



Quaker concern for the abolition of torture

Friends have long had an interest in prison reform that is needed more than ever today, not just nationally, but internationally. We were made more aware of this when the Quaker Eric Baker worked alongside Peter Benenson in the setting up Amnesty International in 1961. Twelve years later in Paris Eric Baker organised an International Conference on Torture for Amnesty International. During those intervening years, it became apparent from their newly established research department, that not only were people being imprisoned, often without charge or trial, but were being brutally tortured and ill-treated. This was in contravention of Article 5 of the United Nations Universal Declaration of Human Rights 1948.

In 1976, Meeting for Sufferings gave Eric Baker permission to have a session at London Yearly Meeting in York about the abhorrent practice of torture. There is a small group of Friends within Britain Yearly Meeting, who occasionally meet to seek the way forward for the Quaker Abolition of Torture. We held a Special Interest Group at Britain Yearly Meeting last year when about thirty friends joined us. They were handed an introductory statement and some questions prepared in advance. We wanted to hear from Friends how we might proceed to further the interest in the Abolition of Torture within BYM, as it is clearly a very difficult subject for some Friends. We heard from Friends who were working with asylum seekers and refugees, as many may have faced torture and/or ill-treatment, and suffer from the trauma. During our discussions, it became increasingly clear to me that Friends appeared to be thinking that a 'small

amount' of torture/ill-treatment might just be acceptable, and I wondered if they knew what action would have to be taken in order to inflict a 'little torture', in the light of last year's terrorist attack on London, just supposing that someone had planted a bomb somewhere, and should someone be caught, a 'little torture' just might save lives. I swiftly explained that this is often quoted by people/Friends, who are uninformed, bearing in mind, the subsequent United Nations Convention against Torture and the European Convention against Torture. I was shocked to think that Friends might condone the torture of a human being, to extract evidence, which is generally regarded as inadmissible evidence. Wouldn't we all admit to anything, if we were being cruelly tortured, to get away from the torment. Tragically, it is very rarely a 'little bit' of torture, as it can go on and on. Torture is the infliction of serious beating, sometimes whilst hung from a beam, burning, submersion in water, electricity applied to sensitive parts of the body and other methods, and it is essential to realise the long-lasting effect on a human being, with lives shattered for thousands of men, women and children. The Medical Foundation for the Care of Victims of Torture have examined thousands of people and documented their injuries over the last twenty years, revealing sickening acts of brutality that we must not tolerate. They seek ways to prevent and stop this abhorrent treatment. Since the London bombings in July, there has been an urgency to arrest people for longer, without charge or trial, under the Prevention of Terrorism Act 2005, which Amnesty International

want repealed. However, Amnesty International is now concerned about arguments that human rights should be curtailed if this means the fight against terrorism could be prosecuted more effectively. There are various moves by the government to deport people, by signing a Memorandum of Understanding regulating the arrangements by which assurances regarding the treatment of particular individuals can be sought prior to their deportation, and the government is looking for agreements with Algeria, Egypt, Tunisia and Morocco (and possibly Libya, Pakistan, Sri Lanka and India) where torture is known to take place.

There is the serious issue of exceptional rendition, and the following example concerns two men (names available) from the Yemen who were transferred from the US detention facility at Guantanamo Bay in Cuba, on 20 June, 2005 and were effectively disappeared for over a year and a half in Jordan, where they were detained incommunicado without charge or trial in unknown locations, held and interrogated by guards they say came from the USA. Neither was told why they were detained or allowed access to their family, lawyers, diplomatic representatives or visits from the International Committee of the Red Cross or other detainees.

As Quakers believe that there is that of God in everyone, it is imperative that we seek to address the complacency now affecting our Society, and I mean the Religious Society of Friends, with this very important concern.

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