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Confronting U.S. policy on detention and torture

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NCR Today

Concerned about the cruelty of U.S. detention policy, fifteen anti-torture activists entered the U.S. House of Representatives yesterday afternoon and interrupted a vote on a 2012 defense appropriations bill.

The activists, who are members of the group Witness Against Torture say the version of the bill, under consideration yesterday, undermines U.S. Federal courts, keeps the detainment center in Guantanamo open, and attempts to expand the use of indefinite detention for terrorism suspects.

Standing in the gallery of the U.S. House, the activists read the following statement:

"Today the House of Representatives is in the process of contemplating not the passage of a bill but a commission of a crime. Provisions in the proposed Defense Appropriations Bill grant the United States powers over the lives of detained men fitting of a totalitarian state that uses the law itself as an instrument of tyranny. The law would make the prison at Guantanamo permanent by denying funds for the transfer of men to the United States, even for prosecution in civilian courts.

Abandoning civilian courts, the bill would be the ultimate concession that the rule of law and cherished American values cannot survive the fear and hatred that have consumed this country. The proposed bill makes restrictions on the transfer of detainees, even to foreign countries, so severe that no one ? whether cleared for release by our own government or acquitted in trials ? could be expected to leave Guantanamo. It therefore mandates the indefinite detention even of innocent human beings which is the very essence of tyranny. Congress has an obligation to uphold US Constitution. All Americans have the obligation to defend human rights. The proposed bill makes America a callous and reckless jailer, unworthy of the name of democracy. It must be defeated.

Guantanamo must close. Those unjustly bound must be freed. Justice must rule."

Fourteen of the fifteen activists were arrested, released and given an arraignment date of July 12. Matt Daloisio, Witness Against Torture coordinator, said New Yorker Brian Hines remains incarcerated while police verify his identity. After his arrest during a previous anti-torture demonstration, Hines gave the name of Shaker Aamer, the sole remaining British detainee in Guantanamo, and is currently listed as such in the Washington, D.C., prison system.

June is torture awareness month (Yes, such a month now exists). Yesterday's action at the U.S. Capitol was one of several demonstrations, held this week in Washington, that were organized by Witness Against Torture and the Torture Abolition and Survivors Support Coalition International.

The activists say they are calling on the government to close Guantanamo, end indefinite detention, repudiate the Military Commissions, and resist efforts to reauthorize torture in the form of "enhanced interrogations."

While the demonstrators in Washington, D.C., seek to end U.S. use of indefinite detention and torture, the National Religious Campaign Against Torture (NRCAT) wants to confront the torture that has already occurred. The organization is calling for a Commission of Inquiry into the subject.

As part of their campaign, the NRCAT has issued a sobering statement about our devolution from a country, once regarded as a strong advocate for human rights, to a place where waterboarding is justified. They have also written a compelling prayer that includes a confession for our tolerance of torture in the past.

Here is an excerpt from their statement:

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Waterboarding is only one type of torture that our government used on detainees. Our government acting in our name, engaged in a variety of practices that qualify as torture, including: walling (slamming detainees against a wall), sexual humiliation, sleep deprivation, beatings, extreme heat, induced hypothermia, stress positions, long term isolation, sensory deprivation, threatening detainee with dogs, threatening detainees with electric shocks, and forcing detainees to urinate and defecate on themselves.

How did our country come to this? How did the United States of America, long seen by many as a defender of human rights, reach the point making it government policy to torture prisoners? Why did we operate secret, CIA-run prisons? Why did we send prisoners to Egypt, Syria, and other countries to face even worse forms of torture? These are questions that should engage all Americans, and, as people of faith, we have a particular obligation to address them.

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