

# Act to Stop Torture

## *A Message from the Australian Catholic Social Justice Council for the International Day in Support of Survivors of Torture*

On 26 June the international community marks the International Day in Support of Survivors of Torture. It would be easy for us, in a country like Australia, to think that this isn't relevant to our community. But torture is not a thing of the past – we can all remember the atrocities committed during East Timor's struggle for independence being shown on our television screens night after night in the lead up to and aftermath of the independence referendum.

Torture is surprisingly widespread even today. It happens all around the world, including our region. There are many survivors of torture among us who have come to Australia seeking asylum, safety and a chance to rebuild their lives. Perhaps we are unaware of their presence among us. Often they are traumatised again by recounting their experiences and prefer not to talk about it.

Many survivors of torture have physical as well as psychological scars and on-going health problems, but there are not always visible signs of torture. Some of the more discreet methods of torture, which do not leave any tell tale marks, include isolation, the manipulation of light, physiological rhythms, emotions and senses, and the administration of drugs.

This is how the UN Convention Against Torture and Other Cruel, Inhuman or Degrading Treatment or Punishment, 1984 describes torture:

... any act by which severe pain or suffering, whether physical or mental, is intentionally inflicted on a person for such purposes as obtaining from him or a third person information or a confession, punishing him for an act he or a third person has committed or is suspected of committing, or intimidating or coercing him or a third person, or for any reason based on discrimination of any kind, when such pain or suffering is inflicted by or at the instigation of or with the consent or acquiescence of a public official or other person acting in an official capacity. It does not include pain or suffering arising from, inherent in or incidental to lawful sanctions. (CAT Article 1.1)

On this International Day in Support of Survivors of Torture we must ask ourselves:  
How well have we as a nation welcomed and supported survivors of torture?

In immigration detention centers around Australia there are desperate people who have arrived seeking asylum. Some of them are labeled "illegals" even though they are exercising their right under international humanitarian law to seek asylum without necessarily having a visa. A number of them come from countries in which torture is a standard practice in police or military custody. At certain stages in their processing, asylum seekers in detention are not allowed to contact their families. Often they do not know if their families are dead or alive and they don't know whether or not their families are aware that they are alive. Unlike those convicted of a criminal offence, asylum seekers do not know for how long they will be detained. In some immigration detention centers observations and musters involve waking asylum seekers at night or shining torches on them while they are sleeping.

Do elements of our immigration detention regime amount to torture?

Human dignity is at the center of Catholic thinking about human rights and social justice, and torture is a profound attack on human dignity. In torture the victim is treated as something less than human and

the perpetrator becomes less human. Respect for human dignity and human rights calls us to act to stop torture in whatever way we can.

Cardinal Francois-Xavier Nguyen Van Thuan, President of the Pontifical Council for Justice and Peace, and former Amnesty International prisoner of conscience, has lent his voice to the call for demonstrations, prayer and other actions against torture as part of a worldwide campaign against torture. His prison writings share his story of surviving torture and have inspired and given hope to many.

The Australian Catholic Social Justice Council invites you to consider taking some of the following actions:

- Include survivors of torture in the prayers of the faithful during Mass
- Pray for survivors of torture on 26 June
- Pray for those who inflict torture
- Make use of the Amnesty International resource materials for action against torture [www.amnesty.org.au](http://www.amnesty.org.au)
- Visit asylum seekers in detention
- Read the writings of Cardinal Van Thuan
- Visit [www.fiact.org](http://www.fiact.org) for information about the international campaign to end torture
- Provide financial support to services for survivors of torture and trauma
- Set up a shrine or monument to survivors of torture in your community
- Mediate on the image of the crucified Christ

Today we pray for ...

Asylum seekers and refugees

Prisoners on death row

The families of the Disappeared

Survivors of Nazi concentration camps

Survivors of the Killing Fields

Women raped in war

May they know peace and healing and be embraced with loving compassion by our community.

Bishop William Morris

Acting Chairman

Australian Catholic Social Justice Council

26 June 2001