

Quakers on torture

Why silence?

As a practicing chartered clinical psychologist I am deeply troubled by the recent United Nations report on the abuse of detainees in Guantanamo Bay. The report refers to the extensive use of psychological methods and the role of psychologists and psychiatrists in 'consultative roles to interrogation and information-gathering processes...'

It is hardly surprising that people harness psychological knowledge in order to extract information or to intimidate others. Psychologists study how humans perceive and react. Our research has investigated both wellbeing and distress in detail. Using our expertise to support the military is a longstanding application of this. Psychologists play a role in the British and US military training programmes, training military personnel techniques to resist interrogation, such as the R2I [Resistance to Interrogation programme]. Conversely, we have contributed to interrogation manuals to extract information. Those written in the 1960s and 1980s describe the same techniques used to mistreat detainees at Abu Ghraib in Iraq and Guantanamo Bay today.

What has now developed seems to me of a qualitatively different order.

The US is working towards excusing the CIA and US military from laws prohibiting the use of torture. They are now defining torture so that only tissue damage and pain is considered. New terms are being used to

describe behaviour, so changing the perception of the causes and culpability. For example, individual or mass suicide attempts have been euphemistically described as 'manipulative attention-seeking behaviour'.

Mental torture, degradation and abuse have devastating effects on the mental health of its victims. It is clear that psychological abuse, such as hooding, sensory deprivation, sexual humiliation, while leaving no evidence on a person's body, can leave profound mental scars. Amnesty International has documented this extensively. In 1983 the CIA wrote 'Extreme deprivation of sensory stimuli induces unbearable stress and anxiety and is a form of torture. There is a profound moral objection to applying duress beyond the point of irreversible psychological damage.'

The regime provides many examples of the deliberate manipulation of detainees' environment to induce severe psychological strain. The detainees face an uncertain length of confinement and are unaware of the charges made against them. It is known that this has led to serious mental illness, self-harm and individual and mass suicide attempts. This parallels the experience of those detained in Belmarsh, UK. They suffered severe depression and now have clinical symptoms of post-traumatic stress. Some of the detainees have been in Guantanamo Bay for more than four years, none have been charged and none have any idea of a time

of release.

The UN reports the excessive use of force against the detainees, as well as shackling and hooding during transportation, the force-feeding through nasal tubes during hunger strikes being used against detainees. The religious sensitivities of many of the detainees have been deliberately flouted; the Koran kicked, washing before prayers being prevented and the like. The men have been confronted with offensive sexual behaviour deliberately designed to humiliate and shock them given their beliefs, the use of female interrogators stripping and 'lap dancing' only being one.

These, and the isolation, exposure to extreme temperatures, minimal exercise and hygiene constitute a grave risk to their mental health. All in all, Guantanamo is a package of domination and mental torture.

International law is clear. The Geneva Convention of 1949 prohibits 'physical or mental torture, or any other form of coercion ...threat[s], insult[s] or ...any unpleasant or disadvantageous treatment of any kind.'

Quakers have spoken out when evil has been seen to be operating. Will we now?

Others have protested. Why our silence to date?

What barriers are there to forwarding this as a concern in the UK?

What can we do as a body?

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