

Sir,

Prisoners of war and torture need more attention

According to the definition of torture by the U.N.,¹ torture is defined as “the intentional infliction of severe mental or physical pain or suffering by or with the consent of the state authorities for a specific purpose”. In the literature, specific groups are mentioned as victims of torture, such as political, religious, or ethnic groups. In detail, it includes groups that challenge governments, mainly in developing countries, so politicians, union leaders, journalists, health professionals, human rights defenders, people in detention or prison, members of ethnic minorities, and student leaders are frequently mentioned.²

Military conflicts are actually an important source of torture.³ In the 20th century, 72 million deaths occurred in 25 conflicts worldwide.⁴ In terms of loss of disability-adjusted life years (DALYs), war was ranked sixteenth by the World Health Organization in the global burden of disease in 1990, and by the year 2020 it is expected to rank in eighth place.⁵ Among victims of war, prisoners of war (POWs) are the group that is heard from less than others and are rarely considered as victims of torture. They are often subjected to extreme physical and psychosocial stressors (during capture, or internment), so it is strongly believed that the surviving ex-POWs are fragile persons and more prone to suffer from a variety of physical, psychiatric and social disorders than

the so-called normal members of the general population.⁶⁻⁸

Physical trauma and psychosocial stressors can arise. One of these stressors is prolonged and indefinite captivity that is itself the greatest source of hardship for POWs. For example, during the Iraq-Iran war, the longest military conflict in the 20th century (1980 to 1988), nearly 21,000 of the prisoners were registered by delegations from the International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC), but others (55%) went undetected (some for ten years or more) until the exchange of prisoners in August 1990. Subsequently, many of them were in this situation for 16 years. This was apart from the poor health conditions in the detention camps⁹ and restriction of physiological needs (food, water, sleep, toilet and ...). This situation is very harmful and destructive for anyone in the world, regardless of nationality, language and religion.

We seldom hear about the POWs even though they have suffered lengthy times of captivity. In conclusion, the POW is subjected to various physical and psychological violence from which they and their families experience the consequences for years. It seems that it is necessary to bring special attention to prisoners of war as victims of torture.

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