

### **Q-CAT's work: duplication or a distinctive approach?**

There are a number of non-governmental organisations working against the use of torture worldwide, through practical work in support of victims and through campaigning. For example: Amnesty International has a focus on the welfare of political prisoners at risk of torture and other malpractice, and has a major 'Stop Torture' campaign in 2014, Freedom from Torture seeks to heal those who have suffered torture and continue to suffer its ongoing effects, Medical Justice documents the torture and medical mistreatment of asylum seekers.

Trustees are sometimes asked if Q-CAT's work has anything distinctive to contribute which justifies Quaker time and money spent on this Concern, beyond individual Quakers' support of these other organisations. Several points arise in response.

1. Q-CAT's particular concern is for the corrupting effect on members of society in any country that condones the use of torture and the lack of openness and accountability. Incremental changes in a society can gradually lead to the acceptance of the use of torture, but we believe that finding torture acceptable reflects a deep spiritual malaise that will eat into the core of that society.
2. As a Quaker body recognising the common humanity and sacredness of all individuals we acknowledge that not only does torture do immense damage to victims but it also damages those who commit torture, authorise it or collude in its use. We are committed to the well-being of all these people, understanding that people can and do change.
3. The abomination which is torture needs to be tackled from as many sides as possible. Underpinned by our commitment to peace and equality, we are doing our part by raising awareness among our own Quaker community; by establishing links with other faith groups; by working to establish an on-going conversation with government bodies to increase mutual respect and understanding and by developing sufficient interest in the matter among other public bodies so that pressure can be exerted for change and a recognition of past actions previously hidden.
4. In 1999 British Quakers issued a statement: "Torture is a profound evil, causing unimaginable human suffering and corrupting the spiritual and political life of the human family. British Quakers re-commit themselves, and wish to encourage other people of faith, to work for its eradication world-wide..."  
Q-CAT is dedicated to furthering this aim.

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## Perceptions and myths about torture

An international survey recently carried out on behalf of Amnesty International (get the report from Amnesty, or there are a number of summaries that may be found online, e.g. from BBC news on <http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/uk-27387040>) revealed that in the UK, 29% of the population believe that torture can be justified in certain circumstances – more than in Russia, Brazil or Argentina, but well behind the figures for Kenya (66%) and China (74%). It also revealed that the perceived risk of being tortured was lowest in the UK, with 83% feeling they were not at risk. Globally, the fear of being tortured if taken into custody stands at 44%, being particularly high in Mexico, Pakistan, Turkey, Kenya and Brazil.

It is difficult to escape the conclusion that, for most British people, torture is something remote that only happens to “other” people in faraway countries where we have little influence.

Amnesty comments that for many people, torture is glorified by the depiction of it in programmes such as *24*, *Homeland* and *Spooks*. It may be worth adding that many fictional depictions – often set in the past – exploit received prejudices. In Ken Follett's novel *Jackdaws*, for example, sadistic Nazi torturers are condemned for visiting unspeakable atrocities on their victims, yet brave and resourceful British agents somehow save us all by committing casual violence on an industrial scale.

There are a few myths that need to be examined here.

*1. Torture can be an effective and necessary instrument for extracting the truth from those who would prefer to conceal it* (probably what the 29% had in mind).

As Andrew Brown commented (*The Guardian*, 13 May 2014), whilst torture may frighten people into keeping quiet (at least in the short term), it has the opposite effect when trying to extract information from people. During the troubles in Northern Ireland, for example, the IRA may have scared people into keeping quiet, but the British did not succeed in forcing people to divulge information. A person under torture loses the ability to judge whether what they say is real. Stalin managed, by the use of torture, to extract confessions from various unsavoury individuals that they were plotting to assassinate him – and as a result, executed several for one of the few crimes they almost certainly did not commit! And the same perverted logic operates in many places today.

*2. When it happens far away* (as, in this perception, it usually does!) *it's nothing to do with us.*

Shaker Aamer is a Saudi citizen with the right of permanent residence in the UK; his wife and children are all British. He suffers from post-traumatic stress disorder after years of torture, including “second degree torture” (threats to his family) at Guantanamo Bay. According to the Guantanamo authorities, he's not been on hunger strike – just a long-term non-religious fast! (see Clive Stafford Smith, in *The Guardian*, 9 April 2014) His mental health will almost certainly improve when he is returned to his family in London. This has been going on for many years, and the British government is reluctant to intercede – possibly because of what he might divulge about the use of torture in Iraq. Only last November, the British government sought to use the new Justice and Security Act to conceal evidence of British complicity in the torture and mistreatment of two men in Somaliland.

### 3. *Our own free and open society may be at risk.*

Allegations of British and US collaboration in the use of Diego Garcia as a secret prison as part of the rendition programme have been hushed up for years; only recently, a Whitehall official was photographed carrying documents confirming that logs of flights have been handed to detectives – but not to MPs or lawyers representing detainees (Report in *The Observer*, 12 July 2014). Yet, when the chair of the all-party parliamentary group on rendition asked to see these logs in 2008, he was told that “ a thorough review had been conducted which found no such information”. In June of this year, the Crown Prosecution Service sought to use the Justice and Security Act to hold a terrorist trial entirely in secret. The Court of Appeal ruled that the accused should be named, and the verdict made public. Even so, we may never know whether any allegations concerning human rights abuses are made during the trial – and if they are, whether they are well founded.

### **A Quaker concern**

The Q-CAT statement highlights our “particular concern for the corrupting effect on members of society in any country that condones torture”, and also the damage that torture does to those who commit it, authorise it, or collude at it. If we keep quiet, we all collude.

More detailed information on all the specific cases mentioned above, and others, can be obtained from reliable news websites such as that of *The Guardian*. Google the appropriate name, and judge for yourself. You might wish to take up some of these cases with your MP, asking her/him to seek information from the Home Secretary – or from the Prime Minister - as to what representations have been made to the appropriate foreign government in, say, the case of Shaker Aamer. You might try using the Freedom of Information Act. If you don't get all you were hoping for, persist - reply to the reply and engage in dialogue.

You may also wish to write protesting about the ineffectiveness and corrupting effects of torture generally – and you might seek to involve Friends and members of other faith communities (for example through your local council of churches) in discussions on these matters, particularly what the findings of the Amnesty survey tells us about the moral state of our society.

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