

Necessity - the mother of invention

the story of the first UA is retold to a meeting of UA coordinators in Brazil

Brazil, 9 December 1995; as Latin American Urgent Action coordinators gather in São Paulo for a regional meeting, there are three extra names on the guest list: Luiz Rossi, María José Rossi and Tracy Ulltveit-Moe. Over the next two days, the trio will transport the meeting back to a time, more than two decades ago, when their lives became inextricably linked.

São Paulo, Brazil, the night of 15 February 1973; heavily armed military police force their way into the home of Luiz Basilio Rossi, Professor of Brazilian History at São Paulo University, and without explanation, take him away into the darkness. Now, more than 20 years on, he tells the gathered UA coordinators how, "At the time, many people were being arrested for political reasons and tortured to death or "disappeared", and I had a real fear that this would happen to me too."

The security forces return to the house, surround it and even nail boards across the front door to prevent the professor's wife, María José, and three young daughters from telling the world what has happened. "We couldn't get out of the house", recalls María José, "not even out to the street, so I had to write a note to a neighbour without the police seeing." Via a back window and the neighbour's young daughter, the message is passed to a priest, who in turn passes it on to the Bishop of Lins.

On the other side of the world - not yet "shrunk" by computers, faxes and e-mail - a small organization called Amnesty International has for

some time been receiving disturbing reports from Brazil telling of brutal state torture. The organization's existing action techniques - with their cautious concentration on prisoners of conscience (POCs) - are beginning to seem hopelessly inadequate in the face of these horror stories. Tracy Ulltveit-Moe was AI's Brazil researcher in 1973. She remembers: "We invited one of our Brazilian contacts, who was in Paris at the time, to come to London and meet with myself and Martin Ennals, then Secretary General. We spent the entire weekend discussing the problem and concluded that what we needed was a quick action for prisoners in danger, irrespective of the POC issue. I suggested the name "URGENT ACTION", and the title stuck." More than that - a technique which over the next 23 years and beyond would spawn millions of appeals on behalf of thousands of individuals in many countries, was born.

By now the Rossi family's smuggled message has reached London where it finds Tracy at AI. The case of the Brazilian

professor abducted by the military in the middle of the night is set to become AI's first "Urgent Action". Details are typed up and, on 19 March 1973, using names selected from a "shoe box" of handwritten address cards, the UA is mailed out, requesting immediate appeals in order to save the professor from torture and possible "disappearance" or death.

Two weeks later, María José receives a telegram ordering her to come to the military police (DOPS) headquarters in Sao Paulo to "identify her husband's body". On arrival, however, she gets a glimpse of her husband alive! She is also shown a pile of letters. María José still remembers how the DOPS Director told her "Your husband must be a more important person than we thought, because we've got all these letters from all over the world". She is forced to sign a letter stating that Luiz is alive and well and not being tortured, and that the international action should stop. The authorities send the fake letter to AI in London.



Tracy Ulltveit-Moe, María José Rossi and Luiz Rossi

However, as María José now tells: "When I got home I immediately wrote another letter to AI, telling the real story, that Luiz had been tortured, but that several hundred protest letters had arrived which I believed had saved his life." Two decades on, she remains firmly convinced of this: "In my opinion, the intervention of AI was fundamental in saving Luiz from further torture and worse. I got the impression from the DOPS Director that he and the authorities were feeling under great pressure from AI - pressure to produce the prisoner, to show him, because he was getting so much publicity. Moreover, we were heartened to know that people outside Brazil knew what was going on, that they cared, and that they were prepared to do something about it. It gave us great comfort and hope. I and my family felt lonely and frightened and kindness from outsiders helped enormously."

Tracy, too, recalls the events with clarity: "I have a very clear memory of the case - in AI they say you never forget your first prisoner! When we received María José's second letter, we were overjoyed and very emotional to think that the Urgent Action had worked and that Luiz was safe".



In São Paulo: Vera Monteiro, Tracy Ulltveit-Moe, Monica Hummel, Carlos Idoeta, together with María José and Luiz Rossi

Luiz himself believes that the international appeals were crucial: "The torturer aims to isolate you, to cut all your links with the outside world. But AI was able to break that isolation. ...Once the authorities know that other people know you're there and what's happening to you, they are forced to be more careful about how they treat you... When I saw my wife, I knew that my case had become public, I knew they could no longer kill me. Then the pressure on me decreased and conditions improved."

After his release, the family left Brazil and eventually settled in Belgium. When they

returned to Brazil years later, María José helped to set up an AI Health Professional's Network and was a founding member of the AI group in Brasilia where they now live.

São Paulo 10 December 1995, Human Rights Day: the latest chapter in the story of the first UA closes with Professor Rossi, by now wearing a British Section UA T-shirt, hugging everyone goodbye as he leaves the meeting: "I am an example of your success and a symbol of the importance of continuing your work. And I will write an Urgent Action appeal anytime - how can I refuse!"

The meeting in Sao Paulo on 9-10 December, attended by UA coordinators from Brazil, Chile, Costa Rica, Ecuador and Peru, was the first such gathering in Latin America. As such, delegates were keen to meet their counterparts from the region, to identify and solve common problems, and to learn something new about UA work in other countries. Subjects discussed included:

- improving speed of receipt of UAs and response to them, use of information technology;
- improving the quantity and quality of appeals, training of appeal-writers;
- UAs and target sector work;
- more systematic use of UAs as part of theme and country campaigns;
- establishing and maintaining regular contact between UA coordinators in the region.

As a result, it is hoped to establish a small regional newsletter, and a first draft is being prepared by the Peruvian Section. Other immediate results include two more sections, Brazil and Peru, agreeing to participate in the WARN (Uruguay has also joined since). All Latin American Sections will be able to receive EXTRAs soon, although a few technical problems remain to be resolved.

The presence of Luiz and María José Rossi was very special, and will not be forgotten by delegates. Also of great interest was the other guest speaker, the newly-appointed Police Ombudsman for the State of São Paulo, Benedito Mariano. Special thanks go to Brazil UA Coordinator Monica Hummel for organizing the meeting.