

Are we aroused to action?

Barbara Forbes discusses the recent Q-CAT conference

Torture is something we can be reluctant to think about. We don't like to countenance the idea that people will deliberately inflict pain on others for whatever reason, and we don't like the idea that 'civilised' countries collude and even carry out such behaviour.

The Quaker Concern for the Abolition of Torture (Q-CAT) was set up in 2004 to take forward the concern that had first been raised at Yearly Meeting thirty years earlier. Q-CAT is an independent charity, with three official supporting Area Meetings, to which Meeting for Sufferings has delegated this work.

As part of our activities this year, we held a conference at Friends House in early November entitled 'Preventing torture – effective action'. We were fortunate to engage four experts to help us to look at this topic from different angles. Richard Carver, co-author of *Does Torture Prevention Work?*, outlined the research on the effectiveness or otherwise of prevention mechanisms which governments are supposed to put in place; Ray Bull, a world expert on non-aggressive interview techniques, provided a wealth of detail on the 'PEACE' model of interviewing that he created many years ago and which, to his surprise and pleasure, was referred to in a recent United Nations report; Elizabeth Stubbins Bates, from the University of Oxford, reminded us of the obligation to train armed forces in international humanitarian law, and how this is or is not being put into practice; and Anna Edmundson, coordinator of the UK's National Preventive Mechanism, told us about the work done by this organisation and how people can get involved.

With such a barrage of high-level information, it was no wonder that the participants felt somewhat overwhelmed by the end of the day – but the different perspectives gave clarity to the present situation in Britain and the rest of the world. We will be picking up on individual topics in future newsletters and briefings, which are sent to individual supporters and supporting Meetings and put on the website – so please do look out for them.

As usual, it is individual snapshots that remain

in people's minds and everybody has their own memories. Mine include:

- In some countries police have monthly performance targets, so you're more likely to be tortured if the police pick you up towards the end of the month. (Richard Carver)
- If you can't initiate a conversation and engage with the suspect, leave the room and get somebody who can. (Ray Bull)
- Regimental culture could increase the risk of torture – 'survivability' is regarded as giving prestige, and those who endure psychological torture successfully learn how to use it on others. (Elizabeth Stubbins Bates)
- The UK's National Preventive Mechanism (obligatory for all countries that have signed the Optional Protocol to the UN Convention against Torture and Other Cruel, Inhuman or Degrading Treatment or Punishment) is the largest and most complex in the world, making thousands of visits to places of detention in the UK each year. (Anna Edmundson)

The Q-CAT trustees are very excited about having made these contacts and we fully intend to follow them up in our mission to bring this concern to the forefront of Friends' minds.

In 1974 London Yearly Meeting minuted its concern about torture as a 'moral contagion which has spread throughout the world', involving both systematic physical ill-treatment and the misuse of psychology and other sciences and technologies. Yearly Meeting asked the question: 'Is this evil one that will arouse us to action as our Society was once aroused by the evil of slavery?' (*Quaker faith & practice* 23.30).

Given Q-CAT's struggles to raise the level of Friends' active engagement, it seems that even after more than forty years, we still have a lot to do.

Barbara is a Q-CAT trustee.

Further information: <http://qcat.org.uk>