

Thank you for your generous welcome.

It is an honour to speak to you as part of Amnesty International's Freedom Week.

Today we join with many around the world to applaud and support human rights defenders.

More personally, I want to thank Amnesty International – you supported me when I desperately needed help.

When I did not have clothes shelter and food, lost and lonely, far away from my wife and children, unsure of when next I would see them ever or at all.

For three months, you provided me with an apartment, money for food and clothes , and more which I sent home to Zimbabwe to my family. I saw Amnesty International in action, exactly living up to what it stands for.

As many of you will know, Amnesty International was founded in 1961 by British Lawyer Peter Benenson.

He had read about two Portuguese students who were sentenced to seven years in prison for raising their glasses in a toast to freedom. Last Monday evening, some of us gathered in the Backbencher to repeat that toast.

Benenson was shocked. Many more people who had also read the news were also shocked. He wrote an article entitled *The Forgotten Prisoners* for *The Observer* newspaper. This article asked readers to write letters showing support for the students.

The response was overwhelming. Within a year groups had formed in more than a dozen countries, writing to defend victims of injustice wherever they might be.

By mid-1962, Amnesty had groups in many countries around the world including New Zealand. The rest is history, including a Nobel Peace Prize.

Portugal has since become free. But all over the world, injustices and human rights abuses still occur daily.

As part of Freedom Week, Amnesty International is focusing on Human Rights Defenders. Amnesty has highlighted some examples in the materials being handed out here today.

These women and men hold human rights violators to account. They try to protect the vulnerable. They act peacefully and according to law. Because of this work, many become victims of disappearance, political killing, arbitrary arrest, unfair trial, torture and intimidation.

You will see amongst them, a group of women from Zimbabwe, my own country. They call themselves WOZA, Women of Zimbabwe Arise.

Many of these women are involved in the informal trade on the streets of Zimbabwe. They do this so that they can fend for their children. Most of you will by now have read about the infamous Operation *Murambatsvina* (clean- out- filth) by the Zimbabwe government. These women were the worst affected.

These women have been campaigning to protect the human rights of Zimbabwean women. Their main weapon has always been demonstrations in the streets. Yet they have been arrested and detained under the most inhuman conditions for long hours, leaving behind their children with no one to look after them. Invariably no charges are actually brought against them. This group, WOZA, is very close to my heart.

But we should always value human rights defenders anywhere in the world, not just in our own countries.

I draw your attention particularly to another human rights defender in the examples, a Rwandan journalist called Bonaventure Bizu-murey-mi.

Bonaventure edits one of the last remaining independent newspapers in Rwanda, *Umuco*, that provides insight into the problems facing the country and is often critical of the policies of the Rwandan Patriotic Front (RPF), the ruling political party in Rwanda.

Since September 2005 he has been detained and interrogated several times by the security services and put on trial for libel.

In January of this year four heavily armed men forced their way into and ransacked his house to stop him publishing critical articles.

We do not know what would have happened to him if neighbours had not come to his aid.

He continues to write, despite the risk to his own safety.

Bonaventure Bizu-murey-mi is a human rights defender.

He needs the world's support. He needs your support.

You can voice your concern about intimidation and harassment. You can demand that the perpetrators of violence against him be brought to justice.

You might think that campaigning from New Zealand is too far away to make a difference.

But each of us has to take the actions that we can. I urge you to write a letter. Take your own step. Become active. The pen is mightier, as they say, than the sword.

Let me return briefly to my own story.

As I have already said, I experienced very personally, the activism of Amnesty International.

I have discovered that long before I fled Zimbabwe in fear of my life and my safety, Amnesty was researching my case. I knew nothing about that.

Along with other organisations, like the International Bar Association, and the International Commission of Jurists, Amnesty International documented my situation, complained to the government of Zimbabwe, and urged people just like you to write to the Government demanding that the independence of the Judiciary be respected.

When I fled the country for my safety and life, Amnesty International provided practical help.

They connected me with the United Nations High Commission for Refugees. They ensured that I could feed myself in South Africa. They lobbied governments to give me protection as a refugee.

All this helped me to survive, and indeed to find refuge here in New Zealand.

Activism, ladies and gentlemen – activism. The opposite of doing nothing. It is time to act. Let us all defend human rights. Let us all shout and tell the world whenever we notice human rights violations.

And so, from the bottom of my heart, I thank Amnesty International and all other human rights defenders the world over. I say keep up the good work.

A special thanks is extended to a woman by the name of Sigrid Rausing. She is a Swedish philanthropist living in the United Kingdom who gives substantial amounts of money to human rights organisations and in particular to those who are defenders of human rights.

When she realised that my continued stay in South Africa was becoming increasingly unsafe, and that there were complications associated with my movement to the United Kingdom, she offered an extremely generous fellowship at the University of London, hoping to persuade the British government to expedite my exit from South Africa.

While this was happening, New Zealand came to my aid and granted me refuge. Sigrid Rausing extended that fellowship to Victoria University. To me she is a committed human rights defender.

I also thank New Zealand for its commitment to human rights, and for the welcome you have given me and my family. Words cannot carry the depth of that gratitude.

I thank you for your attention today, fellow activists.

I urge you to support human rights defenders.

THANK YOU.