

Center for the Victims of Torture

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

<https://www.cvt.org/blog/healing-and-human-rights/we-must-not-forget-survivors-torture-during-pandemic>

Public Facing Advocacy Writing

As part of an event to commemorate 26 June, the UN International Day in Support of Victims of Torture, Yusra Al-Kailani, CVT psychotherapist and resilience programming trainer, joined a distinguished panel for a webinar titled, Combatting Torture and Ill-Treatment in Times of COVID-19: Testimonies from the Ground. She joined UN experts to discuss people deprived of their liberty and abuses committed in the context of emergency legislation and other extraordinary measures.

This event was hosted by the United Nations Fund for Victims of Torture, the United Nations Human Rights Office of the High Commissioner, and the Association for the Prevention of Torture.

Here is the speech she delivered during that event.

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The International day of support of victims of torture is a special day for CVT as every year we celebrate our achievements in working with victims and honor the significant resilience we have witnessed in survivors of torture. This year was exceptional due to the situation of Covid-19 which made our mission, and that of our partners, even more important.

The current crisis has impacted all of us globally in many ways. Survivors of torture and gross human rights violations have been greatly and uniquely affected by the pandemic.

For many, the experience of quarantine and isolation has triggered memories of traumatic experiences in their past. The increased presence of security forces, restricted movement, uncertainty and fear, difficulty in accessing basic goods like food, and being separated from family and loved ones, has led to an increase in trauma related symptoms such as anxiety, fatigue, sleep problems and various physical symptoms. We've seen the effects on both the mental and physical health amongst survivors, many of whom are already struggling with past trauma and continued stress. COVID-19 has compounded this.

Through the work of our Survivors of Torture Initiative (SOTI), which focuses on strengthening civil society organizations, advancing justice efforts and trauma healing, we've observed the effects of quarantine on human rights defenders who've experienced detention and siege. In response we developed a self-help booklet which we shared with these individuals to learn about these experiences in line with offering tips and skills to manage trauma triggers. We also continue the provision of self-care and staff-care support for civil society organizations, as well as providing online and remote training for clinical teams.

CVT clinical programs in Ethiopia, Kenya and Uganda, which work both in the community and camp settings, have faced many challenges in providing in-person rehabilitation services including mental health, physiotherapy and social services during COVID-19. As a result, our services switched to use of emergency phone lines to respond to clients with ongoing supervision and mentorship. These interventions contribute to help beneficiaries cope with anxiety and stress during quarantine. However, one of the challenges we faced was clients' accessibility to phones and finding ethical ways for consent when clients had to use a phone from a neighbor or other family member. We have been facing challenges in cases of domestic violence, gender based violence, high risk clients (such as suicidality or self-harm) and finding ways of supporting them. This has created a great need for innovative but low-tech tele-mental health and physiotherapy approaches.

The fear of COVID-19 hitting refugee camps has been of particular concern to CVT. In these contexts social distancing is almost impossible and health facilities are often limited. Communication is also a challenge and CVT has had to find creative ways to provide key information to beneficiaries. In Ethiopia, counselors have been broadcasting pre-recorded messages via megaphones while riding around on bicycles.

In CVT's Jordan program which works in an urban setting, lockdown occurred rapidly, creating uncertainty and anxiety among both our staff and beneficiaries. In addition, the lockdown started in the middle of the healing groups 10-week cycle, when survivors normally have the opportunity of sharing their most difficult moments. Difficult decisions had to be made to suspend the cycle in order to reduce harm. Since then, CVT's interdisciplinary model has been essential in providing holistic psychosocial support to beneficiaries under the challenging conditions of lockdown. Clients have been receiving ongoing check-ins and follow ups by physiotherapists and counseling teams. Social workers have been connecting with clients to help meet their urgent needs and address protection issues where necessary. One of the greatest challenges in the community however, was that many basic services were extremely limited or unavailable. This increased the vulnerability of beneficiaries, and left CVT staff often struggling with feelings of helplessness.

At CVT we are determined to promote self-care for both our staff and partners under these difficult conditions, and have received a number of requests to support humanitarian staff as well as human rights defenders facing renewed or intensified challenges. Internally,

CVT launched a 30-day self-care challenge to share resources, skills and ideas to help balancing and cope during these difficult times and offered online trainings for partners.

As restrictions begin to be lifted in some of the locations CVT works, we are aware of how much we have learned through this time, both about our own resilience and that of our beneficiaries. Despite the huge challenges faced, we are encouraged by feedback we receive from beneficiaries, such as the person who said CVT was the only link for me to the outer world.

Thank you.

We **heal victims** of torture through unique services and professional care worldwide.

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We **advocate** for the protection & care of torture survivors and an end to torture.

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