organization, Antoni Marreco and James Beckett, thanks to the courage and determination of certain victims, recorded the situation.

In [the first report](#) published in January 1968, they stated that "*despite the climate of fear especially among those who were released and could indicate how they were tortured, despite the extreme difficulty and time necessary in making contact, 16 people testified that they had been tortured*". The delegation obtained and cross-checked 32 more names of people who were imprisoned and claimed to have been tortured.

In the same report, 22 different methods of torture were mentioned and a few paragraphs concentrated the horror of torture as described by the victims: the torment of the phalanga, women's sexual torture, electric shocks and psychological tortures. Furthermore, the report did not hesitate to name the alleged torturers at Bouboulinas Street [ where the Athens

Police Station headquarters were situated] and elsewhere: Inspector Lambrou, Mallios, Babalis, Karapanagiotis and others.

Kitty Arsemi would later [describe](#) her meeting with our delegation:

*" [...] I was notified that they were in Greece, an Amnesty International delegation has come that is searching for testimonies by people who had actually been tortured. And I was told, do you want to go, can you, can you bear to go? And I bore it and went. This was Amalia Fleming's house, who was also encircled by riot police and surveillance. And there were two members of Amnesty International, Marreco and James Beckett".*

The publication of the investigation caused a stir across Europe while similar denouncements were published in the international press and by other organizations.

The organization insisted and Marreco returned to Greece in March 1968. Under the pressure of world opinion, he was given for the first time access to facilities and prisoners. On March 28, he went to Bouboulinas street. He described the "roof" and had a conversation with Andreas Lentakis. Marreco noted that he had *"little doubt that the man had suffered extreme brutality."*

He also visited the prisons of Aegina and Averoff where he talked to other prisoners. He also confabulated with S. Pattakos, who denied everything. The investigator insisted on the credibility of the witnesses and highlighted the imminent threat of the expulsion of Greece from the Council of Europe. *"Let them throw us out,"* replied the dictator, something that would not take long to happen.

[The second Amnesty International report](#) was published in April 1968 and consolidated to the world public the belief that tortures were taking place in Greece.

### **"Adoption" of political prisoners and the expulsion from the Council of Europe**

The mobilization of Amnesty International remained constant throughout the dictatorship. Consecutive letters and "noise" so that the prisoners' voice is not forgotten. "Adoption" of hundreds of them as prisoners of conscience, many of whom were released. Moreover, the organization sent observers to trials which were characterized as parodies and financially supported the victims' families. The national offices of the organization in other countries took action: letters of support and protest and when, in 1972, the then Secretary General of the organization addressed an international appeal for the release of political prisoners, all national sections simultaneously published the names of 356 prisoners. [Among them](#), Chronis Missios, Alekos Panagouli, Sakis Karagiorga and many others.

The contribution of Amnesty International to the ostracism of the country from the Council of Europe (CoE) was crucial especially with regards to tortures. The investigators of the organization presented all their findings in detail directly to the CoE. As Kitty Arsemi, a key witness to CoE, narrates again:

*“ [...]a mobilization begins abroad, initiated by the Scandinavians who accused Greece of human rights violation at the Council of Europe. At this point, there was collaboration with Amnesty International. Amnesty International submitted the collected statements , most of which were anonymous” .*

The country was in essence expelled from the Council of Europe in December 1969, although it had typically withdrawn shortly before this, which practically confirmed the fact that it did not fulfill the fundamental principles of human rights and the values shared by the Council's members.

As a result of its insistence on victims' vindication and the torturers' conviction, the organization sent observers again to [the torturers' trials that followed](#) and urged the authorities to try all the torturers and to deconstruct the mechanism that led to such tortures.

### **What are we doing today?**

40 years after the fall of the junta, the call for eradication of torture and ill-treatment all over the world continues to inspire us.

In Mexico, Nigeria, Morocco and the Philippines, even often in Greece, [people are being mistreated and tortured](#). In 2014, Amnesty International launched a campaign for the permanent elimination of the use of torture and other forms of inhuman ill-treatment, which, according to our latest research, [remains a reality](#) in at least 141 countries around the world - basically, almost all countries where the organization operates.

Amnesty International is now 51 years old, a global movement with more than 2 million members and supporters and 5 million activists. And although much has changed, what unites us with the investigators, who established the tortures in Greece, is the same spirit of independence from governments, religions, impartiality and methodical work, the same principles and stubbornness to defend the human dignity of every human being.

Unfortunately, the same deep economic crisis which affects the Greek society has also influenced the Greek office of Amnesty International. It could not be otherwise, anyway, since the Greek office, steadfast to the principles that characterize the entire organization, is based almost exclusively on the economic contribution of members and supporters.

Despite the difficult times for the Greek society, it always and exclusively counts on the financial support of all those who, with few or more money, personal volunteer work or any other means will enable it to cope with the difficulties and continue its mission: to keep the flame that has been burning in Greece for almost 40 years alive, and deliver it strong to the next generation

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