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# Amnesty & Mandela

Amnesty International adopted Nelson Mandela as a "forgotten prisoner" following his arrest and conviction in 1962 for alleged passport violations. In 1964 he spoke in his own defense at the famous Rivonia Trial and explained why he had chosen to organize an underground army (MK) and plan a campaign of violence directed towards the end of overthrowing the apartheid regime. Mandela's open avowal of choosing to use violence to further political ends caused a split within the ranks of Amnesty International, which at the time was very much smaller than it is now. One group advocated continuing to work unconditionally for Mandela's release, while the other urged that AI should adhere to its own principle and restrict its efforts for unconditional release only to those political prisoners which they termed "prisoners of conscience" -- those who had neither used nor advocated violence. This would exclude Mandela from POC status, but would enable AI to continue to work on his behalf in terms of fair trial, and against the possibility of the death penalty.

This issue was debated at length at the 1964 congress in Canterbury England, and it was decided there in favor of the second position -- that is, not to make an exception for Mr Mandela. I would recommend that readers interested in the details and in the early history of Amnesty International should get ahold of a copy of Egon Larsen's --A Flame in Barbed Wire -- (New York: W.W. Norton, 1979). By the way, Amnesty International takes no official position on the justification of the use of violence. It only makes a distinction between those political prisoners who do and do not use or advocate its use as concerns its internal program of action on their behalfs.

President Mandela has long since acknowledged that Amnesty made its decision in good faith, and has thanked the organization for its work on behalf of thousands of other South African prisoners and detainees. On his first visit to America following his release he met with a group of AI members in Detroit who presented him with an Amnesty International T-shirt. I have a picture of him wearing this T-shirt and waving on the wall of my study.

So those of you who would like to raise this old chestnut again would do better to think twice about doing so. Wouldn't it be wiser to devote our attention to the world's current spate of human rights violations?

Morton Winston  
Amnesty International USA, Board of Directors/South Africa  
Coordination Group

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From: "Arthur R. McGee"  
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Editor: [Ali B. Ali-Dinar](#)

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