

# Q-CAT

# QUAKER CONCERN FOR THE ABOLITION OF TORTURE

## JUNE 2020

## NEWSLETTER No.40

Charity No 1093757

The Religious Society of Friends declares itself to be utterly opposed to the use of torture and determined to spare no effort to bring it to an end...  
Hamilton Declaration 1976

This comes hoping that you and yours are well in mind, body and spirit in these difficult times and that, if not, you are able to get the help you need.

### Update

#### Under the cover of coronavirus

Jonathan Freedland, writing in the Guardian 16/5 highlights the opportunities that the world's leading "authoritarians, tyrants and bigots" are finding to pursue their aims. This might be directly by using the coronavirus against part of their population. For example, there is emerging evidence that Bashar al-Assad is deliberately leaving Syrians in opposition-held areas more vulnerable to the pandemic. And in China 1 million Uighur Muslims are held in internment camps, in cramped conditions with inadequate sanitation and poor medical facilities and reportedly being forced to work as labourers, filling in for non-Muslims who are allowed to stay at home: optimum conditions for the virus to spread.

Indirectly, the virus is working by creating a global distraction "allowing unprincipled rulers to make mischief when natural critics at home and abroad are preoccupied with the urgent business of life and death".

#### Syrians on trial in Germany for war crimes

As reported in the Guardian 22/4 the first trial for war crimes relating to state torture in Syria began in Germany on 23/4. Private Eye, no.1522 (22/5 to 4/6) covering the same story, explained that the regime could not be tried before the International Criminal Court in the Hague because Syria was not party to the treaty which set it up. But the Geneva Convention 1953, which Syria *had* signed, gives domestic courts of all countries jurisdiction over war crimes and crimes against humanity, regardless of the accused's nationality or where they hide.

The defendants, Anwar Raslan and Eyad al-Gharib defected from Syria and applied for asylum in Germany. Raslan who was commanding officer at the Damascus Security Branch 251 is charged with overseeing torture of 4000 people and murdering 58, al-Gharib, a lesser official, with assistance to torture and murder. Horrific details of alleged crimes have already been given at the trial. The trial may take two or three years. It is hoped that in addition to judging the two defendants it will lay bare the workings of a violent system that suppressed and murdered thousands of victims.

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## Immunity from prosecution

Q-CAT has recently sent a letter to Ben Wallace MP, Minister of Defence, giving reasons for their opposition to a Bill that is currently before Parliament and requested that further consideration was taken about it becoming law.

This Bill, the Overseas Operations (Service Personnel and Veterans) Bill, would in effect create immunity for any acts of torture undertaken by UK personnel that took place more than five years ago. This move by the Government led to a joint statement, made on 18th March 2020 by Amnesty International UK, Freedom from Torture, Liberty, Redress, the Rendition Project, Reprieve, and Rights Watch UK expressing their deep concerns about this. These charities wrote

“It cannot be right that the UK will not prosecute acts of torture if they took place more than five years ago... The erosion of global rules against torture would put UK personnel at risk by endangering British soldiers detained by foreign forces overseas. Any perceived licence to torture will compromise our cooperation with military allies who maintain categorical opposition to such abuses. The Government should act on the suggestion in its previous consultation on this issue, and make clear there will be no quarter or concession for those who engage in torture.”

Earlier, in 2019, the Government had held a ‘consultation’, the consultation mentioned above, about whether there should be such immunity extended to agents of the Government. Human rights charities in the UK, including Q-CAT, responded in detail to the consultation questions, opposing the proposal. Nevertheless, the Government has proceeded with it and the Bill has had its first reading. The second is imminent.

Apart from the reasons given in the Charities’ joint statement, which Q-CAT shares, there are other reasons for our disquiet. Truth and justice are two of core Quaker Testimonies. Quakers hold that the pursuit of both these are critical elements for the human community and for establishing peace and security. This bill seems to neither uphold justice nor to uphold the necessity for a search for truth in the face of ill-doing.

Under the heading “Why British Troops must not be placed above the law” the Head of International Advocacy at Freedom from Torture gives a good summary of the reasons to oppose the Bill, in the online journal Each Other (eachother.org.uk).

### Practical action against torture

Huddersfield Quakers and the local Roots of Resistance group are active in the campaign against the University of Huddersfield training course for the Bahraini police force (reported in *the Friend* 27/3/20). They have been holding a weekly vigil, currently suspended, protesting that the course is lending legitimacy to the Bahraini police force which still behind the scenes involves torture. In this they support the Bahrain Institute for Rights and Democracy (birdbh.org).

If any Q-CAT supporters know of any other practical action which is being taken against torture please let us know at [from.qcat@hotmail.com](mailto:from.qcat@hotmail.com).

### Forthcoming Briefing on Psychological Torture and Cybertorture

Just as we were about to publish a Briefing paper on psychological torture and cybertorture along came coronavirus. These matters seemed far too important to risk going unnoticed amid the anxieties surrounding the pandemic. So it seemed right to defer publication, but we intend to publish soon.

### Constituency Information

We had a good response to our request to email contacts to let us know which constituency they live in:

One strand of Q-CAT’s work is holding the government to account and to this end we write to government departments, ministers and MPs as appropriate. It is useful sometimes to be able to focus on specific MPs known to be particularly interested in or expert on a matter. Since MPs are usually willing to respond only to their own constituents it would be helpful to know which constituency you live in so that in certain circumstances we might be able to ask you to direct a specific matter to your MP.

To that end, if you are willing, **please could you reply saying which constituency you live in (or your town) and who is your current MP.**

It will also be interesting and useful to know from this, the geographical spread of our supporters.

If you have not yet replied to this and are willing, please do so. For those we contact by post, we are able to tell the constituency from the address.