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Catholic activists protest torture practice

by Claire Schaeffer-Duffy



(photos by David McReynolds)

WASHINGTON

Approximately 200 human rights activists rallied in Washington April 30 to urge President Obama to support a criminal inquiry into use of torture by the United States and to fully break with the detention policies of the Bush administration.

The anti-torture demonstration included a procession from the Capitol to the White House, where 62 activists were arrested. Dressed in orange jumpsuits and black hoods to resemble Guantanamo detainees, they stood behind a large banner that read: "Justice Delayed is Justice Denied." Stenciled on their uniforms were the names of prisoners who have been cleared for release but remain at the detention facility, as well as those who died in custody.

"Despite early, encouraging signs, the first months of the Obama administration have been a grave disappointment with respect to detainee issues and torture," said Matt Daloisio, a member of the New York Catholic Worker and co-founder of Witness Against Torture.

"Many of the immoral and illegal policies of the Bush administration remain in place, and President Obama has been reluctant to investigate possible past crimes," Dalosio said. The group of Catholic activists organized yesterday's action in collaboration with Amnesty International, the American Civil Liberties Union, and Torture Abolition Survivors Support Coalition.

During his presidential campaign, Obama promised to close Guantanamo and restore American commitment to the rule of law. On the first day of his presidency, he signed two executive orders that directed the closure of the U.S. detention facility by January 2010 and ended the CIA's use of secret prisons and coercive interrogations.

"Signing pieces of paper has done little to relieve the circumstances of Guantanamo's detainees," Dalosio said. By one count, 55 of the prison's 239 detainees have been cleared for release but remain incarcerated out of concern they could be mistreated if they returned to their home countries.

Read the editorial from the May 1 print issue of National Catholic Reporter: **Torture as a wake-up moment.**

Earlier this week, U.S. Attorney General Eric Holder asked European leaders to help relocate 30 detainees cleared for release. U.S. officials have appealed to Europe before. But a not-in-my-backyard attitude in the United States and abroad has made it difficult to resettle men the American government once tagged as terrorists.

Yesterday's demonstration comes amidst revelations that, under the Bush administration, CIA operatives used extremely harsh interrogation tactics against detainees suspected of terrorism. Last month, the Justice Department released four torture memos which were written in 2002 and 2004.

The documents reveal that a handful of politically-appointed attorneys contended it was legal to subject people to forced nudity, slamming against flexible walls, extremes of hot and cold, sleep deprivation, and faux suffocation such as water boarding. One memo described CIA treatment of Al Qaeda operative Haled Sheik Mohammed, accused of masterminding the 9/11 attacks. Within the first four weeks of his detention, he was beaten, thrown against a plywood wall, given a forced enema, put in stress positions, deprived of sleep, and waterboarded 183 times.

The revelations have created a furor in Washington. Some Democratic lawmakers have called for the impeachment of the federal judge who authored the memos while some Republican and former CIA officials have criticized the Obama administration for jeopardizing US intelligence gathering operations by publicizing the documents.

Although Obama has said he will not prosecute the CIA operatives or their lawyers, under the US Constitution, a president cannot decide who should or should not go to trial. The Associated Press reported April 28 that a Spanish magistrate opened an investigation of Bush officials' involvement with harsh interrogation methods. U.S. Attorney General Holder has reportedly not ruled out cooperating with the investigation.

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U.S. and international law prohibit the use of torture. According to

Matt Vogel, one of the organizers of the White House protest, that fact obligates the Obama administration to investigate and possibly prosecute. "President Obama cannot restore the rule of law while failing to enforce the law. We need accountability, not immunity," he said.

Police said they arrested yesterday's demonstrators, who were standing in front of the White House, because they violated a permit regulation that requires people to keep moving during pickets or rallies. All of the activists were given citations and released within hours of their arrest.

The April 30 event concluded Witness Against Torture's 100 Days Campaign to Close Guantanamo and End Torture. But according to Daloisio, Witness Against Torture's work is far from over.

"The group will continue its activities," Daloisio said, "until torture is decisively ended, its victims are fully acknowledged, Guantanamo and similar facilities are closed, and those who ordered and committed torture are held to account."

[Claire Schaeffer-Duffy is a frequent NCR contributor.]

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