

Global activists adopt new initiative to counter torture in times of terrorism

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Tunis, Geneva, and Brussels: Following a two-day meeting in Tunis convened by the World Organization Against Torture (OMCT); leading anti-torture activists from 23 countries discussed a concerted approach to challenge the growing acceptance of torture in volatile security contexts.

“The question is not about addressing the threat that terrorism poses to our societies, but about *how* we address it”, said Mokhtar Trifi, OMCT Vice President. “The members and partners of our SOS-Torture Network see on a daily basis how the legitimate fight against violent extremism is subverted to justify torture, despite the universal ban against it. We need to remember that, while no one is above the law, no one is below the threshold of the law either, whatever the crimes they stand accused of. Poking holes in the international legal framework endangers us all. It is urgent to fight this toxic narrative, even more so with the current turn toward populist governance in many places, including in democratic countries.”

The participants to the new Working Group “Torture & Terrorism”, who met for the first time on 5-6 February, live and work, for the most part, on the front lines of the “war against terrorism” in Africa, Asia, Europe, Latin America and the Middle East. They are faced with growing public acceptance of torture in their respective contexts. “This is despite what we know from experience, that torture doesn’t make us safer”, said Sevan Doraisamy from SUARAM, a Malaysian human rights organization. “Quite the opposite, it brutalizes societies and only feeds a vicious cycle of violence.”

Shockingly, members of anti-torture groups find themselves increasingly targeted by both sides, added Khalid Ibrahim from the Gulf Centre for Human Rights. “The biggest travesty is that States abuse the fight against terrorism to target human rights defenders, the very people we need to support the fight against violent extremists. Each of us knows a colleague who was either the victim of terrorism or of the security forces supposed to protect us. How can anyone pretend that our countries are safer when State responses to terrorist violence sweep human rights defenders in their wake?”

Ms Fionnuala Ni Aoláin, United Nations Special Rapporteur on the protection of human rights while countering terrorism and one of the patrons of the Working Group, addressed the participants via video link, highlighting the “crucial contribution of civil society groups such as this one in helping document the entrenched and systematic misuse of counter-terrorism measures.”



In the next months, the Working Group will step up its actions along three main axes:

- collection of data from the field, building on the members' collective experiences and expertise ;
- increased support for victims of torture and human rights defenders at risk
- innovative campaigns to challenge the growing public acceptance for torture in so-called "exceptional" cases.

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