Talking Past the Torture; At Falls Church Clinic, Immigrants From All Over Bear Marks of Cruelty and Confront the Damage

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Body

As Osman Mohamed sat down for his weekly therapy session in a third-floor office in ***Falls Church***, the sound of a jackhammer outside stopped him cold. To his therapist, it was merely background noise on busy Route 7, but to Mohamed, a Somali refugee, it brought back memories of an attack on his home by gunmen who beat and terrorized him.

For Mohammad Ali, who was ***tortured*** in an Afghan prison, the sound of footsteps outside his apartment or a knock at the door can trigger a panic attack. For Khassan Baiev, a doctor from Chechnya, the whirring of a helicopter conjures up terrifying flashbacks of the air raids that ravaged his town and leveled his hospital.

The three men are among thousands of ***torture*** and trauma survivors who have flooded the Washington region in recent years. Doctors have diagnosed post-traumatic stress disorder in all three, and they are part of a growing clientele at the nonprofit Center for Multicultural Human Services, a private mental health facility in ***Falls Church***.

There, a project called the Program for Survivors of ***Torture*** and Severe Trauma, funded by U.N. and federal grants, offers therapy and other services to refugees and asylum-seekers, some of whom have endured treatment so horrific they can barely speak of it.

"The Washington area is teeming with people who have suffered from ***torture*** or severe war trauma," said Judy Okawa, the clinical psychologist who heads the program. "It's downright frightening how many there are that need our services."

At least half a million ***torture*** survivors now reside in the United States, the Minneapolis-based Center for Victims of ***Torture*** estimates. The Washington area has one of the biggest concentrations--10,000 to 40,000, according to the ***Falls Church*** center.

Since the late 1970s, they have arrived in waves from around the world: first Southeast Asia, then Central America and the Balkans, now mostly from Africa. As they create new lives in a new land, most ***torture*** victims suffer in silence. Thousands of other refugees may struggle and prosper here, but ***torture*** survivors often remain prisoners of their wounded psyches.

The ***Falls Church*** program, launched two years ago with a $ 30,000 annual contribution from the United Nations, has served about 200 such refugees from 35 countries. Just since Oct. 1, the center has received 44 referrals; it now has a waiting list.

This ***fall***, the program was awarded an annual grant of $ 500,000 from the State Department, part of $ 7.2 million in federal funding for 16 ***torture*** treatment centers nationwide. But the money cannot be spent on administration, so the ***Falls Church*** center needs to raise about $ 50,000 each year to support the grant.

It also needs more trained mental health workers, Okawa said, plus volunteers to help clients with transportation and language barriers.

Rising Tide of ***Torture***

The rising caseload reflects what human rights advocates say is a dramatic increase in ***torture*** worldwide. Amnesty International reported in June that the number of countries using ***torture*** increased 23 percent from 1989 to 1999. A subsequent report said ***torture*** occurs in more than 150 countries and is "widespread" in nearly half. Many victims are women and--increasingly--children.

According to Amnesty, beatings--with fists, sticks, gun butts, whips, iron pipes and bats--constitute the most common ***torture*** method. Others are rape, electric shocks, suspension of the body, suffocation and mock execution. Victims have been submerged in water, burned with cigarettes, dragged behind cars and deprived of sleep.

"The stories are so gruesome. We always think we've heard the worst story, then something even worse comes along," Okawa said.

"Part of what makes ***torture*** still exist in the world is that people don't want to hear about it," said Ronda A. Bresnick, program coordinator at the center. The result is what therapists call "a conspiracy of silence."

Several clients from Sudan, Okawa said, have described secret ***torture*** centers known as "houses of ghosts" because many who enter do not come out alive. In them, dissidents have been beaten while suspended from ceiling fans, she said, or forced to lie on searing tin roofs and stare into the sun. Common household tools such as pliers are used to inflict excruciating pain, she said.

Some of the worst accounts involve children: The center now has four child clients from Africa, one of whom was raped before she was a year old, Okawa said.

Nearly 80 percent of the women in therapy and half the men have been raped or sexually ***tortured***, she said. Severe depression is a common reaction; about eight in 10 people seen at the center are suicidal, Okawa said.

Therapy and Its Toll

Besides listening to clients and ***talking*** to them about their fears, the therapists employ techniques such as art therapy and sand trays to draw out their feelings. The sand trays are used as settings for small figurines--of people, animals, buildings and other objects--that clients select and arrange as they wish. The therapists then encourage the trauma victims to explain their creations.

Art and sand tray therapy are considered especially effective in treating children but also can help adults express thoughts and emotions they've repressed.

Some survivors' accounts are so disturbing that the therapists suffer "secondary traumatization" themselves, Okawa said. "We have nightmares. We may have intrusive memories. . . . We may feel the same sense of isolation that the survivor does, because no one else really understands."

Waking up one Saturday morning, Okawa recalled, she was shocked to see in the shadows on her ceiling the image of a man strung up by his wrists. "I considered that a warning sign," she said.

Therapists also have reported that they cry more easily and are more affected by violence on television. They are encouraged to take time off, but the growing caseload makes that hard to do, Okawa said.

The ultimate aim of the therapy is to help clients process the experiences that traumatized them so they can "move on with their lives," Bresnick said.

No Escaping Trouble

Besides their psychic wounds, some refugees are afflicted by the anxiety of living in legal limbo. One of them is Mohamed, 35, who belonged to a minority clan in Somalia. In 1991, his home was invaded by gunmen who accused the clan of treason. They tied Mohamed up with an electrical cord, he said, beat and ***tortured*** him with bayonets, and terrorized his wife and children.

"I felt helpless. They told me, 'If we ever see you here again, you will die.' "

He fled the Somali capital with his family, but his parents, an older brother and his brother's three children were killed. After eight years in Kenya--first in a refugee camp and then in Nairobi--he paid a smuggler to get him to the United States. He sneaked across the border from Mexico in 1999 and applied for asylum. But his case has dragged on, and he worries about his wife and children, still illegal ***immigrants*** in Kenya.

"They're in hiding, and I'm starving here," said Mohamed, who lives in Gaithersburg with a Somali family that lets him stay in their basement for now. "I'm supposed to be a good father and help them, but I can't."

Although he has a university education and speaks four languages, Mohamed lacks a work permit and fears that getting a job without one would jeopardize his asylum case, said his therapist, Afshin Nili, who began seeing him in July. He takes medication for depression but regularly experiences flashbacks, Nili said. He also frets that he is wearing out his welcome with the Somali family, headed by a friend of his dead brother. He eats sparingly and sometimes stays at a nearby mosque.

"He's constantly in a state of anxiety about what happened to him, about his immigration status, his family and what they are going through right now," Nili said.

Another of the center's clients, Ali, still breaks down when speaking of his 1986 arrest and ***torture*** by Afghan secret police. He was caught working on behalf of Islamic rebels in Kabul and thrown into a dank cell, where, he said, he was ***tortured*** for 40 days.

After two years in jail, he escaped to Pakistan, and he came to the United States in 1990, settling in Alexandria. His wife and two daughters joined him later, but it was not a happy reunion. Ali had learned that his wife inadvertently was responsible for his arrest in Kabul, and they soon divorced.

Angry, embittered and traumatized, Ali could no longer hold a job. Twice, he attempted suicide, he said. Two years ago, a friend got him into therapy.

"I don't like people right now," he said in a recent interview. "I get nervous very fast, and I cannot control myself."

Quick to anger, he has been fired from a number of jobs for arguing with customers, he said. Even hearing people curse can trigger memories of his torturers, he said, so he keeps to himself in the Alexandria apartment he shares with two other Afghans.

His Iranian-born therapist, Rouyan V. Jones, said Ali suffers from depression, panic attacks, obsessive thoughts and hallucinations. Yet, in their discussions, conducted in Farsi, "his conversation is filled with beautiful symbolic poems," she said. Now 53, Ali studies Persian poetry and does artwork as part of his therapy.

Witness to Slaughter

Unlike most of those in treatment at the ***Falls*** ***Church*** site, Baiev, the doctor from Chechnya, has gained wide renown. The 37-year-old performed heroically during fighting between Russian troops and Chechen rebels, treating civilians and combatants from both sides and earning accolades from human rights groups.

The former judo champion was nearly executed three times, once after being held in a pit for a week in a Chechen mountain stronghold and more recently by Russian mercenaries who used him as a human shield while on patrol.

But his worst memories stem from January, when more than 300 people were blown up in a minefield while fleeing the siege of Grozny. Baiev, the only doctor left in his hospital, spent two days without sleep doing amputations and other surgery. Standing amid pools of blood and piles of body parts, he said he operated until he collapsed, then would be taken outside to have snow rubbed on his face to revive him.

"It was like a nightmare," he said. "While I was operating on one, I dreaded to think how many other people would die."

Russian forces branded Baiev a "bandit doctor" for saving the life of a Chechen rebel leader, and his hospital was destroyed. A U.S. human rights group helped him escape, but his wife and five children were left behind. Now living with friends in suburban Maryland, he fears for his family's safety. Last month, his nephew was killed by gunmen in Chechnya.

Baiev ***confronts*** his grief and stress in his weekly therapy.

Seated at a small table during a recent session, he gingerly placed figures in a sand tray. At one end he put a house; nearby, a mother and some children, two birds and a dolphin. The dolphin "strikes me as a very kind animal," he said. The birds to him were doves of peace.

"That was how it was in our country. We used to have big, happy families," he said.

Okawa, sitting opposite, asked if those times might come again.

"I'm afraid not," Baiev responded. When the first round of fighting in Chechnya ended four years ago, people rebuilt their houses and ***talked*** about raising families, he said. But now, after the second war, "I don't believe people have these hopes. There's not a single house that didn't lose somebody in the family. . . . There's no hope for them . . . no support for them."

But the scene in the sand tray before him was a hopeful one, Okawa pointed out. "As long as you can create this, you still have those feelings," she told him.

The realization seemed to touch something deep inside the doctor. He took off his glasses, covered his face with his hands and wept silently for several minutes.

"This came out of you naturally," Okawa said softly.

Later, she reflected on Baiev's trauma: "He saved hundreds and hundreds of lives--but he remembers the lives he couldn't save."

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