

National Religious Campaign Against Torture

Torture, Former Combatants, Political Prisoners, Terror Suspects, & Terrorists

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Public Facing Advocacy Writing

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WASHINGTON, D.C. On Tuesday, October 18, Juan Mndez, United Nations Special Rapporteur on Torture, delivered the keynote address at a briefing and panel discussion at the Church Center for the United Nations entitled: The Dangerous OverUse of Solitary Confinement: Pervasive Human Rights Violations in Prisons, Jails & Other Places of Detention. The panel was organized by 11 organizations, including the National Religious Campaign Against Torture. Earlier Tuesday, Mndez presented a report on solitary confinement to the General Assembly of the U.N.

As UN Special Rapporteur on Torture and Other Cruel, Inhuman or Degrading Treatment or Punishment, Mndez investigates charges of torture by governmental entities worldwide. Mndez has concluded that prolonged solitary confinement which he defines as solitary confinement for any amount of time longer than 15 days is a harsh measure that can cause serious psychological and physiological effects on prisoners. Because of the severe mental pain and suffering that solitary confinement may cause, it can amount to either torture or cruel, inhuman and degrading treatment, both of which are illegal in most countries.

Rev. Richard Killmer, executive director of the National Religious Campaign Against Torture, participated in the panel responding to Mndez.

The religious community is deeply concerned about the large numbers 36,000 by some estimates of prisoners in the United States who are held in solitary confinement. We are particularly concerned about the high percentage of mentally ill prisoners who are subject to this treatment, Killmer said after the panel. While solitary confinement causes psychological damage to people who were not mentally ill in the first place, it can be devastating to people with mental illness.

As an example of successful prison reform, Killmer cited the good news that Maines corrections commissioner, Joseph Ponte, who was appointed in March 2011, reduced the solitary population in that state by almost 75 percent since May. In 2010, the National Religious Coalition Against Torture and the Maine Council of Churches worked with the Maine Civil Liberties Union and psychiatrists, psychologists and other medical personnel to urge the state legislature to limit the use of prolonged solitary confinement. That led to legislation which directed the Department of Corrections to review its policies on solitary confinement and to make recommendations that ultimately led to the steps taken by Commissioner Ponte.

The National Religious Campaign Against Torture is now urging religious people across the country to look to Maine as a model and to advocate for similar steps by legislatures and departments of corrections in their own states, Killmer said.

In addition to Killmer, the panel included David Fathi, Director of the American Civil Liberties Unions National Prison Project; Jamie Fellner, Senior Advisor for Human Rights Watchs U.S. Program; Dr. Craig Haney of the University of California at Santa Cruzs Department of Psychology; and Dr. Homer Venters of New York University Medical Schools Center for Health and Human Rights.

PANEL CO-SPONSORS:

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The National Religious Campaign Against Torture (NRCAT) is a growing membership organization committed to ending U.S.-sponsored torture, and cruel, inhuman and degrading treatment. Since its formation in January 2006, more than 300 religious organizations have joined NRCAT, including representatives from the Catholic, evangelical Christian, mainline Protestant, Unitarian Universalist, Quaker, Orthodox Christian, Jewish, Muslim, Hindu, Bahai, Buddhist, and Sikh communities. Members include national denominations and faith groups, regional organizations and local congregations.

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