

World Organization against Torture (OMCT)

30th Anniversary Forum

Statement of the UN High Commissioner for Human Rights

Zeid Ra'ad Al Hussein

24 November 2016, 11:00

Ms Jilani

Ms Quiroga Carrillo,

Members of the World Organisation Against Torture,

Colleagues and Friends,

I am honoured to address this gathering of the anti-torture movement. Among you are many human rights defenders and anti-torture experts – people who devote great time and thought to assist victims and document the horrors of torture. I commend your 30 years of advocacy for an end to torture, which we mark today, and the deep and lasting benefit your assistance has brought to many victims.

Your struggle has been global, regional and national, with almost 300 organisations participating in your network today. Their work has often been undertaken in conditions of danger. In this room are many people who have faced the threat of violence and personal reprisals.

You have brought invaluable assistance to the human rights bodies of the United Nations. The international legal framework on torture is uniquely solid and comprehensive, and this is thanks in part to the dedication of your movement. You participate in the reporting and monitoring performed by the Special Rapporteur on

Torture, the Committee against Torture and the Subcommittee on Prevention of Torture, as well as to the assistance given to victims and their families by the Voluntary Fund.

Torture is an unequivocal crime, prohibited under all circumstances, bar none. No matter what threat to society, it is unjustifiable and illegal to cause pain to defenceless men, women and children. Torture is beneath contempt, and unworthy of any decent society.

The continued existence of torture today is deeply disturbing. Across every region, it persists, and in many countries, it is growing. State and non-State actors practice torture, in multiple conflict zones. Increasing concerns about protecting national security and national borders have also led to violations. And people seeking to profit from migration flows are frequently able to exercise absolutely merciless control over vulnerable migrants and refugees.

The victims come from all walks of life: men, women, and heartbreakingly, a growing number of children. They are indigenous people and minorities; human rights defenders, political opponents and journalists; migrants; people with disabilities; people who are lesbian, gay, bisexual, trans or intersex; or simply inhabitants of certain neighbourhoods. They are selected for torture at random, or targeted and hunted down.

In a context of often extreme secrecy, it would be difficult to estimate the full number of victims of torture globally. But with conflicts multiplying in many parts of the world, and millions of people leaving places of violence and deprivation to seek a better life, many reports indicate that torture and ill-treatment are on the rise, in contexts that are increasingly complex.

In many countries, we are also witnessing a growing and shocking narrative that condones and even incites the use of torture. Torture is portrayed as an effective short-cut and a lesser evil. But torture is the infliction of pain by a coward, on men, women and children who are captive and defenceless. It extracts no useful information, because people in extreme pain will say anything at all. Torture will bring no good to anyone, but it will inflict great evil on many individuals – and it will corrupt and warp every society where it is commanded, inflicted and condoned. As a psychologist working in northern

Iraq recently told me, “Take one member of society, torture him, send him back to society, and it is as if you had tortured the entire society”.

In coming years we will need all our joined forces of advocacy and action to put an end to torture around the world, and to assist those who have suffered it. The World Organisation Against Torture is among the world’s largest coalitions of non-governmental organisations fighting against arbitrary detention, torture, summary and extrajudicial executions, forced disappearances and other forms of violence, and I hope to see an even stronger alliance between you and other anti-torture actors. I am already pleased to see the UN mechanisms working together more closely, and I trust this will continue.

I also encourage all of us to seek the perspectives and views of victims. They have an important role to play in holding torturers to account, but their sadly expert guidance should also be sought regarding appropriate care and assistance to others, and they are uniquely qualified to act as advocacy for change. We must constantly remind decision-makers that there cannot be effective prevention of future victims without pursuing accountability for past violations. All national anti-torture programmes should include this point – in addition to assistance and rehabilitation for victims, prevention, and improved application of anti-torture standards.

Moreover, there needs to be much broader understanding of the specific harms and trauma caused by torture, and the assistance required for its healing. Many migrants, including unaccompanied children, have faced torture, either before they left, on their journey or even – perhaps most shockingly – on their arrival. They require careful interviewing and attentive rehabilitation, and the expertise on these and related issues should be coming from you. I hope more can be done to disseminate your experience and knowledge on these topics, including to migrant destination countries.

One final point: we must strengthen our advocacy and action for a stronger and wider space for action by civil society – a space that is under threat in many societies. Last year, the Treaty Body Committees adopted the San José Guidelines Against Intimidation or Reprisals, which remind States of their responsibility to prevent and investigate acts of reprisals against people who have cooperated with UN human rights

bodies. The Coordination Committee of Special Procedures and each of the treaty bodies have designated a focal point or rapporteur on reprisals. And a new mandate has been given to the Assistant Secretary General for Human Rights, Andrew Gilmour, to lead UN-wide efforts to put an end to reprisals.

Above all, I thank all of you, both personally and on behalf of my Office, for your dedication and help. May the world put an end to torture within the next 30 years.