

Children And Torture

The purpose of this paper is to raise awareness of the systematic torture inflicted upon children worldwide for political reasons, because of poverty, and in detention camps. The life long effects of torture and mistreatment are discussed.

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The Hidden Practice of Systematic Violence

by Evgenia Berezina

For most people, the word “torture” conjures up an image of medieval times, an antiquated and horrific practice left behind long ago in favor of progress and civility, and any such practice today exists only in the acts of sadists, terrorists, and psychopaths. It is easier to ignore or avoid the issue altogether, because it is too difficult or unsettling to imagine that even in the 21st century, torture still exists.¹ It is even more disturbing to visualize that children are deliberately subjected to pain and suffering in many of the countries throughout the world.

However, as shocking as it is, torture, the intentional infliction of intense pain and anguish, is still a widespread practice today, performed by countless individuals working among armed militias, political groups, and even governments in order to sustain control and power over a population. Torture is generally used alongside other methods of control, as a facet of a broader mechanism of power and domination.

In every society where the threat of torture and violence is real, children become the easiest and most vulnerable targets. Tragically, children are less capable of protecting themselves, and their torturers are less likely to be prosecuted because most incidents of

child torture remain unreported as children fear repercussions for reporting the practice to the authorities; and often when they are reported, children are not believed or are ignored by authorities.

Traditionally the worst child torture and abuse has occurred in developing countries like Sri Lanka, Nigeria, Turkey, Singapore, Afghanistan, Zimbabwe and Pakistan; however, even children in the world's wealthiest and most powerful countries are still at risk. *Amnesty International* has reported that some of the most severe children's rights violations have occurred in the United States, Great Britain, Israel, and Russia.

The cases of torture and ill-treatment of children "are not sporadic or isolated acts," according to the World Organization Against Torture (OMCT); rather, "they have very often proven to be a part of a systemic phenomenon, where violence is widespread and violent behavior is the norm within the family, the community and state institutions. Violence is often perpetrated against children in both private and public settings - their families, communities, detention centers, schools and other institutions - by parents, educators, employers, peers, armed groups and state officials of all kinds."ⁱⁱ

Children are subjected to torture because of racial or ethnic prejudice, in order to gain information, or to sustain discipline. A growing number of cases of child torture result from poverty. Children living or working on the streets are frequently seen by security forces as criminals and nuisances.ⁱⁱⁱ Lacking the protection of responsible adults, street children are silent and easy targets for abuse by police and society at large. Arrested for petty crimes (often on little or no evidence) such as vagrancy or labor

law violations, children are held in adult jails and detention centers, and victimized by both the police and adult inmates.

In Turkey, street children reported brutal beatings and use of electric shocks during interrogation. Testimony of sexual torture has been received from many children as young as 14, who describe being stripped naked, sexually assaulted and threatened with rape. In many cases, the torture of children is corroborated by medical evidence.^{iv}

Imprisoned street children can also be detained and sexually tortured to please prison authorities. Such was the case in two prisons in Malawi where an in-depth official investigation uncovered prostitution rings involving police and prison guards who rounded up boys and smuggled them into adult cells, for 30 cents each.^v

In many instances children are tortured because of their political beliefs, or those of their families. According to Amnesty International reports, in Afghanistan the Islamic extremist Taliban regime had hundreds of children detained in the place of their fathers or older relatives, who had escaped from custody. In the famous Manisa trial in Turkey, school children were arrested for participation in an illegal political group, and detained for several days without seeing their families. While they were detained, confessions were extracted from them by use of sexual abuse and other forms of torture.^{vi}

In armed conflicts, children are tortured along with adults as a means of acquiring information, forcing submission, imposing fear, or coercing children into combat or servitude. In the Democratic Republic of Congo, during the country's five-year war, children have suffered on-going systematic torture and cruelty. According to a report by a consortium of

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Child Rights Spotlight: The Manisa Trial

On December 26, 1995, 16 students from Manisa, Turkey were arrested for subversive activities, such as displaying left-wing posters and causing a fire in a barber shop. The youngest of those arrested was 14, the oldest in their early 20's. Most were between 15 and 18. The teens were detained for nine days before being allowed to see their parents. They were tortured into a coerced confession, and some even had to be sent to the hospital while still in police custody to be treated for the abuse they received at the hands of the police.

The children reported the use of electric shock, as well as pressurized water to hose down the detainees and coax a confession. The boys alleged that they were forced to strip naked while officers squeezed and twisted their genitals. They claimed to have been anally raped with truncheons. The females underwent forced vaginal exams, and one was reportedly raped.

The students, originally convicted of belonging to an illegal leftist group, the Revolutionary People's Liberation Front in 1997, were acquitted in 2000.

The medical evidence proving the guilt of the officers was so strong that the Court of Appeals twice overturned lower courts decisions to acquit the officers. Finally, in 2002, the police officers were convicted and sentenced to serve between 60 and 130 months each. The Court of Appeals upheld the conviction of the 10 officers in April of 2003.

Much public pressure fell on the Turkish government to uphold their pledge to take action against torture. The European Union demanded reform in Turkey's human rights policies before the country is allowed entrance into the Union. According to Sabir Ergul of the Republican People's Party, the original acquittals of the officers would make "Turkey hang its head in shame before the civilized world." Amnesty International hailed the sentencing of the officers as a "positive step in the fight against impunity for torture in Turkey."

monitoring NGOs, children had been forced to witness the brutal murders of their parents and grandparents, and sometimes even forced to kill their close relatives; young girls have been raped in front of their families; children, including infants, were locked up without food or water, and were often dying from hunger and thirst.^{vii}

Perhaps the most underreported kind of torture is the abuse of children in detention camps, where they endure startlingly cruel methods of physical and mental torture. Internationally, children are subjected to brutal interrogation by the police seeking to obtain confessions or information. In correctional facilities children often suffer severe corporal punishment, forced labor, deprivation of food and/or sleep, isolation, restraints, sexual assaults, and harassment.^{viii}

In the United States, *Human Rights Watch* found that children in juvenile detention facilities in Georgia were bound to their beds at the wrists and ankles for several hours often face down, as a form of discipline.^{ix} In Sri Lanka, *Amnesty International* reported the story of a 15-year old girl who was kept naked while in custody for three days, "hung upside down and beaten on her legs, burned with cigarettes, given electric shocks, and burned with heated metal rods".^x

Torture is also widely practiced as a form of disciplinary punishment. The staff of many Russian orphanages have resorted to the most hideous forms of abuse. *Human Rights Watch* has reported on children who were put naked into a freezing cold, dark, isolated room for several days with no food or water; children stripped of their clothes and put in front of an open window in the classroom, as a lesson to others; small children forced into small wooden clothes chests and thrown out of a window; and, children sent to a psychiatric institute as a

punishment for misdeeds such as attempting to run away.^{xi}

Children who have been exposed to torture may experience numerous post-traumatic effects, including anxiety, recurring nightmares, restlessness, and irritability. They often suffer severe depression, chronic fatigue, paranoia, and other forms of mental and physical disorders. Most tragically, these children lose their ability to trust; they often become anti-social and hostile, sometimes violent, resorting to the torture of smaller children or animals, as a means of revenge for their own past suffering.

The impact of torture on children is generally much greater than on adults, as children have a lower threshold for pain and less understanding of why others use torture. Suffering physical and emotional trauma “at an important developmental stage in their life when their personality is being formed, child victims are likely to carry the effects for a lifetime. For an adult, such an experience may be horrific, but it isn't likely to change their personality, their sense of who they are.”^{xii}

The international community has officially condemned torture, especially child torture, as the most dreadful violation of human rights and has listed torture as a war crime. But despite the pledge of numerous countries to eradicate torture, this barbaric practice continues behind closed doors of many government institutions; and, the perpetrators are the same individuals that are responsible for the safety and well-being of children: school personnel, police officers, care givers, and those in the military service.

Numerous NGOs around the world have criticized the 1989 Convention on

Torture^{xiii} for its failure to set up any strong enforcement procedure of its own. Although the Rome Statute of the International Criminal Court (1998 and 1999) would provide an enforcement mechanism against the crime of torture, many countries have avoided ratifying the Convention for fear their own authorities would have to come before the Court.

At present, individual governments ultimately have the primary responsibility for deterring violence, and for providing effective protection and remedies, including assistance and support to the victims of torture. However, due to the scandalous nature of child torture, many cases remain unreported, and torturers are often spared any reprisal, punishment, or condemnation. The only way to ensure punishment of torturers and to help prevent reoccurrence of child torture is through public awareness and civic action.

The general public can help end child torture by writing to governments where torture is widespread, such as in Turkey, Zimbabwe, Uganda, and Sri Lanka, among others, and demand an end of abuse and suffering. It is equally important for each person to ask their own respective government to take action in ensuring that action is being taken around the world to end the continuing worldwide practice of torture.♦

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For more information, visit these links:

- [Amnesty International](#)
- [Human Rights Watch](#)
- [UN Convention Against Torture and Other Cruel, Inhumane or Degrading Treatment and Punishment](#)
- [Save the Children](#)
- [Canadian Centre for Victims of Torture](#)
- [International rehabilitation Center for Torture Victims](#)

^{xiii} UN *Convention Against Torture and Other Cruel, Inhumane or Degrading Treatment and Punishment* is the main legislative document used by anti-torture advocates worldwide; another important document, *The Torture Victims Relief Act (TVRA)* [PL 105-320], first passed in 1998, is the major source of government funding for torture treatment centers in the United States. The act authorized millions of dollars to assist torture victims through the Office of Refugee Resettlement, the U.S. Agency for International Development, and donations to the United Nations Voluntary Fund for Victims of Torture.

Endnotes

ⁱ YAP International recognizes the definition of “torture” put forth in the UN *Convention Against Torture and Other Cruel, Inhumane or Degrading Treatment and Punishment*: “Any act by which severe pain or suffering, whether physical or mental, is intentionally inflicted on a person for such purposes as obtaining from him or a third person information or a confession, punishing him for an act he or a third person has committed or is suspected of having committed, or intimidating or coercing him or a third person, or for any reason based on discrimination of any kind, when such pain or suffering is inflicted by or at the instigation of or with the consent or acquiescence of a public official or other person acting in an official capacity.”

ⁱⁱ OMCT report “Children, Torture, and other Forms of Violence; Facing the Facts, Forging the Future”, 2001

ⁱⁱⁱ Approximately 100 million children internationally are living on the streets today according to a recent report of ‘Save the Children’

^{iv} ‘Turkey: Children at risk of torture, death in custody and “disappearance”’, November 1996, AI

^v ‘Torture of Children: A Secret Shame’, AI report, 2000

^{vi} ‘Torture against children: In Turkey, children fighting fascism are tortured and receive heavy sentences in a Courtroom!! The Manisa- Trail’ Opinion piece by Pierre Sane, Secretary General, Amnesty International AI INDEX: EUR 44/145/96

^{vii} ‘The impact of armed conflict on children in the Democratic Republic of Congo’, Watchlist on Children and Armed Conflict, 2003

^{viii} ‘Easy Targets: Violence Against Children Worldwide’, 2001, Human Rights Watch

^{ix} ‘Easy Targets: Violence Against Children Worldwide’, 2001, Human Rights Watch

^x ‘Torture of Children: A Secret Shame’, AI report, 2000

^{xi} ‘Abandoned to the State: Cruelty and Neglect in Russian Orphanages’, HRW, 1998

^{xii} Ann Fitzgerald of Amnesty International, the author of ‘Torture of Children: A Secret Shame’ report