

Physicians for Human Rights

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

<https://phr.org/our-work/resources/two-decades-of-international-collaboration-to-prevent-torture/>

Campaign and Advocacy

By [Vincent Iacopino, MD, PhD](#)

Twenty years ago, Physicians for Human Rights (PHR) led the development of the Istanbul Protocol, which established United Nations standards on the state obligation to investigate torture and other cruel, inhuman, and degrading treatment or punishment. The Istanbul Protocol outlines international legal standards on protection against torture and sets out specific principles and guidelines on how effective legal and clinical investigations into allegations of torture and ill treatment should be conducted.

The Istanbul Protocol became an official United Nations document in 1999 and has been recognized by a number of human rights bodies, including the UN General Assembly, the UN Commission on Human Rights, the UN Committee Against Torture, the UN Special Rapporteur on Torture, and regional human rights bodies. In his annual report to the UN General Assembly in October 2014, the UN Special Rapporteur on Torture, Juan Mndez, recognized the critical role of forensic and medical sciences in the investigation and prevention of torture and other ill-treatment. The Istanbul Protocol serves as a standard for medical evidence given by experts, for benchmarking the effectiveness of the evidence, and for establishing redress for victims, he said. Quality forensic reports are revolutionizing investigations of torture. Such recognition represents a significant factor in the widespread use and acceptance of the Istanbul Protocol and its standards in medical-legal and other contexts worldwide.

The Istanbul Protocol has been routinely used by state and non-state actors to guide their investigations into torture and ill-treatment. The Protocol is now translated into more than 20 languages, and many countries as well as intergovernmental bodies have taken steps to incorporate it into their legal or policy frameworks.

Torture and other forms of ill-treatment are heinous crimes committed by state officials that are often concealed to effectively preclude justice, accountability, and redress. The Istanbul Protocol is a tool that empowers civil society to prevent torture and ill-treatment, hold perpetrators accountable, and afford victims the redress and rehabilitation that they deserve. The strength of the Istanbul Protocol lies in the global consensus that it represents and the power of the medical-legal evidence that it employs.

During the past two years, representatives of four civil society organizations (Physicians for Human Rights, the International Rehabilitation Council for Torture Victims, the Human Rights Foundation of Turkey, and REDRESS) and the four principal UN anti-torture bodies (the UN Committee against Torture, the UN Subcommittee for the Prevention of Torture, the UN Special Rapporteur on Torture, and the UN Voluntary Fund for Victims of Torture) have led a large-scale project to strengthen the Istanbul Protocol involving more than 180 experts in 51 countries. The 2020 edition of the Protocol will include updates and clarifications that address the role of health professionals in different documentation contexts and provide guidance to states on implementation of the Istanbul Protocol.

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On this solemn day of support for victims of torture, the UN High Commissioner for Human Rights, Michelle Bachelet, has announced her unequivocal support for the Istanbul Protocol and the plan to publish an updated and strengthened 2020 edition of the document.

We at PHR are proud to be among the many participants in this extraordinary effort to take critical action in support of victims of torture to ensure the most fundamental right of all people to live in a world without torture.

Photo by Robert Lisak

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