

SOS-Torture

by Pierre de Senarclens

In 1983, at the suggestion of its founder, the late Jean-Jacques Gautier, the Swiss Committee against Torture convened a symposium on means of eradicating torture. The meeting, which was held in Geneva, brought together almost 70 experts from some 30 countries representing many different human rights organizations. It concluded that a way had to be found to create a more effective role for the hundreds of non-governmental organizations (NGOs) around the world which had been set up to eliminate torture. In particular, it suggested establishing a service to speed up the circulation of information gathered by these NGOs, to facilitate rapid representations to the United Nations and other regional organizations responsible for defending human rights and, when desirable, to organize concerted action. This, it was thought, might finally do something to help the victims of torture.

Objectives and methods

Following a period of planning and organization, SOS-Torture¹ came into existence in January 1986. Its objective is to eradicate torture, summary executions, “disappearances”, internment of political dissidents in psychiatric hospitals and all other cruel, inhuman or degrading treatment. From the very beginning, the organization has engaged in five types of activity, described below.

1. ***Rapid dissemination of appeals from member NGOs.*** SOS-Torture is today at the service of about 150 NGOs around the world, particularly in Latin America, Europe and Asia. Appeals began to come in very

¹ Under its new statutes, the organization is called the *World Organization against Torture (WOAT)—SOS-Torture*.

soon after the organization's founding. They are circulated through an ever-expanding network and this has greatly increased the effectiveness of anti-torture campaigns.

Let us take a common example. An NGO within the network informs us that an arrested person is in danger of being tortured or that a person has disappeared. We spread this information as quickly as possible throughout the network to the press, to the relevant international organizations and to anyone else who might be able to take action. We ask them to put pressure on the responsible authorities to obtain the release, or at least provide protection for, the person concerned. This has often helped to save people, as we know from the many messages of gratitude we have received.

The procedure is strikingly original—human rights are defended by the NGOs directly concerned, familiar with the situation in their country and region, in possession of first-hand information and able to act without delay.

SOS-Torture does not check the information it forwards; it simply attributes it to the NGO from which it comes. But only NGOs which are committed to promoting and defending human rights are accepted as members of its network. SOS-Torture's selectiveness has so far ensured that its trust is well placed.

2. ***Strategies for joint action.*** SOS-Torture imposes nothing on the NGOs; each one remains completely free to act according to its own criteria and objectives. SOS-Torture encourages concerted action and when possible provides information which can be used to assist victims.

3. ***Promoting the use of accepted international procedures to counter torture.*** Existing procedures are often little known. A request that does not have the right wording or is not sent to the right place may be ineffective or even counter-productive. Being in Geneva, our organization is ideally situated to advise NGOs in this regard. It has already published a guide in three languages on existing procedures.

4. ***Emergency help for the victims of torture*** or people on the scene who are seeking to help them. In situations in which torture is practised, rapid action can mean the difference between life and death. Sending a plane ticket or providing legal counsel can give a considerable degree of protection. And, alas, those who have been tortured must be cared for. There too, we endeavour to act in conjunction with inter-governmental and non-governmental organizations able to mobilize the necessary resources.

5. *The publication of a bulletin* six times a year provides news to the members of the network. The bulletins describe some of the appeals and the action taken, give information on judicial means of preventing torture and publish texts discussing various aspects of the problem.

The structure of SOS-Torture

In the beginning, the organization had a fairly loose structure. The group of friends who had formed SOS-Torture met regularly to support and advise the director, Eric Sottas, and his small staff². In March 1988, however, a General Assembly of representatives from the member NGOs officially adopted the organization's present statutes and elected an International Council with 15 members from various regions of the world. Some of the Council members form a smaller bureau which meets regularly to monitor the organization's work. This structure has the advantage of being as representative as possible without incurring excessive operating costs.

Problems and challenges

The founding and growth of SOS-Torture would not have been possible without the financial support of several NGOs, many private associations, the Geneva authorities, other Swiss cantons and municipalities, the Swiss Confederation, the Danish, Finnish, French and Swedish governments and the European Community.

The organization's financial resources are nevertheless far from adequate to meet its objectives. Conceived as an instrument for the use of the member-NGOs, the organization must keep its administrative structure flexible. But the appeals are expensive. They must be studied to ensure that they are in keeping with the organization's criteria and it is sometimes necessary to ask for additional information. Then the appeals are sent out in several languages by various means (telex, telepac, telefax, telephone and letter). Finally, any action must be co-ordinated and followed up. An attempt is also made to provide modern means of communication to the member NGOs and to place other services at their disposal such as assistance for the victims of torture and funds for legal work and the establishment of useful contacts.

² Address: 37-39, rue de Vermont, 1202 Geneva, Switzerland.

General points

It is hardly necessary to explain why we are seeking to eradicate torture. But it should be pointed out that our work is guided by realism. We have just celebrated the fortieth anniversary of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights which states that “No one shall be subjected to torture or to cruel, inhuman or degrading treatment or punishment”. The men and women who drew up that text and adopted it in the UN General Assembly in 1948 knew from personal experience how important it is that political life everywhere should be inspired by certain principles and that people and their governments should undertake to ensure that they are respected and show solidarity in defending them. The Nazi regime in Germany taught us how dangerous it can be to respond to repressive governments with indifference or appeasement. The founders of the United Nations understood this well—history must increasingly be viewed in global terms, for an ever denser communications network is being woven around our planet; our lives are conditioned by inextricably linked economic and social systems and we are thus obliged to experience together the tragedies which take place in our “global village”. No man, or nation, is an island. International solidarity is not merely a moral and humanitarian obligation, it is a political necessity.

The Universal Declaration and the 1966 International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights rightly place the ban on torture among a whole array of rights designed to promote full respect for human dignity. Torture is rarely an isolated phenomenon. It is usually used as a system of repression, in regimes founded on arbitrary authority and violence, in socially polarized societies, in war and civil conflict and when ideological or religious fanaticism burst through the ever-flimsy defences of law, justice and liberty.

We strive to defend one of the most fundamental rights of the person. But agreeing on what that means in a specific context requires more than proclaiming human rights a “common standard of achievement for all peoples and all nations”. There will always be differences on how to interpret human rights, on the priority to be accorded the values concerned and on the strategies necessary to uphold those rights. In other words, the commitment to human rights is fundamentally political and in real terms this means that there is no universal agreement about ways and means of guaranteeing them. Some approach the problem by promoting legal safeguards (the 1984 United Nations Convention against Torture and the 1987 European Convention against

Torture are recent fruits of such efforts). Others concentrate on information campaigns to influence governments and public opinion to make better use of existing legal instruments. Some prefer active political resources and join a political party or take part in social movements. Still others choose to work for economic development in order to change the national and international structures that favour violence and repression. All such activities are necessary and are worthy of our highest esteem.

Thus, in choosing to combat torture, we are aware that we are engaged in a specific sector of a much larger front in the battle for human rights. We have placed ourselves at the service of NGOs working to eradicate torture without setting any conditions except those of non-violence and of honesty in the forwarding of information. We feel that this is one way of practising international solidarity while recognizing the conditions peculiar to individual countries and regions where anti-torture activity is growing. Through SOS-Torture, North and South, East and West are united in a common struggle—the NGOs of every region on our planet are working, with the means at hand and in accordance with the day-to-day reality of their environment, for the same cause.

We are aware of the limitations of campaigns aimed at governments and public opinion. Appeals are not much use when no authority is willing to assume responsibility for the acts of paramilitary forces or private “vigilantes”. These days, such crimes are invariably accompanied by worsening economic and social conditions and the process is often beyond the control of the States concerned. The proliferation of such situations will oblige the NGOs to set more consistent guidelines for international action and to be more precise in selecting their targets, for example by directing their appeals to those governments and inter-governmental organizations that are in a position to exercise real influence on the economic or political development of the countries concerned. We are also endeavouring to make up for the relative scarcity of NGOs in eastern Europe and Africa. Finally, we know that large-scale initiatives must be launched to reverse the tendency to use torture on penal-law prisoners, a common practice in many countries.

Pierre de Senarclens
President of WOAT—SOS-Torture