

Foreword

Torture of children is one of the worst violations of children's rights and the mere fact that children are tortured is outrageous in itself. This practice is often hidden from the public and we do not hear much about children being targets of torture, but children count among the most vulnerable victims. Since they per se often lack the power, the knowledge and the resources to claim and advocate for their basic rights to live a life free from torture, they are defenceless and dependent on others for their protection.

Individual suffering associated with torture reaches far beyond immediate pain and fear and has long-lasting consequences, including long-term physical and mental health problems. This is particularly severe for children, as the effects of torture can interrupt the process of normal psychological, emotional and social development and can lead to more severe, long-lasting consequences than on adults. This has a direct negative impact on children as they move into adulthood. Torture against children, therefore, creates a negative "ripple effect" throughout society, the consequences of which reverberate for generations – affecting families, communities and the society at large.

Freedom from torture is a fundamental and absolute human right. Torture has been systematically prohibited in international law for the past 60 years. The UN Conven-

tion on the Rights of the Child is the human rights treaty with one of the highest number of State parties to date and it specifically prohibits torture and ill-treatment of children, reinforcing the general prohibition under the UN Convention against Torture. Furthermore, we are happy to see that this year Ms Marta Santos Pais was appointed new UN Special Representative on Violence against Children. Yet, the specific aspect of torture on children is often not reflected in the implementation of national policies and in the international discourse.

It is a fact that torture of children exists in many countries around the world. Indeed – and it is essential to understand this – anyone can become a victim of torture – regardless of age, sex, religion, ethnicity, education or political status. Torture takes place in dark, dingy rooms at the back of police stations or in prisons but also openly in the streets. Sometimes, it takes the form of systematic abuses against large groups, including children, who are targeted as an integral part of warfare. Torture exists in societies where poverty and corruption thrive. Children may be taken in for a petty crime and forced to confess under torture. Or be forced to watch the torture of their parents. Or be abused by border guards when unaccompanied by family. Or simply get beaten by police officers for loitering. Torture and

violence has become a key element of today's conflicts.

However, the precise scope and magnitude of children and torture is still unknown to us and so far, few statistics and little systematic documentation exist on the subject. To address this gap – and ultimately to put a spotlight on the fact that children are tortured and to enhance support to child survivors – the IRCT has begun to make children and torture a key thematic focus of its work. Concretely, this entails a range of initiatives to ensure that our rehabilitation services reach more children who are both primary and secondary torture victims, to help them regain their right to joy and dignity in life, and to conduct preventative action to protect vulnerable children from torture in the first place. For this purpose an advisory group of experts was formed by the IRCT Council to provide input to the scientific debate, conducting research and establishing best practice examples from our member centres.

This special issue of *TORTURE* journal supports this aim by bringing attention to the specific plight and needs of tortured children and by sharing the experience and expertise from colleagues working at rehabilitation centres for torture victims around the world. Dr Jose Quiroga's groundbreaking desk study provides great insight to the scope of torture against children constituting a basis for the current and future work of the IRCT on child victims of torture. And the hidden nature of torture against children is particularly illustrated by Dr Abdel Hamid Afana's account on children in the Palestinian territories.

In times of strife and armed conflict, children are at high risk of torture. A prominent example of this is rape – an unfortunately very common and widespread form of torture in many conflict areas, not least

in Africa, where it is systematic in countries like DR Congo and the Sudan. This aspect is discussed from different angles in the contributions from Mr Kennedy Amone-P'Olak and Mr Kitwe Mulunda Guy, who address torture against children in rebel captivity and child soldiers, and Ms Tonje Persson and Ms Cecile Rousseau, who examine interventions for children in war-torn societies. While we only have to look back 15 years to the war in Bosnia for an example of the same thing happening in Europe, the focus here lies more on children in families that seek asylum that might have suffered torture, as Ms Aida Alayarian illustrates in her article.

States have a range of obligations to prevent torture, to prosecute perpetrators and provide victims with access to rehabilitation and redress. While this of course also includes children, few court cases are brought forward and Ms Monica Feria's contribution gives insight into this challenge. Further, children are in need of specialised and most often very comprehensive medical and psychological assistance. They require targeted health treatment and specialized examinations, to which Dr Muriel Volpellier provides guidance.

All articles in this Special Issue of *TORTURE* illustrate the urgent need to increase efforts for preventing and putting an end to torture and ill-treatment against children and to provide specific treatment and rehabilitation for tortured children. I trust that this publication will be a valuable contribution for all those working for the rights of children and in the fight against torture worldwide. It brings us a step closer towards shedding light on this hidden practice and protecting children from this horrid abuse that must end.

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