

Physicians for Human Rights

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

<https://phr.org/our-work/resources/remembering-the-victims-of-us-torture/>

Public Facing Advocacy Writing

Sondra Crosby, MD on June 28, 2012

Is it torture to waterboard a person, slam them against walls, deprive them of sleep, and force them into stress positions until they cry out for mercy? Close your eyes and imagine this is being done to your husband, your sister, or your child; it would seem to be an easy question to answer. Certainly, prior to September 11, 2001, it was an easy call for the US, which labeled such practices torture. What we universally agree is torture is not changed by the passage of time, special circumstances or who we do it to. Torture is torture.

Yet today, some are asking whether such interrogation techniques are effective. Here's the answer of Senator John McCain, who was tortured: under torture a person will say anything he thinks his captors want to hear true or false if he believes it will relieve his suffering. Often, information provided to stop the torture is deliberately misleading.

If it's clearly torture, and it doesn't appear to work, why does the effort to justify waterboarding and other forms of torture continue to be heard in America? Former CIA officer Jose Rodriguez has been on book tour, touting the effectiveness of making some terrorism suspects uncomfortable for a few days. Of course, we can't judge for ourselves just how uncomfortable we made them. Rodriguez defied a court order and destroyed over 90 tapes with hundreds of hours of the interrogations. Apparently he concluded that the heat from destroying the tapes would be nothing compared to what it would be if the tapes ever got into the public domain. It seems that the image of making someone uncomfortable would have been devastating to us.

In a digital world, it's easy to believe that evidence of torture can be destroyed or silenced, leaving a vacuum into which distortions, lies, and hypocrisy can be peddled as truth. But the truth of what happened in Guantanamo and other US detention sites is out there, forever etched on the bodies, psyches, and souls of the hundreds of men who were released from detention after the US government determined they were not a threat. We know, because we've met some of these men.

Rashid was never a threat to the US; indeed, upon his release from US detention, he was given a document confirming his innocence. Kidnapped from his hospital bed in eastern Africa, Rashid spent five years in US custody in various detention sites including some of the worst in Afghanistan. During that time, he suffered severe beatings, prolonged stress positions and solitary confinement, sexual assault, sleep deprivation, forced nakedness, the withholding of food and medical care, and forced intravenous medication during interrogations. The unbearable pain and profound suffering Rashid experiences to this day was evident during an interview with Rashid as he described the water room, where he was forced to lie on a wet mat, naked and handcuffed, having cold water poured on him while men attempted to insert the spout of a water jug into his anus. Uncomfortable?

As we approach the end of June, Torture Awareness Month, try to think of Rashid and the many other men like him who spent years in US custody and were subject to waterboarding and other practices such as sexual humiliation, prolonged stress positions, and sleep deprivation. Think of these men when you hear talk about enhanced interrogation techniques. Imagine if your son, your father, or another one you love was imprisoned and tortured in a foreign land. What would you call it? We call it torture and it is unconscionable.

At the very least, the men who were made uncomfortable deserve medical and psychological help. They deserve reparations. They deserve justice.

To this day, Rashid still suffers from the torture he endured while detained, describing himself as a ghost wandering around the town in isolation, unable to eat or sleep.

Much attention has (rightfully) been focused on ensuring the release of these men from their confinement. We must not forget, however, that the years they spent in US custody have a lasting effect on the bodies and the minds of men like Rashid. Our concern for the men who have been harmed must not stop when they walk out of the prison gates. If we cannot hold torturers accountable for their actions, we can at least commit ourselves to healing their victims.

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