

Optional Protocol to the Convention against Torture

From The National Religious Campaign Against Torture's

As people of faith, we were horrified to learn of the abuses perpetrated by our government on those detained as suspected terrorists in the years after the 9/11 attacks. Torture and abuse are contrary to our belief in the fundamental dignity of each human being and violate U.S. law.

We were pleased when President Obama signed the executive order in 2009 banning torture; however, the work to stop torture forever is not yet done. We need to codify the principles of that executive order into law, and, most importantly, we need a government-funded Commission of Inquiry to conduct a full and open investigation into our use of torture and to make recommendations to ensure that torture by the U.S. never happens again. We also need to work to ensure that we do everything we can to encourage all nations of the world to end torture once and for all.

One of the most promising international safeguards to prevent torture is the Optional Protocol to the Convention Against Torture (OPCAT). This protocol builds upon the UN Convention Against Torture by requiring each signatory country to develop its own independent process of overseeing its detention facilities (including prisons, police stations, immigrant detention centers) to help ensure that cruel, inhuman, or degrading treatment, including torture, does not occur anywhere in that country. It also requires each signatory country to make its detention facilities accessible to occasional review by an international panel.

The United States was one of the leading proponents of the Convention Against Torture, signing the treaty in 1994. For those nations ratifying OPCAT, it is an important tool for implementing that treaty. By bringing transparency to detention facilities worldwide, including here in the United States (where the use of extreme isolation, and shackling of women during child birth occurs), OPCAT will dramatically reduce the opportunities for abusive treatment. Cruel, inhuman and degrading treatment can exist only in secrecy; OPCAT is designed to end that secrecy.

As of October 2010, 68 nations have signed OPCAT, and 57 nations have ratified it. It is time for the United States to do the same. We call upon the President of the United States to sign OPCAT and the U.S. Senate to ratify it. Signing and ratifying OPCAT would show the rest of the world that the U.S. is willing to work for an end to the use of torture in a transparent way and that we reject the U.S. use of torture. We also call upon both the President and Congress to support nations that have ratified OPCAT in their efforts to implement mechanisms preventing torture.

All religions believe that nations and individuals can change. Our nation erred when we resorted to torture, but we can take the necessary steps to restore our moral credibility in the international arena. OPCAT is a vehicle for our country, and for all nations of the world, to work for the day when torture is ended, forever. For more information, please visit www.nrcat.org.