

# PREFACE

Mary Robinson



I was very pleased as UN High Commissioner for Human Rights to contribute to the publication of Ahmed Othmani's book, 'Sortir de la prison, un combat pour réformer les systèmes carcéraux dans le monde'. (*Beyond Prison: The Fight to Reform Prison Systems around the World*). Ahmed came to see me a number of times in Geneva, and I was deeply impressed by his passion and commitment to penal reform. Later, when in my current work as President of Realizing Rights I invited Ahmed to attend a seminar on human rights in South Africa, he turned the tables and persuaded me to serve as Honorary President of Penal Reform International! It was an honour to value publicly the work of Ahmed and his colleagues.

This is an exceptional personal testimony and story of achievement. Ahmed Othmani tells of his own appalling treatment when in detention and how it informed and inspired a lifetime vocation to struggle for the rights of all prisoners, everywhere. As the story demonstrates, Othmani was one of those rare individuals who moved from passion and conviction to effective action - he was responsible for the establishment of one of the world's most reliable and mature human rights organisations, in the field of penal reform, Penal Reform International (PRI). His untimely death in Morocco in 2004 deprived the cause of a passionate advocate, but the work goes on.

I share the great concern which Ahmed Othmani had and PRI continues to have for the world's prisoners. Often voiceless and forgotten, prisoners are among the most vulnerable groups in any society. Time and time again they are subjected to multiple abuses of their human rights and are provided with little or no means to seek redress.

The United Nations continues to take steps to highlight the plight of prisoners, to articulate minimum standards for detention, to decry arbitrary detention and to support national efforts to improve prison conditions. This work would have only limited impact were it not carried out in partnership with international civil society. I welcome, therefore, the increasing collaboration which the United Nations – and especially the Office of High Commissioner for Human Rights – has developed with PRI. I trust that they will continue to be constructive partners in the years to come.

I hope people everywhere, including prisoners, will have the opportunity to read this book. It deserves attention, as it makes an important case for accountability as well as rehabilitation, and the long-term protection of societies and individuals. This is a message which should be heard in prisons and at the level of policy-making nationally and internationally.

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