

Physicians for Human Rights

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

<https://phr.org/our-work/resources/transforming-central-asian-attitudes-about-torture/>

Public Facing Advocacy Writing

Dr. Rusudan Beriashvili is an expert in forensic medicine with more than 20 years of experience combating torture around the world. A longtime PHR partner, Dr. Beriashvili has trained thousands of people in the Istanbul Protocol, the internationally recognized UN standard for investigation and documentation of torture. She is leading PHRs project to help governments and civil society across Central Asia implement these standards and create a culture that no longer tolerates torture.

One of our biggest challenges is defining what torture is. People are just beginning to realize the role of governments in torture, to understand why it is perpetrated, and also the pain and suffering it inflicts. But many people still do not appreciate the psychological impact of torture the fact that psychology is a powerful science and that psychologists can give effective input into the investigation of torture cases. In lots of cases, sometimes even judges and prosecutors do not have a clear understanding of this.

In Kazakhstan recently, we held a training for prosecutors. There were many young prosecutors, and they started with very skeptical questions and language. But after four days of long and tough discussions, a young prosecutor came to me and said: You know, now I understand not only what you are teaching, I understand that I was working in absolutely the wrong way. It was the most important compliment for me. After finishing the training, he started conducting trainings for his own colleagues. He not only gained knowledge, he now delivers knowledge.

In Tajikistan, years ago, the deputy head of the forensic medical center attended our training. He was very negative at the outset. But now, he is writing books about the Istanbul Protocol and he is one of the few people in all of Tajikistan producing independent forensic documentation of torture, which helps survivors secure justice. And in Kyrgyzstan, a representative from the state ministry was very skeptical when she first came to our training. But after two or three trainings, her mentality and perspective absolutely changed. She is now leading the work of the ministry of health in implementing the Istanbul Protocol. She is the locomotive of this work, and has become a real agent of change.

The PHR project and the Istanbul Protocol are changing beliefs and changing systems its very powerful. Five years ago, in many settings in Central Asia, it was impossible to utter the word torture or to say out loud that torture exists. Now we have governments committing to the Istanbul Protocol, we have standards for implementation, torture rehabilitation programs, documentation centers, lots of legislative changes, books being published, NGOs working on this area. The network of people who are now involved in documentation and investigation stretches across Central Asia. Just in Kyrgyzstan alone, thousands of people have been trained by PHR or our local trainers. Thanks to the Istanbul Protocol and PHRs work, the situation in Central Asia regarding torture has completely changed.

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