



Tom Lantos Human Rights Commission Briefing

Honoring the Victims: The U.S. Response to Torture

**Thursday, June 23, 2016
11:00 AM – 12:00 Noon
2255 Rayburn House Office Building**

Opening Remarks

Good morning and welcome to today's Commission briefing "Honoring the Victims: The U.S. Response to Torture."

We are joined by a distinguished panel of speakers, and I would like to thank them for the incredible work they have done over the years to raise awareness of torture, advocate against its use, and help treat and support torture victims. I'd especially like to thank Merga for his bravery and perseverance, and for being willing to share his personal story as a torture survivor.

This briefing is especially timely, as we mark the UN International Day in Support of Victims of Torture this coming Sunday, June 26th. The UN chose this date because it was on June 26th, 1987, that the Convention against Torture and Other Cruel, Inhuman or Degrading Treatment or Punishment entered into effect. The United States participated actively in negotiating the treaty, which has been ratified or acceded to by 159 countries, including our own. Under the Convention, torture is against the law.

But despite its absolute prohibition, even in times of war, the crime of torture is pervasive across the globe. It occurs in increasingly complex contexts, such as migration flows and protracted conflicts, and at the hands of non-state actors. Amnesty International has documented torture in 141 countries and all regions of the world, and notes that in many countries, including many that are states party to the Convention, torture is probably underreported.

Torture occurs even though it is ineffective in generating information. The UN Special Rapporteur on Torture is among those who have found that there are other credible, human

rights-friendly alternatives that produce better results than torture. The very first finding in the Senate Select Committee on Intelligence's Executive Summary report, published in December 2014, was that the CIA's "enhanced interrogation" techniques were not an effective means of acquiring intelligence or gaining cooperation from detainees.

I don't know whether anyone who has never experienced torture can really imagine what it's like. But certainly when we see the abhorrent images or listen to the testimonies of survivors, we can come to understand that torture has terrible physical and psychological consequences for the victims. These consequences can be life long, and can affect families and loved ones as well.

Compensation and rehabilitation for survivors is required under Article 14 of the Convention Against Torture, and can help victims and survivors heal. That is why I co-sponsored H.R. 2870, the "Torture Victims Relief Reauthorization Act of 2015," which would provide funds for treatment programs and centers both domestically and abroad. After this briefing concludes today, I encourage everyone ask his or her Member of Congress to support this bill.

The good news is that this year also marks the 35th Anniversary of the UN Voluntary Fund for Victims of Torture, which provides direct humanitarian assistance --medical, psychological, social and legal-- to victims and their families, and to which the U.S. is the largest donor. So we are doing something to help survivors of torture, but I'm guessing we'll hear today that it's not enough.

I believe that torture is inconsistent with our nation's most deeply held values, and undermines our national security. We are here today, in solidarity, to honor the victims of torture for what they have endured. In my mind, the best way to do that is to renew our commitment to fight against the use of torture. Those who violate the prohibition against torture should be held accountable, and torture victims should receive the treatment to which they are legally and morally entitled.

I look forward to hearing our panelists' recommendations on how the United States government, including Congress, can help.

I would like to turn the microphone over to our moderator, Andrea Barron, who will introduce each speaker. Thank you.

