

Report on SCIENCE & HUMAN RIGHTS

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2003 UN International Day in Support of Victims of Torture Arrives; Treatment Centers Face Ongoing Harassment

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June 26 marks the observance of the United Nations International Day in Support of Victims of Torture. On this day in 1987, the Convention against Torture and Other Cruel, Inhuman or Degrading Treatment or Punishment (CAT) entered into force. Ten years later, the United Nations General Assembly adopted resolution 52/149, which proclaimed the day as the official observance in support for victims of torture around the world. The day is intended to raise awareness about the issue of state-sponsored torture and to highlight the work of non-governmental organizations (NGOs) around the world who are working to eradicate torture and provide rehabilitation treatment for individual victims.

According to the International Rehabilitation Council for Torture Victims (IRCT), torture is the “intentional infliction of severe pain or suffering for a specific purpose. Torture is used to obtain information or a confession, to punish, to take revenge, or to create terror and fear within a population. The aim of torture is not to kill the victim, but to break down the victim’s personality.” Torture victims can be those individuals active in a community, such as politicians, union leaders, journalists, and human rights defenders. However, torture can also be inflicted on ordinary citizens in an attempt by the government to instill a climate of fear in the population.

The effects of torture are far reaching and impact the individual’s physical and

mental health. Torture victims can suffer from anxiety, insomnia, depression, and memory lapses. Victims may also experience extreme guilt and shame as a result of the humiliation they were forced to endure or because they were forced to betray information about themselves or their friends and family. The symptoms of torture can be addressed by comprehensive rehabilitation services provided by a torture treatment center.

IRCT works with over 200 torture treatment centers around the world, literally from Albania to Zimbabwe. These centers offer a wide variety of assistance, including psychological counseling, medical treatment, legal services, as well as social assistance programs to help torture victims secure jobs, housing, and meet other daily needs. The combination of

medical and social services can empower the torture victim to regain the capacity to resume as full a life as possible.

The centers also play an important role in addressing the political dynamics of torture. Torture is a political act and as a result, rehabilitation programs must also address the political landscape that allows torture to occur. Independent reports from the centers to NGOs and international organizations often serve as the best indication about the true level of repression and violence in a given country. The centers operate awareness campaigns, documentation programs, training, and education programs.

Unfortunately, much of this work is severely compromised when torture treatment centers operating in a context of political repression and violence, become

Continued on page 4

Also In This Issue...

- Notes from the Field:
Data Protection for Human Rights Groups
in Guatemala 2
- Integrating Environment, Health, and
Human Rights 3
- Facts About Torture..... 4
- Scientific Society Profile:
The Committee on International Freedom of
Scientists of the American Physical Society 5

Notes From the Field:

Data Protection for Human Rights Groups in Guatemala

Miguel Cruz

SHR Computer/Network Engineer

In 2002, there was a series of burglaries at human rights organization offices in Guatemala City. The break-ins were suspicious because only files and computer equipment were stolen, while other easier-to-carry valuables were left behind. The timing of the thefts was also cause for suspicion as several high-profile military figures were then facing trials for kidnapping and killings during the country's 35 year civil war. The loss of computers that contained years of documentation of human rights abuses set the work of the organizations back several months.

Over the past several years, SHR Deputy Director Patrick Ball worked extensively with the Guatemalan human rights community performing statistical analysis of data on violence and human rights abuses. This data made it possible to present a scientific argument rather than a collection of anecdotes and conjecture about what had actually taken place in Guatemala's past. Patrick lives, eats, and breathes data and the prospect of losing all that information the human rights groups had painstakingly amassed horrified him. He sought a way to deal with this serious problem.

When I was hired by AAAS last year, Patrick handed me the goal of ensuring that no human rights organization in Guatemala would lose a single byte of crucial data again. Ordinarily, I would tell someone, "get yourself a CD burner and keep a copy of your files at home." But in Guatemala, that doesn't work, because the same suspicious break-ins have taken place at private homes. Keeping information about human rights abuses at someone's home would make the house a potential target. We determined that the only really safe place to keep the data was out of the country, beyond the reach of those who are interested in suppressing the research findings.

Another key decision was to use Free Software (with a capital F and a capital S), such as Linux computer operating system, for the servers at each organization to gather, encrypt, and transmit the information. Software piracy is rampant in the developing world where groups can often not afford to purchase their own legal copies of word processing and database



software. As the United States continues to pressure foreign governments to crack down on the use of illegal software copies, there is a growing concern in the human rights community that governments around the world may use a campaign against software piracy as a convenient excuse to harass institutions that oppose the government's policies or expose their human rights violations. By using Linux and other Free Software, we not only saved thousands of dollars in license fees per organization, but introduced organizations to a technology that allows them to focus their resources on developing local capacity by hiring Linux consultants locally rather than just spending money on software.

The core of the project consists of encrypting the information generated by these human rights groups to prevent it from being snooped on or altered in transit.

Every night, the information is automatically copied and sent out of the country to securely managed servers in physically safe locations abroad. Of course, in order for that to happen, there needs to be a way to move all that information overseas electronically. Some of the organizations had internal networks and some even had DSL, but at others, the only way people exchanged files was with floppy disks, and the only way they connected to the Internet was by waiting to use the single computer with a modem and an outside line. Therefore, we had to do a lot of basic infrastructure work before we could even begin to move any data to safety. In November 2002, I made my first trip to Guatemala with a duffel bag stuffed with tools and computer networking equipment. Things like cables, routers, and hubs are substantially more expensive in Guatemala.

When the human rights workers started to realize all the benefits that they were going to get from this project—no more lost work, no more waiting in line to use a printer or to connect to the Internet—they asked how they could help. I initially trained about a half a dozen people in the basics of network wiring. They all pitched in, putting their regular jobs on hold to work late into the evening wielding crimpers, digital cable testers, screwdrivers, and hammers. By the end of the two weeks, word had gotten out and people from organizations in nearby towns showed up and traded their labor for networking lessons.

I was really struck by the enthusiasm and energy that people put into the work. Imagine if some stranger showed up at an office in the US with a bag of tools and cables. How many people would put in extra hours for weeks on end in order to discover what that stranger was doing and learn how they could do it themselves?

Guatemala, continued on next page

Integrating Environment and Health with Human Rights

*Anya Ferring
SHR Intern*

Rapid industrialization and urbanization affect populations in more complex and interrelated ways now than ever before. Human rights and environmental groups have increasingly begun to realize the importance of consolidating their goals of protecting human rights and the environment through ensuring healthy and safe living conditions for all people.

Environmentalists are now analyzing the negative effects on health caused by human induced environmental destruction by implementing a rights-based approach. A rights-based approach focuses on the most marginalized and vulnerable groups, particularly children, and recognizes that it is these groups that are often the first and most severely exposed during environmental-based trauma.

Likewise, human rights groups are also beginning to acknowledge that many injustices committed against humanity are environmental in scope. For example, according to the World Health Organization (WHO), respiratory infections and diarrheal disease are the primary causes of death among the poorest twenty percent of the world's population, particularly children. These maladies are not life threatening and could be easily prevented through providing a safe environment. Respiratory infections occur as a result of burning wood, dung, and coal in inefficient stoves within poorly ventilated homes; diarrhea can be easily prevented simply through the provision of clean water and adequate sanitation facilities.

Policymakers and the international community have also begun to acknowledge the inherent intersections in the areas of environment and human rights through the occurrence of environmental-related health concerns, and have pledged to collaborate on global commitments to eradicate such injustices. Today, the culmination of this discussion is most prevalent regarding the right to water, as lack of clean water resources and sanitation facilities accounts for one of the most serious environmental health problems faced today, especially for populations residing in developing regions.

For example, the United Nations Millennium Project, a global research network commissioned to advise the UN on best strategies for achieving the Millennium Development Goals, has set one of its targets to reduce by half the number of people without access to clean drinking water by 2015. In November of 2002, the United Nations Committee on Economic, Social, and Cultural Rights took the monumental step of declaring access to water a human right. The Committee stated that “[Water] is a prerequisite for the realization of other human rights,” recognizing that one of the most basic tenets of human rights is that all human beings have a right to those things which are essential to life. In March of 2003, policymakers, academics, and others involved in water-related fields met in Kyoto, Japan to participate in the Third World Water Forum. In addition to raising the profile of water issues worldwide, the forum also stimulated debate and action

among many sectors of government and society on how to best remedy some of the most pressing issues facing the world today.

Corresponding with the global push to address emerging human rights and environmental issues, AAAS has been active in a variety of pursuits. In April of 2003 AAAS in conjunction with the Center for Human Rights and Environment organized a follow-up event to the 3rd World Water Forum entitled “The Right to Water: The Kyoto Agenda and Beyond.” Throughout the event, participants identified the primary issues central to water and human rights in regard to policymaking, advocacy, and future collaborations.

The AAAS Science and Human Rights Program has also continued to add resources to its website on human rights and the environment. The Environment and Human Rights Resources website (<http://shr.aaas.org/hrenv/resources.html>), a component of the Environment and Human Rights Project, is an online database containing resource information on human rights, environmental protection, and further information on the common links between them. The database allows environment and human rights groups to develop an understanding of their common ground and of the knowledge, methods, and resources that each group brings to its work while improving the ability of both to realize their shared goal of a world that sustainably shelters and nurtures human as well as non-human life. ♦

Guatemala, continued from page 2

I returned to Guatemala for three weeks this April and May to install data protection facilities at other organizations that I didn't have time to reach on the last trip. I was particularly gratified to see that some of the groups that had sent people to help out in November had already made changes in their network configurations as a result of what they learned. These changes result in concrete improvements

in reliability for little or no cost to the organizations.

But the most gratifying aspect of this project is that many gigabytes of data are now being stored safely out of harm's reach and the next time a computer disappears in the middle of the night, the delay to the human rights organization's work will be measured in hours rather than months. ♦

Miguel Cruz joined the SHR staff in September 2002 to work on the Human Rights Data Analysis Group, which provides technical support to large-scale human rights data projects and international assistance to human rights groups with networking, backups, and security of databases. See <http://shr.aaas.org/hrdag/> for more information about this project.

victims of human rights abuses themselves. Torture treatment center staff have been subject to physical attacks, arbitrary arrest and detention, spurious legal proceedings, and constant threats to their security. Many torture treatment center staff have been the subject of AAAS Human Rights Action Network alerts.

Since it opened in 1998, medical and administrative staff working at the Diyarbakir Rehabilitation Center for Victims of Torture, one of the five regional torture treatment centers run by the Ankara-based Human Rights Foundation of Turkey, have faced repeated human rights violations and attempts by the government to shut down the center. (AAASHRAN Case Number: tu9432_one) The Diyarbakir Center faces particular risk because it is located in southeast Turkey, where much of the armed conflict between Kurdish militants and the state occurs. Government officials are sensitive to any reports implicating them in the use of torture of the Kurdish population. The police have raided the center on separate occasions and have taken confidential doctor-patient files, which they have used to locate torture survivors to harass and intimidate them from seeking further treatment or reporting incidents of torture.

Government raids of torture treatment centers to obtain patient records have also occurred in Sudan against the Amal Center for the Rehabilitation of Victims of Torture and Violence. (AAASHRAN Case

Number su0101_nag) The Amal Center is located in Khartoum and provides free medical treatment and counseling for victims of human rights abuses. It is the first rehabilitation center to be established in Sudan. In early 2001, authorities arrested the center's director Dr. Nagib Nagmeldin, a well respected medical doctor and human rights advocate. Authorities arrested him only two days before he was scheduled to meet with the UN Special Human Rights Investigator for Sudan who was visiting on a fact-finding mission. Dr. Nagmeldin was never officially charged and was released 18 days later. Center staff also faced arrest and intimidation for trying to organize events to observe the UN International Day in Support of Victims of Torture.

The most recent attacks against a torture treatment center occurred in May 2003 when there was a break-in at the offices of the Center for the Prevention of Torture Victims and their Relatives (CPTRT) in Tegucigalpa. (AAASHRAN case number ho0306_cpt) CPTRT offers psychological support to victims of torture and institutional violence and their family members. The center also conducts trainings with prison personnel, police officers, and administrators in the judicial system on culturally sensitive treatment models and documents cases of torture in Honduras. During the early morning break-in, the main office door was kicked in and computer and paper files containing confidential patient information appeared to

have been thoroughly searched. Staff at the CPTRT believe that the break-in had political motives as no office equipment was stolen and may have been intended to intimidate the organization from pursuing their documentation work. Staff members had been researching several high profile cases of police abuse and human rights violations in Honduras.

The UN International Day in Support of Victims of Torture is a day to focus on the serious issue of state-sponsored torture and its effect on individuals and communities around the world. It also offers a moment to support the work of courageous medical professionals and human rights advocates in their struggle to eradicate the use of torture and to treat survivors. If you are interested in taking action, please consider sending an appeal letter on behalf of the CPTRT. Visit the AAASHRAN site for more information, <http://shr.aaas.org/aaashran> ♦

Resources:

- The International Rehabilitation Council for Torture Victims site:
<http://www.irct.org>
- The United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights site:
<http://www.un.org/rights/index.html>
- United Nations Committee against Torture site:
<http://www.unhchr.ch/html/menu2/6/cat.htm>

Facts About Torture



Justin VanFleet
SHR Project Coordinator

Article 5 of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights states that “No one shall be subjected to torture or to cruel, inhumane or degrading treatment or punishment.”

The UN Convention Against Torture and Other Cruel, Inhuman or Degrading Treatment or Punishment defines torture as:

“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 having committed, 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

Continued on page 6

Scientific Society Profile:

The APS Committee on International Freedom of Scientists

This is a new series featured in the Report on Science and Human Rights detailing the human rights related activities of scientific societies. A list of societies that currently have human rights or scientific freedom committees is available on our website at: <http://shr.aas.org/scisocs/>

The American Physical Society (APS) is a membership organization representing the interests of over 40,000 physicists. APS's human rights work is coordinated by the Committee on International Freedom of Scientists (CIFS). CIFS began its work in 1976 as a subcommittee of the APS Panel on Public Affairs, which was created in the mid-1970s in response to interest in the physics community about societal issues. CIFS became a standing committee in 1980.

The APS bylaws state that CIFS "shall be responsible for monitoring concerns regarding human rights for scientists throughout the world. It shall apprise the [APS] President, the Executive Board and Council of problems encountered by scientists in the pursuit of their scientific interests or in effecting satisfactory communication with other scientists..." Cases like the oppression of colleagues in Argentina during the "dirty war" and other countries experiencing widespread human rights violations and the well known case of persecution of Russian physicist Andrei Sakharov galvanized the physics community around issues of human rights and scientific freedom.

CIFS is an active organization, drafting appeal letters and sponsoring petitions on behalf of physicists whose human rights have been violated. They are currently co-sponsoring a petition on behalf of 19 Chinese colleagues who were incarcerated solely for having exercised their internationally recognized rights to freedom of expression and association. CIFS also has a focus on US policy and practices that affect scientific freedom, such as the issue of visa denials for foreign researchers, students, and professionals.

SHR recently spoke with Noemie Benczer Koller, the current chair of CIFS. Dr. Koller is a faculty member in the Department of Physics and Astronomy at Rutgers University. She joined CIFS in 2001 and was elected the Chairperson the following year. Her term as Chair ends in December 2003.

SHR: What kind of arguments do you make to the physics community about why a physicist should care about human rights?

NK: The best concise statement on why physicists care about human rights was enunciated by the APS council in 1989:

"In consideration of the international dimensions of science and the need of scientists of all nations to maintain professional contact with colleagues at home and abroad, the American Physical Society has adopted the following statement on The International Nature of Physics

Cooperation:

Science belongs to all humanity and transcends natural boundaries. As in the past, science can serve as a bridge for mutual understanding across political and ideological divisions and as a vehicle for the enhancement of peace. In particular, APS believes that it is important at this time to strive for more open dialogue among scientists to enhance international cooperation.

To achieve its full potential and to benefit all mankind, science requires that governments respect basic human rights, allow open communication, and avoid interfering with the rights of scientists as they carry out their professional work.

The APS expects that any action by any government restricting the freedom of inquiry by physicists or the normal performance of their scholarly

work be the result of accepted judicial procedures in which the rights of individuals to defend themselves against accusations are not curtailed."

SHR: What do you think are some of the most important human rights issues or cases for CIFS right now?

NK: We have a number of colleagues in prison in China, Russia and Cuba. I believe the Cuba problems are the most pressing issues the present time. It has also come to CIFS attention that the civil

rights of American citizens of foreign birth have been limited. We are trying to keep awareness on some of these issues. We are concerned with many of the issues with visa denials of scientists.

We are also working on the internationalization of our efforts, i.e. trying to create a dialogue with our sister committees in sister societies abroad. This

aspect of our work has become important particularly since the Iraq war as we have lost the respect of our colleagues who do not feel we, the US, act according to our moral principles.

SHR: How do you measure the impact or the success of your efforts?

NK: That question is hard to answer. In general, progress, as measured by the response to our letters on behalf of imprisoned colleagues, is very slow. But we feel that keeping pressing the authorities creates the possibility of their changing their views, keeps the prisoners aware that they are not alone and gives them some hope to live by. Meetings with US officials concerning with issues like visas also seem to produce snail-like advances. But, in the end I feel we have always prevailed. ♦

Next Issue: The Human Rights Committee of the American Statistical Association



Noemie Benczer Koller, 2002
Photo by Dennis Connors

capacity. It does not include pain or suffering arising only from, inherent in or incidental to lawful sanctions.”

Quick Facts

- Human rights organizations have cited 125 countries where individuals and families have been detained and then tortured or ill-treated.
- Among the refugees from countries of state-sponsored torture, up to 35% have been tortured and 90% have seen the effects of torture.
- There are 500,000 torture survivors in the United States from foreign countries.

The UN Voluntary Fund for the Victims of Torture

Established in 1981 to receive voluntary contributions from governments, non-governmental organizations and individuals for distribution to non-governmental organizations providing humanitarian assistance to victims of torture and members of their family

- Minimum amount needed for 2003: US\$13 Million

- Fund Amount (as of April 2003): US\$1.2 Million
- In 2002 more than 80,000 victims were assisted through the UN Voluntary Fund.

The Torture Victims Relief Act (TVRA), first passed in 1998, is the major source of government funds for torture treatment centers in the United States. The bill now authorizes a total of \$25 million - \$10 million for U.S. treatment centers, \$10 million for treatment centers abroad and \$5 million for the UN Voluntary Fund

WWW Links

- Amnesty International Campaign Against Torture
<http://www.stoptorture.org/>
- UN Voluntary Fund for the Victims of Torture
<http://www.unhchr.ch/html/menu2/9/vftortur.htm>
- Torture Abolition and Survivors Support Coalition
<http://www.tassc.org/>

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The AAAS Science and Human Rights Program collects and disseminates information about scientists, engineers, and health professionals who are victims of human rights abuses or whose academic freedom is infringed. It also develops applications of scientific methods and techniques for the documentation and prevention of human rights abuses. The concerns of the Science and Human Rights Program are universal and independent of the ideology of any government or individuals it attempts to aid.

The Science and Human Rights Program is part of the AAAS Directorate for Science and Policy Programs. The Directorate and its Committee on Scientific Freedom and Responsibility monitor actions of the governments of the United States and other nations which may circumscribe the freedom of scientists or restrict their ability to exercise their professional responsibilities, and report on developments affecting scientific freedom and responsibility. ♦

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