

Quaker initiative to end torture

By Anne-Marie Zilliacus

WE ARE NOT THE KIND of people who want to kill, imprison, go to war illegally, condone torture—by troops, by law enforcement personnel, by outsourcing to another country. Yet these things happen and have happened at our expense, with our tax dollars. Fear is the reason we have

It is this fear and the acquiescence that grows out of it that the Quaker Initiative to End Torture (QUIT) seeks to address. The QUIT Conference, held in Greensboro, North Carolina in June this year brought Quakers from across North America together to learn about the problem and begin to work towards

hard work, work that addresses the worst parts of humanity, that goes to the darkest place you can go. But it is the Quaker way to carry some light to this place. The weekend conference provided those present with some tools to do this necessary work and go back to their communities to begin.

At a panel discussion at the University of Ottawa, Dr. Amir Attarn, a professor in the faculty of law at the university, talked about Canada's military, which is now complicit in torture in Afghanistan.

There were few Canadians at the conference, only three from Ottawa Meeting: Sue Hill, Tuulia Law and me. Americans see Canada almost as a haven, and Canadians are held up as an example. It is easy to see torture as an American problem but Canada is no bystander,

let it happen—fear of criminals, of the other, of becoming a victim ourselves. When this happens, we can convince ourselves that we must put conscience aside. We become trained to think of ourselves as less than ourselves, forgetting the universal connections between and among us that make us better than ourselves.

the abolishment of torture.

This will be work that could take as long as the Quaker work to abolish slavery in the United States, one hundred years. It is work that could take more than the lifetime of those present at the conference. John Calvi, the originator and convener of the QUIT conference, called it

er, no shining example. We have the Mahar Arar case to show that Canada is complicit. People are detained in Canada on security certificates at Toronto West Detention Centre—all Muslim, Arab. They are detained on secret evidence for long periods of incarceration with all the accompanying uncertainty and humiliation. Four men have come

forward in Canada with stories of torture overseas. In the post 9/11 atmosphere, three of the four had already been under investigation by CSIS before they left Canada. All were asked questions under torture that could only have benefited a Canadian investigation. All had credible stories of torture, and Canada is complicit.

Torture is unequivocally banned in laws worldwide, yet there is a debate going on about the need to revisit rules about torture. Before September 11, 2001, we were in a world where the legal status of torture was certain.

It was forbidden, and the struggle was for compliance. Now, certainty has slipped with challenges to an outright ban coming from places like Harvard, where it has been suggested that it simply needs high level approval. Torture has new names, such as aggressive questioning, or stress and duress interrogation. If it becomes accepted, where does one draw the line—the victim of torture, a suspect, the suspect's sister or friend?

AT A PANEL DISCUSSION at the University of Ottawa, Dr. Amir Attarn, a professor in the faculty of law at the university, talked about Canada's military, which is now complicit in torture in Afghanistan. Canada has an agreement with the Afghan government to hand over prisoners of war. At law, Dr. Attarn said, handing over prisoners means that Canada has

entered into a treaty with the Afghan government and, in Afghanistan, torture continues to take place as a routine part of police procedures. He compared the way that Canada has dealt with the transfer of prisoners to Afghan forces with the Dutch

Jennifer Harbury, plenary speaker at the QUIT Conference. Jennifer is an attorney, author and activist whose husband, Mayan resistance leader Efraín Bámaca Velásquez, was captured alive by the Guatemalan military on March 12, 1992. He was

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agreement for the same thing. The Dutch authorities and the Afghan Independent Human Rights Commission retained the right to visit detainees and placed safeguards on detainees being sent on to a third country. By not including this provision in the Canadian agreement, Canadian soldiers are put at risk of knowingly handing over prisoners to torture, a war crime.

We are bombarded with messages about the threat of terrorism, the ticking bomb scenario, and are in danger of both giving up our civil rights and agreeing to the torture of others in the effort to prevent an unknown danger. We are threatened with the idea of the exceptional case, one where lives can be saved if we just extract information through torture. But, morals aside, would this work? "Torture is used to put fear in the population, and those who order it, believe in it." said

secretly detained and tortured, and eventually executed without trial. She has been working to investigate and document CIA involvement in torture in Latin America as well as the Middle East since then.

JENNIFER described the weaknesses in the ticking bomb scenario: the authorities nab the wrong person, torture them, get false information and the bomb goes off; the authorities nab someone who is a low link in the network, who may have done the assembly but doesn't know where the bomb is so the bomb goes off; the authorities nab someone high up in the network, torture them but they don't know where the bomb is because the information has been compartmentalized and the bomb goes off; the authorities nab someone high up who knows the information but is well trained and gives the wrong information and still the bomb goes

off. It is well known that the accuracy of statements made under torture is suspect. Ask any victim of torture and they will tell you that they were ready to say whatever the torturers wanted them to say. Careful, timely police work is better protection, and this too is well known. Our outrage against torture is well justified, practically as well as morally.

The outrage people feel about torture has to be translated into pressure to stop torture. In order to do this we have to understand that the torture at places like Abu Ghraib was not caused by a “few bad apples,” but is a policy that has been in place for fifty years or more. What is different now is that

Post-9/11, it demanded the right to torture without shame, legitimized by new definitions and new laws.” The week after the QUIT conference, 17 people were arrested in Canada on charges of terrorism. *The Star* reported that several lawyers had described the arrests of the 17 alleged to be guilty of terrorist acts as “A good spectacle ... theatrical atmosphere ... like 24 ... an awards show ... For the experts contacted by *The Star*, these events were as much about creating an image for the public as about charging the individuals. And it’s an image, they argue, that could hurt the right of the accused—12 men and five youths—to a fair trial.”

when they’ve brought their suspects into court for the first time. I’ve also learned that the stronger the police seem to be at this point, the more suspicious I become that they don’t have a complete case.”

WITH FEAR and acquiescence growing, now is not the time to allow ourselves to be terrorised by inflated news stories, but rather to stand up for the justice that has defined Canada to the world for so many years. As Quakers we have to approach torture from a spiritual point of view, thinking of the possibilities in all of us, the light in all of us, and remember those universal connections between and among us, better and bigger than fear. Torture begets fear and shame, in the torturer, the tortured and those who turn away from the knowledge of torture. We need to find ways to draw each other over the threshold of shame into action, ways to include our neighbour, ways to promote actions that fuel public outrage and promote the message that we are not the kind of people who condone torture.

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it is being done openly. Naomi Klein, writing in *The Nation* in December 2005 about the Bush Administration’s open embrace of torture, said, “Let’s be clear about what is unprecedented about it: not the torture, but the openness. Past administrations tactfully kept their ‘black ops’ secret; the crimes were sanctioned but they were practiced in the shadows, officially denied and condemned. The Bush Administration has broken this deal:

If the principal audience for this spectacle is the Canadian public, we have cause to worry about the intensified fear that will push Canadians to allow more intrusions into our civil rights with the justification that we are being protected. In the same article, Toronto lawyer Walter Fox said to *The Star*, “As a criminal lawyer, I am well aware that police and the prosecution are never stronger than at the moment

At the conference Chuck Fager asked what peace folks can learn from the military. Military planners and strategists think long term and big picture. American militarists have a program for the New American Century, century being the keyword. In our world we can take our inspiration from people like Lucretia Mott, who began work on slavery as a teenager when the work had already gone on for fifty years and then she worked on the

issue for another fifty years, living to see it abolished.

What do we need to start the work of abolishing torture? We can't ignore

Witness. With all this we can and need to construct a new story to counter the story being advocated by the conservative right wing. At the conference, several queries

about the use of torture?

Are we doing all we can to uphold and sustain those who are victims of torture?

It was suggested at the conference that Meetings organise DIRECT ACTIONS to do something visible on December 10th 2006 as an International Day of Quaker Witness.

what is happening in Canada. The number of those who are willing to address this issue in a serious way remains far too small. Canadian Yearly Meeting minuted its support of the establishment of the QUIT conference at its meeting in 2005. Now it is time for individual Friends to take up the work.

HOW CAN WE DO THIS? There is a torture industrial complex in our society and clearly our work will be to expose it. We can begin by educating ourselves and our Meetings, then making ourselves available to interfaith councils in our areas. We can offer to speak at church coffee hours, at house parties. We can speak up in personal conversations. We can work with local amnesty groups, make presentations in political science schools. We can organize plays and skits in grade schools, involve kids to create their own response. It was suggested at the conference that Meetings organize direct actions to do something visible on December 10, 2006 as an International Day of Quaker

were suggested. They can be a start for your Meeting to consider this terrible attack on our humanity.

Are we open to the promptings of love and truth in our hearts regarding our individual responsibilities to act to bring an end to torture? Are we prepared to resist the pressure to conform to the status quo?

Are we alert and mindful of the varieties of torture practiced throughout the world?

Are we open to the awareness that both spiritual and political action are needed in resisting the mechanisms that perpetuate torture? Do you know what love requires of you in terms of deepening your spirituality and strengthening your active witness?

Do our lives speak for justice and peace, and against the justifications and mindset that permit torture "for the common good?"

Do we sustain and uphold those who act under a particular concern

IN WHAT WAYS ARE YOU INVOLVED in the reconciliation between those who support the use of torture and those who oppose it, those whose humanity is damaged by torture and those who are damaged by utilizing torture?

John Calvi, in his letter to conference participants, said "our greatest dangers are denial and inaction. The greatest good will come by being faithful to the Light that guides compassionate work and restores our frail humanity in the face of unimaginable pain and systemic illness." Let us be inspired by these words to take up the work that may take more than our lifetime, to eliminate the abomination that is torture. ☞

Anne-Marie Zilliacus is a member of Ottawa Monthly Meeting. The participation at the conference of Anne-Marie Zilliacus and Tuulia Law (also a member of Ottawa Monthly Meeting) was supported financially by a grant from Canadian Friends Service Committee.