

# Human Rights Groups Are Riding a Wave of Popularity

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UNITED NATIONS, N.Y., Feb. 27— Human rights activists, after years of being ignored or disdained as cranks, are riding a wave of popularity because of President Carter's focus on the rights issue. They say the experience is at once exhilarating and unsettling. "Human rights is suddenly chic," says Roberta Cohen, executive director of the International League for Human Rights. "For years we were preachers, cockeyed idealists or busybodies and now we are respectable."

The 34-year-old league as well as Amnesty International and the International Commission of Jurists are the principal organizations accredited by the United Nations that regularly report on their investigations of political repression and torture.

The league is the only group with headquarters in the United States and one whose concerns range broadly over the whole spectrum of rights, including arbitrary arrest, detention without trial, genocide, slavery, denial of free speech and religious persecution.

All groups say they are experiencing an upsurge in public interest since President Carter embarked on a declared policy of upgrading human rights in the shaping of foreign policy and taking such steps as sending a personal reply to Andrei D. Sakharov, the Soviet physicist and civil rights advocate.

The league, which is operating out of a crowded three-room office near the United Nations, has been inundated with appeals alleging violations of their rights, says Miss Cohen, who worries that the new attention is leading to rising expectations that may not be fulfilled.

## League Set Up in World War II

She leafs through a pile of letters, some written in Spanish, French or Russian. On an annual budget of \$50,000, the league has a full-time staff of two, but recently it has had assistance from interns supplied by the Ford Foundation.

While it formerly had to go searching for volunteers, there now are offers aplenty. "Lawyers, physicians, poets and students are calling," Miss Cohen says. "Everybody wants to get into human rights. That's fine, but what happens if they get bored?"

The league was established by Roger Baldwin, the civil liberties advocate, and a small group of like-minded men and women, after the Nazis destroyed human rights groups in Europe. Mr. Baldwin remains active at 93, serving as its honorary president.

Amnesty USA, an affiliate of the London-based organization, is also swamped with requests for information about its works or inquiries about membership, says David Hawk, the executive director.

"What's happened is that the public at last is learning about the growing use of torture and political imprisonment," he says. "People want to find out what they can do about it."

The 15-year-old organization has more restricted interests than the International League for Human Rights, but has won a reputation for its reports on those imprisoned unjustly because of nonviolent beliefs, ethnic identity or religion. In London, the organization maintains a research staff of 41, whose members can work in 21 languages and collect and analyze data culled from many sources, including visits to prisons and talks with the families of victims.

## Cluster of Evidence Required

Amnesty considers that it has verified information only when it has used a "cluster of evidence," says Prof. Andrew Blane of City University, who is the first American to serve on its nine-member executive committee. Some of its findings, such as an estimate of 50,000 prisoners in Indonesia, have been criticized as exaggerated by the



Roberta Cohen, executive director of International League for Human Rights, in office in New York City.

State Department, but its report that torture is used as government policy in more than 60 countries is generally believed. An updated report on torture is in preparation.

The Commission of Jurists is based in Geneva and maintains a New York office. Operating without a network of contributors like Amnesty's, the commission taps a panel of 50 attorneys for the inquiries it has made of the trials and treatment of political prisoners and has turned out reports on Iran, southern Africa and Uruguay. William J. Butler, president of the commission's American Association, is currently completing an inquiry on the Philippines under martial law.

Measured against the output of reports, the dispatch of investigatory missions and the lobbying activities by rights advocates, the number of individuals actively involved is surprisingly small.

The human rights community is a tightly-knit group, as was demonstrated recently when Jerome J. Shestack, the president of the League for Human Rights, presided over a private strategy session. Almost everyone was on a first-name basis and exchanged opinions and experiences with the easy familiarity of men and women who long have labored together on a common cause.

## Long Identified With Movement

Many of the older activists have long been identified with the civil liberties movements of the 1930's and 40's. Younger ones, such as Amnesty's David Hawk, who is 33, were active in the racial integration marches in the South in the 60's.

Edward Kline, a New York businessman, is associated with the League and Amnesty but concentrates on his own field of interest as editor of the Chronicle of Human Rights in the Soviet Union.

Mr. Butler, before going on his mission to the Philippines, spent a week with Roger Baldwin camping out in the Virgin Islands and passing the time "bird-watching and philosophizing about human rights as we have done together for 25 years."

Thomas E. Quigley of the United States Catholic Conference is convinced that President Carter's actions are paying off in such developments as the release of some political prisoners in Latin American countries. He says Paraguay's freeing of detainees recently was a direct outcome of the Carter policy and the pressure exerted by church groups on behalf of the prisoners.

"It's a new day," he says. Although he acknowledges that there is a danger that the aroused public concern will fade as a passing fad, he insists that

## Quotation of the Day

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even that possibility should not detract from the progress now being made.

The church groups in Latin America, in particular, have underpinned the rights organizations by supplying data not otherwise available. They brought out a fifth volume last month further documenting the disappearance of 435 persons in Chile, whose Government says it has no knowledge of their fate.

The Rev. William Wipfler of the National Council of Churches is less sanguine than most rights advocates about the prospects. The release of some Paraguayans who have been held almost 20 years is no more than a token, he says. Those freed included 11 mothers with 17 children but there are hundreds still in jail.

Mr. Wipfler last year submitted data to a Congressional committee on scores of prisoners he said were in Nicaraguan jails. The information, describing torture by starvation, beatings and electric shock, was recorded on six sheets of toilet tissue smuggled out of the jail.

## U.S. Computer Sales Seen as Aid

He has sought to call attention to a practice being adopted by internal security agencies in Argentina, Chile, Paraguay and Uruguay of pooling information on suspected dissidents, saying that this was being made easier by the purchases of American computers.

He and Mr. Butler of the Commission of Jurists are among civil rights advocates who express frustration with the ineffectual procedures the United Nations has used for dealing in secrecy with the thousands of letters of appeals that come in each year alleging violations.

Although sifting of the petitions has shown a pattern of gross violations in at least 20 cases, no country has been publicly called to account by the Human Rights Commission because of what Mr. Butler says is the "club of governments" fearful or unwilling to allow investigations.

The Commission of Jurists is casting



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David Hawk, executive director of Amnesty USA, an affiliate of London-based Amnesty International.

about for alternatives such as encouraging Caribbean countries to form their own regional councils on human rights and, with the Ford Foundation, will sponsor a conference this year.

Meanwhile the groups say they have not much choice except to continue to testify before Congress, keep up their investigatory activities and submit their evidences to the United Nations. "We will make it long, weighty and sweaty," promises Mr. Wipfler.