

Denmark Leads in the International Fight Against Torture. Let's Keep It That Way.

Justice is healing

For those who survived, and those tens of thousands of Syrian men, women and children whose torture in the Assad regime's underground dungeons was followed by their execution, Germany's successful prosecution and conviction last month of one perpetrator of those crimes is a step towards healing the wound of impunity.

Evidence of the Syrian regime's mass murder and torture of civilians since the start of the uprising exactly a decade ago is one of the most brutal example of crimes against humanity since the Second World War. Yet until the Higher Regional Court of Koblenz, a small historical fort city on the banks of the Rhine, put Eyad al-Gharib on trial no one had been held accountable for those crimes.

"We are convinced that justice heals," said Bianca Schmolze, an expert on the psychological harms of torture, reacting to Gharib's conviction. "Many torture survivors suffer from trauma for many years, so trials against perpetrators can contribute to an acknowledgment of the injustice they were exposed to, and to the search for truth." Germany is now rightly garnering praise from governments and human rights defenders around the world for its fulfilment of the obligation, owed by all States, to prosecute perpetrators of torture, which is illegal under international law always and everywhere.

Schmolze and her colleagues in IRCT torture rehabilitation centres in 76 countries across the world will tell you also that healing is justice; the long-term dedication and support to torture survivors needed to start remedying the grave harms inflicted on their bodies and minds. Here in neighbouring Denmark we have for decades been the global leader in fulfilling that other crucial international obligation owed to survivors of torture: the right to rehabilitation.

"You will need all that energy, Lisa," 83-year-old Danish doctor, pioneer and award-winning campaigner Inge Genefke told me when I visited her at home last October. "Work with torture prevention, rehabilitation and reparation is so hard. I know, I devoted my life to it."

Working from the mid-1970s helping Chilean torture survivors who had fled to Denmark to escape Pinochet's regime, Dr Genefke and three colleagues at Copenhagen's University Hospital established the world's first health-based approach to torture rehabilitation. For the first time, persons suffering torture were treated by a state not merely as marginalised victims, but as survivors, recognised for their resilience and deserving of the right to restore their autonomy and their central role in the community.

In 1981, Dr Genefke was one of the founders of the Rehabilitation and Research Centre for Torture Victims, which today has been split into the International Rehabilitation Council for Torture Victims (IRCT), a global organisation based in Copenhagen, and the Danish Institute Against Torture, or Dignity. The organisation I now lead, IRCT, is a movement of bold civil society actors on the front lines of the fight to protect human rights and heal those who have been subjected to the most heinous of crimes.

For half a century, then, Denmark has played a leading role in the international effort to tackle torture. But as the well documented horrors of Syria show, and as the people of Burma and Belarus face renewed onslaughts from their own dictatorships, torture in the 21st century is all too alive and well. In 2013 Amnesty International, with whom Dr Genefke worked in the 1970s to diagnose torture survivors and produce forensic evidence of torture for use in trials, reported recent cases of torture in three quarters of the world, or 141 states. The UN Convention Against Torture has been in effect since 1987 and now has 170 State Parties, including Syria and Belarus. But torture happens behind closed doors. Allegations are inevitably met with the silence of the accused. No one knows

exactly how many people are tortured today. What we do know is that IRCT supports 57,000 survivors each year, and could support many more if we had the resources.

As Denmark's government writes a new development strategy for the coming decade it has rightly made the protection and fulfilment of human rights its end goal. Torture is the gravest violation of human rights and therefore should be front and centre in any human rights-based approach to development.

Denmark's 50 years of leadership on torture rehabilitation give it a unique moral authority and standing on the world stage, not shared by any of the big powers, whether the US, China, Russia, and even the UK, who have all, to varying degrees, been accused of acts of torture in recent years.

That is why the IRCT is calling on Denmark to take the opportunity now, with a new administration in place in the US, and with Germany showing how Europe can lead on prosecuting international crimes, to reinforce its own global leadership in the fight against torture. Stand strong and proud behind this agenda. Use all possible diplomatic skills combined with support to IRCT's life-line of 160 torture rehabilitation centres around the world, supported by Danish development funding. The inclusion and empowerment of torture survivors will be the best evidence that they are not left behind, and that Denmark continues to be a moral compass in the international effort to establish a world without torture.