

Breaking the Cycle of Torture

On 26th June, to commemorate the UN International Day in Support of Victims of Torture, about 100 people gathered at the State Parliament for a Friends of STARTTS seminar on the effects of torture. OLGA YOLDI reports.

“As we sit here tonight, hundred of thousands of people around the world are in jail, suffering torture because of their political beliefs, religion or ethnic background. Millions more are being harassed and intimidated daily by police, military or paramilitary forces who threaten their lives and destroy their livelihood. Many of these people will be murdered, many will flee into exile and spend years languishing in refugee camps, and most will simply continue to live under oppressive regimes, working clandestinely to bring about change and hoping change will come,” SBS presenter Margaret Pomeranz said.

At the seminar to mark the UN International Day in Support of Victims of Torture, the treatment of asylum seekers and Temporary Protection Visa holders in Australia was alluded to by most of the speakers. “Our current response to the asylum seekers in our detention centres is unfortunately a symptom of our current political climate,” Margaret added. “We know they are fleeing terror. We know that in the end the majority of them are being accepted as legitimate refugees in Australia, but we insist on keeping them in harsh conditions and treating them with great disregard. We are doing them great harm. In fact we are creating a group of people with tremendous mental health problems amongst us, who will have difficulty coping and living in normal life conditions in our communities.”

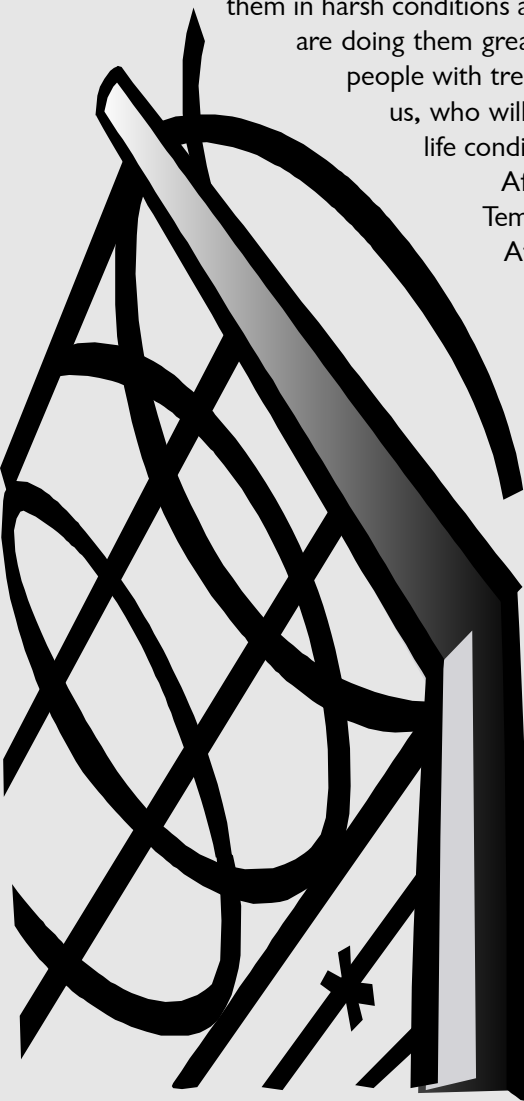
Afghan-born Sayed Reza Moosawi, a Temporary Protection Visa holder, left Afghanistan by himself two years ago at the age of 13; since then he has had no contact with his family. “When I was in Afghanistan my life turned dark. The Taliban persecuted everybody, the warlords changed the country into a blood battle,” he said. “My father sent me out with the hope to get me to safety, security and a future. But the trip was full of danger... I could see moments that I felt I would die. Finally our boat arrived in Australian waters where I was hoping to be safe and welcomed... for the first time I can study, but holding a temporary protection visa puts me in limbo.”

Dr Nooria Mehraby also fled Afghanistan, a decade earlier than Sayed, after the Russian invasion. After working as a medical doctor in various refugee camps, she arrived in Australia in 1993 and two years later started

working as a counselor for STARTTS. Nooria, who has worked with Afghan refugees for nine years, said that there were two factors that drove her work: her commitment to human rights and the resilience of her clients and their ability to survive. This is something that continues to amaze her.

“Throughout last year I found myself carrying a heavy load, sometimes beyond my counseling duties, but providing support for this very special group of people is rewarding” she said. Nooria also spoke about her experience working with a group of unaccompanied minors from Afghanistan in a school in Western Sydney. “The group was highly traumatized and extremely worried about the family they had left behind... It was difficult for me to separate my professional role as a counselor and my personal feelings of sadness, of being a part of a multiply-traumatized community... The session had a significant impact on me. I was painfully aware of my own feelings of loss, sadness, anger and resentment. It was an extremely emotional session. I could sense the fresh smell of my homeland from this newly arrived group and felt that I had traveled with them on a journey of years within two hours, so I felt exhausted... But I was astonished at the strength of these children and their incredible ability to survive.”

Dr Quintiliano Ruidiaz survived threats to his life in his native Colombia but had to face exile in Australia as a result. “It is not easy to suddenly leave everything... It is not easy to start again,” he said. “It is very traumatic, you frequently feel depressed and many times you cry silently in the



darkness of the night or at a lonely park... The suffering is silent and deep, so deep that one forgets to smile, one forgets the aroma of the gardens with roses, carnations and jasmine. One also forgets the colours of life, the clarity of light. One forgets that there is a blue sky and beautiful oceans... You only carry the weight of feelings: guilt, fear, frustration, sorrow, anger and the sight of grey horizons... You ask yourself: "Why did this happen to me? Is it a sin to think differently?"

"In Colombia, it is indeed a sin to think differently," he said. "It is a mortal sin to call for change in our national constitution, to demand social justice and denounce the constant genocide of farmers, unionists, workers, human rights activists, student leaders and everyone who is against the ruling class. A class who still thinks that our country only belongs to them and it is for them. My country's democracy is only on paper. It is made and fixed for a special class but not for the majority of us Colombians."

Rutiliano spoke about the armed struggle in Colombia and the impact it has had on the civil population, particularly on women, children and the elderly. However, he still sees himself as having a role to play in the future of Colombia: "I will be working for a real democracy and for everyone's well-being in Colombia. I will be fighting for peace so that we learn how to engage in dialogue and stop fighting. I will be working for a dignified life full of tolerance and respect."

About 250 organisations in 90 countries joined the International Rehabilitation Council for Torture Victims to commemorate the UN International Support for Victims of Torture this year. The question everyone poses, however, is, "What can we do to break the cycle of torture?" "The pessimist in me says that there is probably nothing we can do. It is all too hard and all I can do is sit back and hope that the problems take care of themselves," Margaret

Pomeranz said. "But the activist and the optimist in me say there are things that we can do. First of all we must ensure that the fight against torture remains high on the agenda of governments around the world... We must remind our own government that human rights have to be a priority condition in all dealings with other governments. Australia should not be lending support to dictatorships and authoritarian regimes that torture their citizens. Australia also has a responsibility to provide proper training, based on the principles of human rights, to our own police and military personnel. But equally importantly, we have an obligation that in all our international education and training work, human rights is a core subject," she added. And, what is more important: "Many foreign police and military are participants in our huge education export industry. They come to classes here in Australia and they participate in programs that Australian educators provide overseas. We have to ensure that the curriculum for all programs provides foreign students with an understanding of the rights of all citizens and provides security personnel with the means to work with their communities in non-coercive ways."

The Australian government has been facing human rights dilemmas in its dealings with China, Indonesia, Malaysia and other governments, for quite some time now, and it is far from being resolved. On the other hand, the September 11 events have not helped the cause of asylum seekers either. "Terrorist attacks plunged us all into a cycle of revenge that will have consequences that we can't even imagine, as yet," Margaret said.

Most speakers agreed that we have an obligation to demand that our government continues to maintain a high standard. "We spent most of the 20th century as world leaders in human rights. We are starting the 21st century with a terrible record and international profile," Margaret said. And this is not acceptable. ■

