

Distinguished guests in attendance with former Zimbabwean senator and Co-minister of State for National Healing, Reconciliation and Integration, Sekai Masikana Holland, 26 June, Sydney Town Hall. Photo, Ignacio Moreno



*JORGE AROCHE is the director of STARTTS and president of the International Rehabilitation Council for Torture Victims (IRCT). He spoke at the official United Nations International Day in Support of Victims of Torture event at the Sydney Town Hall on 26 June.*

# Dangerous times

**T**orture is neither nice nor fair, and there is nothing about it we would wish to celebrate or remember. In fact, the tendency is often to look the other way, to try to forget it has a place in the world and that it affects survivors who often struggle to have a life after torture.

Their survival, their struggle, and the concerted efforts that make success possible are worth celebrating, and certainly worth communicating. Silence is the worst enemy of the struggle against torture and of the fight to ensure survivors have access to the means to rebuild their lives and restore their health and dignity.

It gives me enormous pleasure, therefore, to welcome you all to STARTTS' 2018 celebration of the UN International Day in Support of Victims of Torture – this time not just on behalf of STARTTS as its CEO, but also on behalf of the IRCT as its current president. This is most fitting, since the IRCT was the organisation largely responsible for the advocacy campaign that led to the declaration of this International Day and still coordinates and supports the events across the world.

So, since we are here with this wonderful panel of

highly informed people to talk about the dangerous times we live in, from a torture and human rights perspective, please let me reflect on the global picture from the vantage point of the IRCT movement – the movement that we at STARTTS are so proud to call our movement.

As many of you know, the IRCT was born out of a need to respond to the pervasive use of torture around the world, and to help the many thousands of torture victims whose pain and suffering is caused by perpetrating states. It was a process that originated simultaneously in many regions, from the north of Europe to the United States to Australia. Physicians and people from all helping professions were observing the terrible damage caused by torture and connecting it with its root causes, in the understanding that only by addressing these could we ultimately eradicate the scourge of torture.

Over the past 33 years, the IRCT has grown to become an organisation of more than 160 members in over 70 countries. Our membership is wide and diverse. We have members whose annual turnover is in the millions and others for whom it is in the thousands. We

Photo, Ryan Stuart.



STARTTS presents the official annual event to mark 26 June UN International Day in support of victims of torture, Sydney Town Hall, Tuesday 26 June. From left to right: The Hon. Michael Kirby AC CMG, Rabia Siddique, Richard Ackland, Sekai Masikana Holland and Jorge Aroche.

have members in the global north and in the global south. Some work exclusively on rehabilitation, others also engage in advocacy, capacity building and research. We have members that work only with refugees who have fled from their home countries and members that work only with domestic torture victims.

In Latin America, our centres have a long tradition of political activism inherited from the great 1970s and 1980s' social and political movements. A huge part of their work is to promote how to avoid the mistakes committed in the past by documenting and disseminating the terrible suffering dictatorships inflicted on their people. But they also face current challenges. We only need to observe the shocking number of forced disappearances in Mexico, the murders taking place in Honduras or the current situation in Nicaragua and Venezuela, to understand that our colleagues are in the midst of a human rights crisis.

In North America our colleagues have traditionally been strong and able, but they face the realities of a political system that seems intent on ignoring the rules of international refugee law while defying human rights policies that have been developed over generations.

In Europe, the influx of Syrian refugees that was very much felt by our colleagues of Sweden and Germany was used by populist politicians everywhere else to demonise refugees and migrants. The hardening of migration policies has recently had a terrible effect in Italy and Hungary, where only last week assisting a refugee in need was outlawed. The situation of our colleagues in Russia is aggravated by the constant hostility of the government towards them.

Our colleagues in the Middle East and North Africa are the ones at the forefront of the Syrian crisis: the

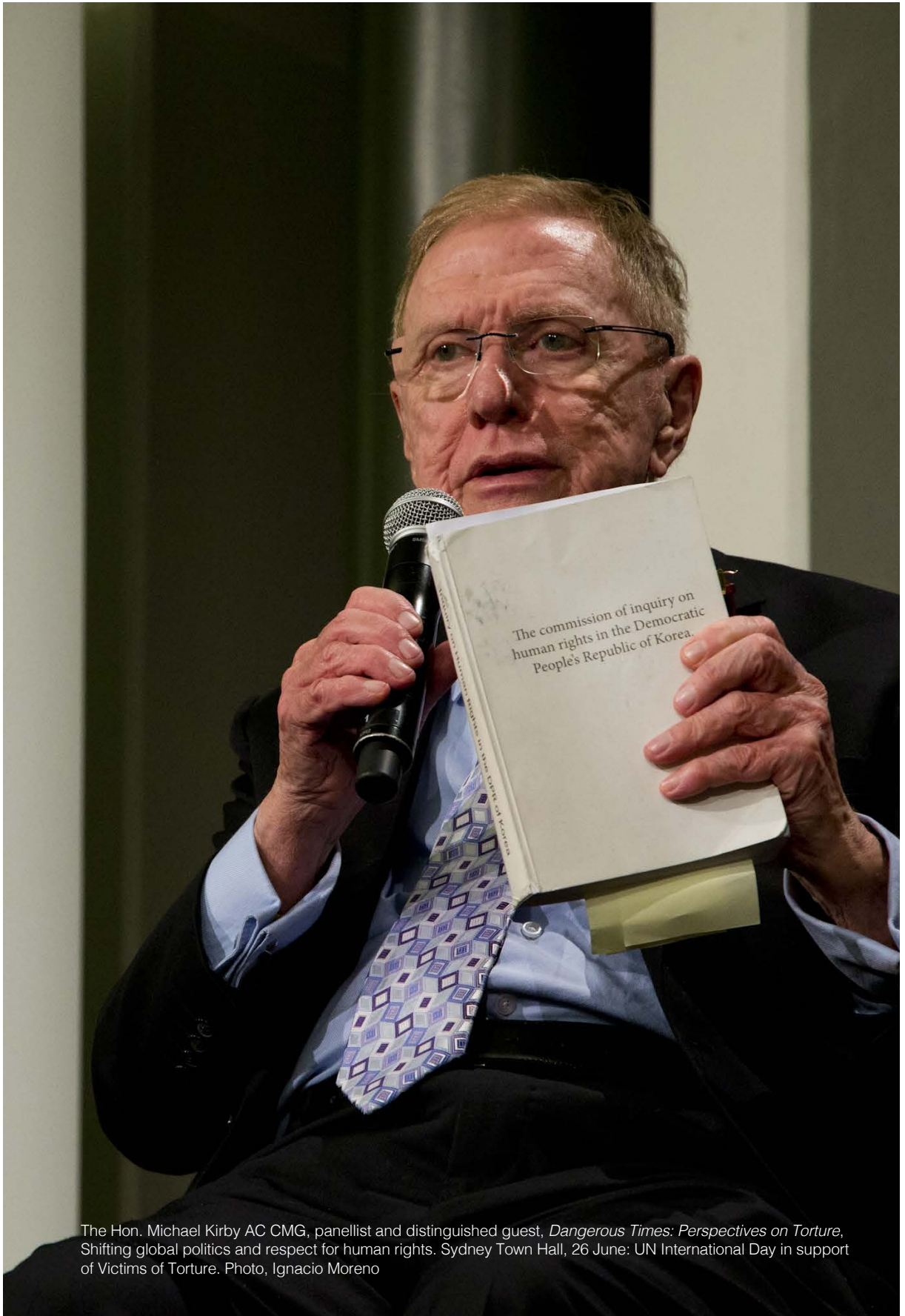
great majority of Syrian refugees and asylum seekers remain in the region – more than 3.5 million in Turkey and at least a million in Lebanon, and they too face persecution by hostile governments, particularly in Turkey and Egypt.

In Asia our centres face exceptional challenges in supporting victims dealing with the past (think of Cambodia, Indonesia, Sri Lanka or Nepal) in the midst of great scarcity and their fair share of continuing crises, such as the terrible situation affecting the Rohingya people.

Finally, our colleagues in Sub-Saharan Africa deal with vast numbers of victims of torture and mistreatment in some of the most desperate social contexts in the world. In the Great Lakes region, for example, they have to deal with systematic rape used as a tool to disempower women and maintain a status quo in which they do not exercise rights connected to land ownership by creating and nurturing networks through which they can provide health care, livelihood support and long-term rehabilitation services.

All in all, every year, our movement serves a minimum of 100,000 persons from all walks of life who long to lead happy and fulfilling lives after torture. Sadly, in a global context where the number of forcibly displaced people has increased by nearly three million in one year, it is not anywhere enough to meet global needs.

And in a context of rising populist and hard-line nationalistic tendencies, where many governments actively discourage our work with victims and others choose to look the other way, the work of many of our sister services is becoming increasingly dangerous and more precarious. R



The Hon. Michael Kirby AC CMG, panellist and distinguished guest, *Dangerous Times: Perspectives on Torture*, Shifting global politics and respect for human rights. Sydney Town Hall, 26 June: UN International Day in support of Victims of Torture. Photo, Ignacio Moreno