

QUAKER CONCERN FOR THE ABOLITION OF TORTURE (Q-CAT)

Briefing 3

September 2009

Two more Parliamentary reports referring to torture since our last Briefing received good press coverage but suffered from being published while politicians were on holiday. They can be read at the web addresses give below. The conclusion of the Human Rights Committee Report supports the attempt by Lord Archer of Sandwell to gain compensation for torture victims through British courts in his Torture (Damages) Bill which is due to have its second reading in the Commons on October 16th. It is worth writing to your M.P, asking him or her to support it (against current Government policy) on the grounds set out in the HR Committee Report, viz. "The UK should lead the international community in condemning torture and expanding international law to ensure victims have access to the reparations they are entitled to. This Bill would send a strong message: there are consequences for states that torture. We recommend the Government adopt the Torture (Damages) Bill and then consider what else needs to be done to promote its enforcement".

The Government rejected the call in the Foreign Affairs Committee Report for publication of existing guidelines to security and intelligence agencies and for a judicial enquiry into several detailed allegations of complicity in torture. The head of MI5 Sir John Scarlett said: "There was no torture and no complicity in torture". It would seem that few human rights practitioners and few M.Ps believe him. Indeed, such blanket denials sit awkwardly with the recent revelation by the Foreign Secretary that MI6 has referred one of its officers to the Attorney General over allegations of torture. It is frustrating that, unlike other Parliamentary committees, the Intelligence and Security Committee is answerable direct to the Prime Minister and its proceedings are not published, so the interface between those services and the body responsible for them is shrouded in secrecy. In spite of this, there were protests that they had evidently lied about their complicity in torture in overseas locations. Last week Reprieve, the human rights organisation wrote to Gordon Brown asking him to demand immediate action from the Prime Minister of Pakistan over two British citizens tortured there.

Meanwhile Tony Blair has been forced to deny a Liberal Democrat claim that he may have known about and condoned torture, making him unsuitable for the presidency of the EU, and in the US President Obama has finally authorised an enquiry into interrogation techniques used by the CIA. Although it is not clear whether those found guilty of breaking national or international law or those senior members of the Bush administration who re-wrote such law will face prosecution.

RESOURCES

Commons Foreign Affairs Committee - Annual Report on Human Rights - includes alleged complicity in special rendition and torture (21/07/09)
<http://www.publications.parliament.uk/pa/cm200809/cmselect/cmfaaff/557/55702.htm>

Joint Committee on Human Rights - Report on genocide and redress for torture victims (21/07/09): <http://www.publications.parliament.uk/pa/jt200809/jtselect/jtrights/153/15302.htm>

DATES FOR YOUR DIARY

Final arrangements for the Woodbrooke seminar in April 2010 should be available for the next Briefing.

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