

Center for the Victims of Torture

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

<https://www.cvt.org/blog/healing-and-human-rights/hope-human-rights-day-2021>

Public Facing Advocacy Writing

Dr. Simon Adams, CVT president and CEO

The most diverse square mile in America is not in New York or the burgeoning suburbs of Los Angeles. It is in Clarkston, Georgia, which has become a sort of modern-day Ellis Island of the South, with large numbers of refugees and asylum seekers from around the world resettling there. Many refugees find work in the local factories, and on weekends some gather outside a refurbished gas station at Refuge Coffee to talk. Others visit a local strip-mall that now has enough global cuisine options to make it the envy of a cosmopolitan metropolis many times its size.

In the heart of Clarkston, in a little wooden cottage off the side of the road, I recently met with a young man from West Africa who had been tortured in his home country for the crime of being gay. He was shackled and repeatedly beaten, and many other unspeakable things were done to him. Joshua, as I will call him, wanted to show me his scars, but this was not a sad meeting. It was a celebration.

Joshua has recently been granted asylum in the United States, in a state where less than three percent of asylum cases receive a positive verdict. The organization I work for, the Center for Victims of Torture (CVT), had helped him on his journey of recovery. He wanted to thank CVT for the healing that he had received from our staff. Working with trauma counselors over a period of several years, Joshua has moved from someone who was unable to make eye contact, to becoming a human rights advocate in his own right. The scars remain, but he is now starting his own business while also still helping other African refugees and asylum seekers navigate the difficult resettlement process.

Torture is intentional. Its true purpose is not the harvesting of information, but the breaking of a human being. While its cruelty is always individual, survivors of torture often remark upon how it has poisoned their relationship with the world, destroying their trust in humanity. People like Joshua may eventually be released from detention long enough to flee their country, but some are so emotionally wounded by their experiences that they feel incapable of reestablishing human relationships.

I am new to CVT, and while I've spent the last decade of my career exposing mass atrocity crimes and doing human rights advocacy with the UN Security Council, survivors like Joshua are teaching me what it means to help victims of torture, persecution and conflict-related trauma to heal. I'm learning how that kind of help not only requires experienced teams of psychological counselors, physiotherapists and social workers to work with survivors, but that professionals in complementary fields need support too. For example, CVT provides training to attorneys who offer legal counsel to asylum seekers and refugees on how to mitigate secondary trauma as they confront the humanitarian crisis on the U.S. Southern border.

Seventy-three years ago, on 10 December 1948, when ambassadors from around the world gathered at the temporary home of the UN General Assembly in Paris and adopted the [Universal Declaration of Human Rights](#), they realized the historical significance of the moment. They were committing, for the first time, to collectively recognize the inherent dignity and the equal and inalienable rights of all members of the human family. This included, in Article 5, a universal prohibition on torture and other forms of cruel, inhuman or degrading treatment or punishment. But I don't think those assembled diplomats could ever have imagined that in the year 2021 there would now be [82.4 million](#) people in the world displaced by persecution, conflict and atrocities double the number from a decade ago and the highest level since the Second World War. The Office of the UN High Commissioner for Refugees [recently argued](#) that based on this trajectory, the question is no longer if forced displacement will exceed 100 million people but rather when.

Disturbingly, of the more than 80 million people who are currently displaced, 68 percent are from five countries Syria, Venezuela, Afghanistan, South Sudan and Myanmar. What those countries have in common is not just long-term conflict, but appalling human rights records that include the use of torture and persecution of people because of their ethnicity, religion, sexual orientation or political views.

The whole point of torture is to deny someone's humanity and make them disappear into the darkness. But Joshua and tens of thousands of others like him are living proof that when survivors engage in the difficult process of recovery and rehabilitation, the light returns. And a life regained illuminates an elemental truth together we are not just exposing and eradicating torture, we are building hope. On International Human Rights Day, that is something worth remembering and celebrating.

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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877.265.8775 cvt [at] cvt.org

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