

“Torturers will be brought to justice sooner or later” – UN human rights chief

Statement by the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights Navi Pillay for 26 June, the International Day in Support of Victims of Torture

Starting in 1976, during Argentina’s period of military dictatorship, prison director Abel Dupuy ordered the systematic torture, cruel, inhuman and degrading treatment of dozens – possibly hundreds – of political prisoners.

New inmates would be greeted by a double row of guards who would beat them as they entered the prison, handcuffed and hooded. They were often stripped naked before the torture sessions began.

The victims suffered serious physical and mental harm, while the torturer-in-chief continued to live in Buenos Aires, a free man – until, decades later, an arrest warrant was issued for Dupuy. In October last year, more than 30 years after the first blows were struck on his orders, justice was eventually done when Dupuy was convicted and sentenced to life in prison.

Across many parts of Latin America and in some other parts of the world, we have been seeing encouraging developments in the implementation of the strict prohibition against torture and other cruel, inhuman or degrading treatment in international law, often many years after the crime was committed.

In Argentina, by October last year, 748 people had been charged for serious crimes committed during the military era, and 81, including Dupuy, had been convicted. In Colombia, a new victims’ law has made provisions for reparations, restitution and other measures for victims of human rights violations committed during the conflict. The arrests of Radovan Karadžić and Ratko Mladic and their indictment on a host of human rights violations and crimes against humanity, including torture, have also reinforced the global struggle against impunity. In all, the International Criminal Tribunal for the former Yugoslavia has indicted 161 people and in many of these cases, torture was included among the charges.

Torture is illegal, and if carried out on a systematic basis can amount to a war crime or a crime against humanity. No circumstances, however exceptional, justify the use of torture against anyone for any reason. Neither a state of emergency nor conflict, neither the fight against terrorism nor the fight against crime excuses the use of torture. These practices dehumanize both victim and perpetrator and leave scars on people, communities and entire societies that can be very difficult to heal. The healing process begins with justice and involves long-term rehabilitation of victims and offenders, as well as reparations. These measures need to be accompanied by

training of law enforcement officials and a zero-tolerance approach to the use of torture.

Sadly, despite the blanket ban on torture and other cruel, inhuman or degrading treatment in international law, terrible examples of its continued practice are documented on a daily basis. The use of torture, symptomatic of desperate despotic governments and dysfunctional criminal justice systems, is all too common. As we have seen very graphically in North Africa and the Middle East over the past few months, men, women and even children are tortured in detention simply for expressing their political views, in order to force confessions, or just because they were in the wrong place at the wrong time.

Behind its common use is an expectation of impunity on the part of those issuing the orders, those actually carrying out the torture and those who deliberately turn a blind eye to it.

Thanks to the courage and determination of victims and survivors, and the tireless efforts of human rights defenders, accountability is increasingly taking place and perpetrators of torture should no longer expect to get away with such heinous acts.

Prosecutions of the sort we are witnessing now, decades after the commission of the criminal act of torture, send a powerful message. Cases such as that of Dupuy demonstrate that as times change, regimes also change, as happened across Latin America in the late 20th century and is starting to happen now in North Africa and the Middle East. Indeed, one of Dupuy's victims, Jorge Taiana, went on to become the Foreign Minister of Argentina and testified at Dupuy's trial last year.

The strengthening of international justice mechanisms, including the rapidly maturing International Criminal Court, means that the chances of torturers being snared one day, either on the national or international level, has greatly increased.

Despotic governments and officials take heed: torture is a serious international crime and more torturers will be brought to justice – sooner or later.

ENDS

To see which States have, or have not, ratified human rights treaties, including the Convention against Torture, go to:

<http://treaties.un.org/Pages/Treaties.aspx?id=4&subid=A&lang=en>

Visit the website of the UN Voluntary Fund for Victims of Torture:

<http://www.ohchr.org/EN/Issues/Pages/TortureFundMain.aspx>

Learn about the Special Rapporteur on torture and other cruel, inhuman or degrading treatment or punishment:

<http://www2.ohchr.org/english/issues/torture/rapporteur/>

For more information about the UN High Commissioner for Human Rights:

<http://www.ohchr.org/EN/AboutUs/Pages/HighCommissioner.aspx>

For more information or media requests, please contact spokesperson Rupert Colville (+41 22 917 9767 / rcolville@ohchr.org) or press officers Ravina Shamdasani (+ 41 22 917 9310 / rshamdasani@ohchr.org) and Xabier Celaya (+ 41 22 917 9383 / xcelaya@ohchr.org).

Follow us on social media:

<http://www.facebook.com/unitednationshumanrights>

<https://twitter.com/unrightswire>