

Mexico hosts International Rehabilitation Council for Torture Victims Conference

Shaun Nemorin

More than 400 participants from nations around the world gathered in Mexico City last October for the International Rehabilitation Council for Torture Victims' (IRCT) 10th Scientific Symposium, aimed at sharing expertise among health professionals in the field of torture rehabilitation.

The three-day event provided a platform for 132 practitioners and experts to speak about research findings and share their experiences.

The IRCT, an independent international health organisation set up in 1985 to work on the prevention of torture globally, today has a network of 152 rehabilitation centres in more than 75 countries, and is the world's largest membership-based civil organisation specialising in torture rehabilitation.

STARTTS staff from across its services delivered presentations, including a keynote from board member Professor Derrick Silove on the challenges facing the sector in evidencing survivors' rehabilitation needs.

Other standout presentations came from Mirjana Askovic, who spoke on the use of electroencephalograms in the assessment and evaluation of treatment outcomes among refugee survivors of torture and trauma. Yvette Aiello spoke about MANTRA, a self-help group for male survivors of torture and rape where participants remember, process and record their unspeakable and painful experiences. Dr Shakeh Momartin presented a session on Capoeira Angola: an alternative intervention program for traumatised adolescent refugees.

The symposium also saw contributions from prominent speakers such as Edith Escareño, coordinator of the IRCT's Mexican member of the Collective Against Torture and Impunity; Suzanne Jabbour, former IRCT president and vice-president of the United Nations Subcommittee on Prevention of Torture; Şebnem Korur Fincanci, president of the Human Rights

Foundation of Turkey; Andrew Standley, European Union ambassador to Mexico; Débora Benchoam, human-rights defender and Inter-American Commission on Human Rights Attorney, and Victor Madrigal-Borloz, IRCT Secretary-General and member of the United Nations Subcommittee on Prevention of Torture.

In addition, the event was honoured to receive messages from United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights Zeid Ra'ad Al Hussein and the President of Chile, Michelle Bachelet.

In her message, Ms Bachelet said: "We know that any strategy is incomplete if we do not recognise the central role of the victim, and of an integral reparation aimed at reverting the harm caused. I would like to highlight the committed work of the IRCT which, on this occasion, has summoned more than 400 practitioners. I hope that through these sessions you will be able to identify better forms of rehabilitation for torture victims and inspire states and authorities to adopt all measures to build societies based upon unrestricted respect for everyone's rights."

The Academic Symposium fed into the IRCT General Assembly held in December 2016. Member organisations represented Europe, Asia, North America, Latin America, Sub-Saharan Africa, the Middle East, North Africa and the Pacific. Each IRCT member centre was invited to designate a delegate to serve as a representative to join the general assembly.

The General Assembly is a fundamental platform for the IRCT membership. Its democratic principles are essential to the success of our daily work and the sustainability of the greater movement. It is also a key event for the movement to engage in lively debates, provide input to vital discussions and formulate the organisation's policy positions that will guide and advance the global work on the right to rehabilitation of torture survivors.



A new executive committee was elected along with a new president and vice-president.

The Council unanimously elected Jorge Aroche, STARTTS CEO, as the new IRCT president. Ms Sana Hamzeh, psychotherapist at Restart Center for Rehabilitation of Victims of Violence and Torture in Lebanon was elected vice-president.

Mr Aroche takes over from Suzanne Jabbour, who excelled in her duties at a time when the global movement saw a lack of will in public policy to provide victims with adequate rehabilitation and a decline in funding from all quarters – even though, as a result of war and conflict there are millions of torture victims with an unfulfilled right to rehabilitation.

It is important to point out that holistic rehabilitation to support these victims is not only a legal and moral imperative, but it is also an integral component of eradicating torture in concert with other actions to prevent torture, overcome impunity and provide redress. "I would like to thank the IRCT Council and the General Assembly for putting their trust in me," Mr Aroche said.

"I believe the outgoing council has put the organisation in an extremely strong position, which has been evident throughout the symposium and general assembly. Under their leadership, the global rehabilitation movement has become stronger and more united – well placed to take on any challenges facing the sector. We hope to build on this and to continue the progress already made."

Mr Aroche presided over the formulation of a resolution entitled the Mexico Consensus. This agreement, formulated and debated by Council members, includes conditions under which states must provide victims with access to a choice of rehabilitation services. Among these conditions are the inclusive and multidisciplinary nature of services and the participation of the victim in decisions concerning rehabilitation.

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Mr Madrigal-Borloz said: "It is an extraordinary opportunity to start the next strategic period with such a strong and committed executive committee. The appointed officers are an extraordinary blend of competencies, cultures and skills, and share the vision of a rehabilitation movement that works for the benefit of torture victims."

The Mexico Consensus also includes an ambitious agenda, including a concerted effort to advocate for increased funding, support for the research and documentation of torture, awareness actions and campaigns, and an agenda for international cooperation through sharing good practices, capacity building and the promotion of ratification of the United Nations Convention Against Torture and Other Cruel, Inhuman and Degrading Treatment or Punishment and its Optional Protocol.

Through the Mexico Consensus, members of IRCT demand that all countries comply with their obligations to prevent and prosecute torture, provide reparations to the victims, and increase the funding available to fulfil the victims' right to rehabilitation. ☞