

## **Support Funding for Treatment of Torture Victims**

August 19, 2004: There is now a political imperative as well as a moral responsibility to confront and prevent torture. Providing funds for the treatment of torture victims will be on the Senate's agenda when the session resumes on September 6 to deal with the remaining appropriations bills. Last year Congress authorized \$25 million for FY2005 to fund treatment centers for the many (estimated 500,000) victims of torture who have fled to the U.S. as refugees and political asylees. However, it is feared that the Senate will appropriate only \$10 million, the amount requested by the White House, or go along with the House in appropriating only \$13 million of the \$25 million that was authorized.

Also last year, Congress authorized \$7 million for the U.N. Voluntary Fund for Victims of Torture, but the Administration requested only \$5 million for FY2005, which is the amount recently appropriated by the House. The House, in report language, has recommended \$12 million of USAID funding be directed to treatment programs in other countries.

Before the Senate convenes on September 6, write or call the Washington offices of your two senators (Senate switchboard 202-224-3121). Ask for the Legislative Assistant who works on human rights or appropriations and leave a voice mail message if he/she is not available. Identify yourself by name, as a constituent and, if you're comfortable doing so, as a member of the Presbyterian Church (USA). "I am calling to ask Senator XXXX to do all he/she can to help victims of torture. I appeal to him/her to support fully the authorized funding amounts of \$25 million for the treatment centers in the US, \$7 million for the U.N. Voluntary Fund for Victims of Torture and \$12 million for USAID to support foreign treatment programs. By acting to heal the survivors of torture, the United States can help to heal the effects of torture and prevent its use around the world."

The shocking photos of Iraqis being abused by American guards at Abu Ghraib prison forced Americans to think about the horror of torture. Many feel compassion for those traumatized men and ashamed. Not long before, the President's State of the Union address cited Saddam Hussein's torture chambers as one of the reasons we went to war. Yet, to date, no rehabilitation services have been made available to the Iraqi people.

Treating torture victims is essential, but much more is necessary for torture to be prevented. Douglas A. Johnson, the Executive Director of the Center for Victims of Torture, spoke in a congressional briefing on June 23rd of the important monitoring role of independent human rights groups, the investigative role of the U.N. Special Rapporteur on Torture and other international mechanisms, as well as bringing the light of truth through transparency in the handling of prisoners, including those held by the military and the CIA. He said that additional legislation may be necessary.

Certainly, the universal applicability of the Geneva Conventions cannot be compromised. The Geneva Conventions, ratified in 1955 by the U.S. Senate, prohibit inflicting torture-cruel, humiliating, or degrading treatment-on detainees. In 1994, the Senate ratified the International Convention against Torture, which provides that "no exceptional circumstances whatsoever, whether a state of war or a threat of war, internal political instability or any other public emergency, may be invoked as justification of torture."

Any signal that torture might be condoned in high places is a slippery slope that invites policy "implementers" at all levels to "push the envelope" just a bit further, writes Helena Cobban, a columnist for the Christian Science Monitor. That slope can be seen from Abu Ghraib straight up to the Justice Department memo of August 2002 that assured the Bush Administration that interrogators could torture prisoners as long as the president authorized it, and that those interrogators could avoid accountability.

Throughout the Middle East, torture is endemic. Joe Stork of Human Rights Watch said of Egypt, "If reform means anything, it means ending 50 years of emergency rule and addressing the country's torture epidemic." Although many Arab states have legislation that forbids torture, its use is widely reported and sometimes excused by higher authorities under the guise of "protecting national security." As is true in virtually all the Middle Eastern countries, the Palestinian Authority's Basic Law prohibits torture; however, international human rights groups have documented widespread abuse and stated that the use of torture was not restricted to people detained on security charges. The much-heralded call for reform in the Arab world should be matched by clarion calls for an end to torture. If given the freedom to speak and organize without fear of arrest and torture, the citizens of those repressive states will become reformers themselves.

The slippery slope in Israel is evident. The High Court allowed for the security forces to request "special permission" to use "moderate physical pressure" against detainees considered to possess information about an imminent attack. The U.S. State Department Country Report says that in 2002, the Israeli authorities acknowledged use of physical pressure against 90 Palestinians who had been defined as "ticking bombs." The line between physical pressure and torture is blurred; it's reported that Israel's security services abuse thousands of detainees almost routinely. [See Helena Cobban, "Zero Tolerance on Torture: How Hard Is That?" Christian Science Monitor, 6/2/04 (<http://www.csmonitor.com/2004/0602/p09s02-coop.html>)]

The prevention of torture is at the heart of the universal human rights movement. Constituents should press their elected officials to place a high priority on this core element of universal human rights.

The Senate Appropriations Subcommittee on Foreign Operations provides funds for the USAID, which now supports torture treatment programs in 26 countries, and for the U.N. Voluntary Fund for Victims of Torture. Senator Mitch McConnell (R-KY) is Chairman, Senator Patrick Leahy (D-VT) is Ranking Minority Member. Republicans: Specter (PA), Gregg (NH), Shelby (AL), Bennett (UT), Campbell (CO), Bond (MO), DeWine (OH), Stevens (AK). Democrats: Inouye (HI), Harkin (IA), Mikulski (MD), Durbin (IL), Johnson (SD), Landrieu (LA), Byrd (WV).

The Senate Appropriations Subcommittee on Labor, Health and Human Services, and Education provides funds for the treatment of torture victims in the United States. Senator Arlen Specter (R-PA) is Chairman, Senator Tom Harkin (D-IA) is Ranking Minority Member. Republicans: Cochran (MS), Gregg (NH), Craig (ID), Hutchison (TX), Stevens (AK), DeWine (OH), Shelby (AL). Democrats: Hollings (SC), Inouye (HI), Reid (NV), Kohl (WI), Murray (WA), Landrieu (LA), Byrd (WV).

General Assembly: The 216th General Assembly (2004) of the Presbyterian Church (USA) "[C]ondemns in the strongest possible terms torture and abuse of prisoners held any place in the world, in United States government, military, or civilian custody, and we oppose any continuation of this practice."

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