

# REHABILITATION COUNCIL MAKES A DIFFERENCE

Twenty-five years ago the International Rehabilitation Council for Torture Victims (IRCT) was established in Denmark. Today the IRCT is an umbrella organisation for 143 torture and trauma centres in 73 countries. In the last two decades it has served on the front lines of humanitarian crises. In 1999 it helped establish a rehabilitation centre in Pristina, Kosovo, to assist survivors of the Balkans conflict. In 2005 it set up the first centre in Iraq, after the elections, and in Georgia, following Russia's occupation of South Ossetia. Its director **BRITA SYDHOFF** was a keynote speaker at the national conference of the Forum of Australian Services for Survivors of Torture and Trauma Services. She visited STARTTS and spoke to **OLGA YOLDI**.

**IRCT's mission is to help build a world that values and accepts shared responsibility for the eradication of torture. How can you describe the current situation? Are we moving forward or backwards in the fight against torture?**

It is going two different ways, I think. On the one hand, there is much talk about torture in the context of the so-called 'war on terror' and many people believe that torture used to gain information about terrorists is wrong. On the other hand, the debate doesn't focus on the fact that torture is now also being perpetrated against the poor and the marginalised, people from ethnic minorities, those with a different sexual orientation or religion, against women and even against defenceless children.

Torture is not just practised for political reasons, but also for reasons that have nothing to do with politics. This surprised me when I started working for the IRCT. Torture is the most humiliating and common way of repressing people. It is not only perpetrated by totalitarian regimes, but also by countries that describe themselves as democratic. It continues to be prevalent at all levels. It is quite horrific to see that it is still practised

so systematically and in so many countries.

All torture and trauma services in Australia are members of IRCT, Jorge Aroche, STARTTS Director, is the current vice president.

**How do you help member centres around the world? What strategies do you use?**

We help them in many different ways. In fact our organisation is growing about 10 per cent each year. On the one hand, you could say this is great because it means we are getting better organised in the fight against torture. On the other hand, you could say it is rather sad that we are needed so much. But our presence is still not felt in every country, and we would very much like to expand into those countries where torture is prevalent.

The IRCT is in the process of developing a strategic plan. We are working out our priorities in an effort to create more suitable policies for our members. If we are to change the practice of torture we need to work with politicians to make them understand what torture does to people.

We engage with centres around the world at different




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Brita Sydhoff

levels. Our role is to provide support so that they can rehabilitate torture survivors and their families. We help these centres to build organisational capacity, by assisting them to develop their clinics, by providing medical resources, funding, education, fundraising strategies, and techniques on how to document incidents of torture. Our aim is to help centres function, develop and survive.

Sometimes we donate a computer, or a generator. The year-before-last, we bought many cameras so that colleagues would be able to visually document torture, since they often visit detention centres and prisons. Many centres, particularly in developing countries, are having difficulties due to lack of resources but also because of political repression since the authorities don't regard human rights defenders kindly.

Education is a very important part of our work, so we publish the *Torture Journal* where many clinicians publish their articles. This facilitates the sharing of information, knowledge, research findings on different treatments, and other developments.

The IRCT Exchange Program allows people from member centres to visit each other, learn techniques from each other and develop their own formal and informal networks of support.

When members apply to participate in it, they will normally say: "I want to work with this type of sequelae". Or: "I would like to learn more about working with children". We know who is most suited to teach them and which centres we should contact, so we match them with colleagues who speak the same language and pay for their trips. This has been a huge success, not only for the applicant but also for the mentor, as they both learn from each other.

We deliver training to different groups, particularly in countries where colleagues don't have the resources to do so, or don't want to be detected by the authorities. We train the police, judges, prosecutors, doctors, etc. We have trained 500 judges and 1500 prosecutors on the Istanbul Protocol. We have worked in 12 countries. We are still working in Egypt and you may know that Egypt is notorious when it comes to torture.

We believe that you have to educate people if you are going to stop torture, you need to first of all inform the police, the military and the authorities that torture is forbidden, so that they understand they are committing a crime. Secondly we need to let them know that we are in fact watching them and thirdly that colleagues are documenting what they are doing. So these strategies

will hopefully contribute to catching more perpetrators and to eradicate torture.

**Do you also help colleagues at risk of being arrested due to their involvement in assisting torture survivors?**

In many countries it is dangerous to work in this field. Many of our colleagues have to work underground, risking their own lives. Many centres are constantly harassed by the authorities. Often colleagues are threatened because they have written something. For instance someone working in the Congo had a radio interview, just like I had one today, on the international day of victims of torture, as soon as he finished the police were waiting for him outside the radio station. He was arrested and tortured. We helped him and his family.

In some countries it is so risky that centres prefer not to use the word torture in the signs placed on their doors because it is too dangerous. They call themselves trauma centres, or treatment centres or they change the name when the repression hits harder. In some cases thieves have come in the middle of the night and stolen only the hard disc. Most centres possess a wealth of information about people, which the government is interested in. The IRCT has a compensation scheme to help those colleagues who are having a hard time.

Some centres can hardly afford medicines, other centres have a tiny office. Some colleagues work after hours. A doctor said to me: "I do face-lifts during the day, and with the money I earn I support torture survivors in the evening". She had been in jail for three years. If you ask many colleagues they have had similar experiences. I often ask: "Why are you doing this? Why aren't you working as a cardiologist earning a lot of money?" And then I hear personal stories such as a son who took part in a demonstration and when the mother went to pick him up he was wounded so the mother decided to devote her free time to this cause. There is also a lot of compassion out there.

**Apart from providing rehabilitation services, do centres provide other services?**

You have everything, from fairly large centres with research capacity, extensive clinical treatment and extensive legal work, and a large advocacy programs, with teams investigating cases of torture. The centre in Kenya is a good example. They are strong in the investigation of torture and in bringing cases to court. Then there are centres that are small. They may have one or two staff members. In order to become members of IRCT they need to see a minimum of 50 clients per year. Many centres apply for membership but because they don't treat torture survivors can't join in, however they can still become our partners. It is positive that third-world countries are getting organised.

**You mentioned that you trained lawyers and judges on the Istanbul Protocol. Why is that?**

This Protocol provides internationally recognised standards on how to identify, document and report symptoms of physical and psychological torture. Doctors and clinicians must know how to do this effectively. Our colleagues are increasingly using the Protocol across the world and there have been many successful cases where evidence has been used in courts against the perpetrators. For instance the case in Peru where evidence documented using this method led to the extradition of Fujimore back to Peru to face trial. Of course the aim is to gather evidence to pursue legal action against alleged torturers, thus enabling victims to see justice being done and even reparation.

Many torture and trauma survivors are bitter about their cases not being heard in courts. If there is no justice, you cannot forget and you cannot heal.

It is similar with the situation in Australia. When your Prime Minister decided to apologise, it was the best thing to do as the apology meant a lot to the Indigenous Australians. Something wrong was done to them and recognising it gives them some space to grieve, get justice and move on. The mothers of Plaza de Mayo in Argentina are now looking for their grandchildren. They haven't given up on their quest for justice. The perpetrators are not living a happy life either. Many of them must have terrible feelings about what they did.

**"It is quite disturbing to realise that torture has become a weapon against young people. What surprises me is that it is rarely spoken about."**

**What are the IRCT's priorities?**

One of our priorities is to address the needs of the most vulnerable groups: the poor and marginalised, minority groups, women and particularly children. When you have a poor majority and a system that allows the police to take children into detention, then children become easy targets. I am talking about the street children in Brazil, orphans in India, unaccompanied minors living in refugee camps and children of minority groups, like the gypsies in Europe and kids that are trafficked. These children are tortured when they are caught by the police. This type of abuse is shocking.

We have a colleague that has conducted a study on it. The findings were published in the *Torture Journal* last year. According to this study, children are not secondary but primary victims of torture. Children are thrown into

detention together with grown-ups where they are abused by prisoners and other interns. Using children as witnesses of torture is a technique designed to harm children.

In places like Congo children see their mothers being raped, brothers have to watch their sisters and even worse. Systematic rape against women has become a weapon of war. Imagine the effect this must have on children.

If you go to the current conflicts in the world you will see how children are abused as soldiers, as slaves, as sex slaves. It is quite disturbing to realise that torture has become a weapon against young people. What surprises me is that it is rarely spoken about.

I raised concerns to UNICEF about this, but they have only published one press release on the subject in five years, and that was after we spoke to them. IRCT is trying to find out more information about treatment methods for children. So we are working with centres, particularly in Asia, that apply different methods. We document these and take their knowledge to other centres that want to work with children and adolescents. We have also started a major global campaign against countries that torture children.

**Denmark has a long history of assisting refugee survivors of torture and trauma. Do you also conduct research?**

We do little research, but we play a coordinating role for research centres around the world. We have a fantastic global network of universities, of researchers working on different projects. Now we have for example a forensic project with the University of Copenhagen that will help document torture in a more scientific and forensic way. We also work with different centres in Germany which also work with different German institutions. If you take the sum of what we are doing across the world, it is quite impressive, in both investigating how torture happens and also in the ways you can remedy torture and how you can hold perpetrators accountable. The interest is definitely there.

**What is the IRCT's main goal for the future?**

To do more of the same and to do it better. I think we shall probably try to start centres in countries with a high prevalence of torture. If possible, we will raise our capacity level even more. We need more funding to expand to other countries in Asia and Africa. We need more money to support our colleagues because at the end of the day nobody else really cares about them. They are alone.

One important thing we do is to promote our work. But we must invest more time doing this better because many of our donors don't understand what we are doing, or they have a total misconception of the time

needed to achieve outcomes. They believe it takes a long time for wounds to heal. This may be true in some cases, but there are people that have succeeded and thrived even following years of detention. A prime example is Nelson Mandela and other people, who in spite of having been severely tortured have become heads of state, writers, actors, etc. These are people who have been subjected to this horrid crime but have managed to get over it, and have had fairly normal lives and I think that is a very important message we need to convey to the perpetrators: "you can't win this".

**Is the US still using torture?**

I hope they have stopped torture completely. I hope Guantanamo can be closed down and those responsible can be prosecuted, but you never know. Man is still so medieval and brutal. He uses emotion instead of reason. The use of torture in the US is detrimental to the rest of the world because the damage already done by the war on terror will take a long time to repair. When democratic countries torture it is free for all and everybody can torture.

In the current climate we need to hold on to all the human rights advances we have. We have the Torture Convention, the Refugee Convention, the Convention of the Rights of the Child, the Optional Protocol, the Special Rapporteur and international law that continues to evolve. We already have the legal instruments we need to eradicate torture, the problem is their implementation. What many countries don't do is to criminalise torture in their national laws and this is the problem. Some countries may do that but then they don't have an independent judicial system that can live up to the standards. Or you have the case in many countries, including democratic countries, where the police have allegedly been torturing people and then it is the police themselves who investigate their own actions. Of course such investigations lead nowhere.

It is very important to expose the perpetrators because we all know that torture happens when nobody sees it. That is why the Optional Protocol was created to monitor torture and then report on it. The more people know about it, the more difficult it will be for perpetrators to get away with it. This is my hope.