

World needs leadership and greater political will to combat torture

Dr. Alice Edwards¹



Nearly four decades on since the mandate of UN Special Rapporteur on Torture was established, we are still far from a world where all persons can live freely and peacefully without the risk of private or public forms of harassment, abuse or torture.

Despite the longstanding and universally accepted prohibition of torture, and the obligations on states to prevent such ill-treatment, the practice persists. Inhuman or degrading harm is carried out every day and at times routinely.

That is why I will be making leadership a central plank of my mandate as UN Special Rapporteur on Torture, and am calling on greater political will to better combat torture, including everyday forms of inhuman treatment and punishment. In order to bring about sustained and long-term changes, leaders at all level are required to be involved in identifying the problem and being part of the solution.

Tackling root causes to prevent torture and promote accountability are equally crucial, and I will also take action to reinforce the international legal framework and safeguard it against attack.

The rights of victims and survivors and their families must be put centre-stage. This includes their right to speak and be heard, the right to take part in decisions affecting them, the right to rehabilitation and a remedy. While avenues of justice for victims of torture and similar crimes have become more available over the past thirty years, and the sophistication of interviewing, evidence collection, documentation and preservation, including through implementing the Istanbul Protocol, remedies for hundreds of thousands of

1) New UN Special Rapporteur on Torture and Other Cruel, Inhuman or Degrading Treatment or Punishment*, outlines her vision, approach and priorities

them remain remote and unattainable. For this reason, too, my mandate will pay particular attention to gathering and sharing national practices of torture investigations and prosecutions, with the hope to expand the number of survivors achieving a restorative and just future for them as well as their children, families and communities.

It is imperative to focus on discriminatory causes of torture and ill-treatment and push for changes that include the rights of the women and girls, and other marginalised, under-represented and disadvantaged. A number of studies carried out in different countries have documented that vulnerable people and communities are at greater risk of being subjected to abuse and oppressive practices and unfairly treated within criminal justice systems.

Building safer, torture free and more just societies cannot be done successfully without engaging with governments through constructive dialogue and by providing pragmatic advice. This is because perceived externally imposed solutions rarely achieve the buy-in necessary to activate necessary reforms.

Fact-finding country visits are an important part of the Special Rapporteur's mandate, as are responding to urgent actions and allegations of torture and ill treatment. In all this work, a victim- and survivor-centred approach will be taken. Sharing good practices drawn from diverse regions and country experiences will aim to encourage positive cooperation from states in addressing allegations of torture.

Small as well as bold actions are being taken by a wide number of countries and their officials - supported by civil society - to enforce human rights-based societies. These examples of progress are symbols of hope and ought to be acknowledged. However, new global challenges highlight more than ever the need to counter complacency or tolerance of torture and ill treatment. Reports from human rights groups suggest that among ordinary people there have been at times misunderstandings of what torture is and a growing tolerance for it. Thus, raising awareness with relevant stakeholders and the general public about their right to be treated humanely in all interactions with the state is essential.

The work ahead requires a collective drive. We all have a role to play, from academics and practitioners researching and putting into practice groundbreaking new ways to rehabilitate and heal from torture, to national human rights and preventive mechanisms keeping a spotlight on misconduct, to police, judges, lawyers, health and prison officials working in at-risk systems and striving to do better, through to parliamentarians, militaries and governments with ultimate responsibility and accountability. Let this be the start of a period of renewed action.

END

*Dr. Alice Edwards was appointed by the Human Rights Council in July 2022 and took office in August. She is the first woman to hold office as the UN's torture expert. Dr. Edwards is a board member of Torture Journal.