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Torture survivors testify at human rights hearing

by Jordan Gamble by Catholic News Service

WASHINGTON (CNS) -- Torture survivors and advocates implored Congress June 25 to investigate allegations of military torture of war prisoners, saying that the U.S. must be an example for other countries in respect for human rights.

The hearing, sponsored by Rep. James McGovern, D-Mass., chair of the Congressional Human Rights Commission, was one of several programs held June 25-27 in observance of the Torture Abolition and Survivors Support Coalition's annual Torture Awareness Month.

The panel members declared that Congress and President Barack Obama's administration must take concrete action in investigating and prosecuting torture in order to uphold accountability in the world.

"These are issues, not abstractions. ... We know that there is considerable value in precise information," said Felice Gaer, head of the American Jewish Committee's human rights institute.

But, Gaer added, simply gathering facts about abuse is not enough.

"Countries need to recognize these obligations and live up to these obligations," she said.

American-born Ursuline Sister Dianna Ortiz was tortured in Guatemala in 1989; she helped found the coalition in 1998. She was one of the three survivors who testified about problems they see with the U.S. government response to torture allegations.

"The journey of survivors, our journey, has not been made any easier by the disturbing possibility that the Obama administration may believe that it has made an adequate response to human rights abuse of the Bush era," Sister Ortiz said.

The problem is compounded, she said, because government officials often turn to attorneys and academics as the "torture experts," and not survivors.

"The voices of survivors are vital to confronting the issue of torture. Sadly, members of Congress, both in the House and the Senate, have been reluctant to hear our voices," she said.

"And there is this question about 'how do you define torture?' There's been very few articles, or even discussions, about the psychological impact of torture. I think we are the experts when it comes to that: how it has an impact, not only on our lives, but on the lives of our families, communities, and society as a whole," Sister Ortiz explained.

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"We know torture from the inside out. We could be a valuable resource to help," said Demissie Abebe, current director of the Torture Abolition and Survivors Support Coalition.

The panel also criticized treatment of refugees who come to the United States after fleeing from torture and abuse in other countries. Abebe was tortured in Ethiopia in 1999 and came to the United States in 2005, only to see other torture survivors deported back to the places of their persecution, he said.

In a follow-up program June 26 at The Catholic University of America, a panel of legal experts and human rights activists offered a brief review of the use of torture that they said has been an element of U.S. foreign policy since the Vietnam War.

Maryknoll Father Roy Bourgeois, who served one year in Vietnam as a naval officer prior to his 1972 ordination, recalled hearing stories shared among military officers of how Vietnamese prisoners were abused and often killed in an effort to obtain information.

"This (type of treatment) has been an integral part of America foreign policy for many years. Our country has been involved in torture for a very long time," he said.

After joining Maryknoll, Father Bourgeois became a missionary priest in Bolivia where he heard more stories of people being tortured. The priest said after he and Bolivian human rights activists investigated the reports and gave their findings to American officials, he was subsequently arrested and deported from the country.

Later while ministering in El Salvador, Father Bourgeois recalled, he became aware of the torture of innocent civilians during the country's long civil war and learned members of the Salvadoran military received training in the United States.

The priest spearheads a campaign to close the U.S. Army School of the Americas, now known as the Western Hemisphere Institute for Security Cooperation, based at Fort Benning, Ga., which trains soldiers from throughout Latin America.

Attorney Colleen Costello of Human Rights USA outlined a legal history of U.S. Supreme Court cases that upheld the inherent dignity of the human person by outlawing actions that were considered abusive.

The courts, she explained, sided with plaintiffs in saying that no matter how heinous the crime, confessions could never be forcibly obtained by law enforcement authorities.

Catherine Grosso, assistant professor of law at the Michigan State University College of Law called the scope of country's "torture problem" enormous.

She said seeing the photo of a hooded Iraqi detainee with wires attached to his fingertips came as no surprise. The stance of the detainee was known as the "Vietnam position" during the Vietnam War, she explained.

Grosso urged Congress and the Obama administration to investigate the country's use of torture since the attacks of Sept. 11, 2001. They urged prosecuting those responsible for authorizing the use of torture on detainees in Iraq, Afghanistan and the U.S. military prison at Guantanamo Bay, Cuba.

"The truth is powerful and we must be ready to hear it and know it and document it," Grosso told the audience.

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Contributing to this story was Dennis Sadowski.

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