

Uzbekistan: Britain's ambassador was right to speak out

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The news that Britain's ambassador to Uzbekistan, Craig Murray, has been removed from his post after speaking out about torture in Uzbekistan is stunning. I, for one, had allowed myself a small cheer when Mr Murray started denouncing horrifying human rights abuses in Uzbekistan. Here was a diplomat prepared to break with the usual protocol-driven reticence.

According to Amnesty International, people are routinely tortured under Uzbekistan's authoritarian President Karimov. Mr Murray has been posted to represent British interests in Tashkent. Should he have denounced the fact that his hosts allowed people to be boiled to death? Should he have complained that Uzbek detainees are tortured into false confessions and secretly executed? Or look the other way and keep quiet?

Actually, I suspect most career diplomats would have found a convenient third way. Report it back to London, but keep quiet publicly. His superiors might well have said that Uzbekistan is now a strategically important partner in the "war on terror". And that we have to accept that Karimov is dealing with an insurgent terrorist threat. Interrogations will be rough, but necessary.

Mr Murray appears to be made of different stuff. His recent complaints have focused on the question of whether the Foreign Office and MI6 are receiving information from torture in Uzbekistan filtered through the FBI. And if so, what would they do with it? This seems to have riled his FCO superiors and brought about his removal. He sees himself now as a "victim of conscience". Who is the principled party here?

Under international law information extracted from torture is legally inadmissible in a court. The UN's convention against torture expressly forbids the use of torture "evidence". It is effectively dirty information and must be discounted. However, in a little-noticed ruling in August, the Court of Appeal decided that while information obtained by torture was inadmissible in UK courts, this was only the case when directly procured by UK agents or in whose procurement UK agents have connived.

Amnesty International denounced this alarming view as "giving a green light to torturers" around the world. I agree. Yet this appears to be the FCO's current position. If we don't do it ourselves then information we get from foreign torture chambers is okay.

When I was tortured under Pinochet's military junta in the 1970s, I looked to countries like Britain to resist the barbarity of Pinochet's methods. Britain was a safe haven from torture for me and has been my home now for many years. However, I am increasingly distressed at the UK's apparent new-found "flexibility" over torture.

Let me be clear about torture. It is an abomination. Nobody can describe the pain. Nobody can truly describe the real horror of torture.

I was arrested in front of my wife and two small children in Santiago in 1974 by members of SICAR (Servicio Inteligencia Carabineros). I was blindfolded and taken to a secret detention centre under a car park under the presidential palace, La Moneda. I was tortured there for three months before being transferred to another torture centre known as "La Casa del Terror" (The House of Torture) at no.33 Calle Londres. Three more months of torture followed.

For me, there were two mental stages. The first was shock: I was in shock and my mind was frantically working, getting ready for what was coming. The second stage was acceptance: acceptance that I would die, but die with dignity.

Whether or not I'd given my tormentors information and whether or not that information was truthful, it can only be right that such material never surfaces in a court of law. As a matter of fact, most information beaten out of people in police cells is pure rubbish. People will confess to anything and denounce anybody if pushed to the limits of endurance.

Craig Murray's fear that the FBI is passing information from torture victims to UK officials is, in my experience, highly likely to be borne out. After surviving torture and time in a Chilean concentration camp, I was exiled to Panama. But I was later picked up by Chilean and Panamanian police and interrogated and beaten all over again. On this occasion, interrogations were also carried out by a CIA agent. If, then, intelligence services collaborated against the "communist threat", they are doing it now in the "war on terror".

The huge intelligence failures over Iraq have certainly alerted us to the dire uncertainties attaching to secret "intelligence". How much more questionable if the information derives from blood-spattered torture victims?

When Pinochet was arrested in London in 1998, I hoped we were at a turning point in the fight against torture. Putting Pinochet on trial was vital, not just to me, but for thousands of survivors of torture still alive in Chile and around the world. Britain had, it seemed, taken a brave step in allowing his arrest and detention. The promise seemed to be: no more immunity for torturers.

Pinochet escaped justice here, but may still be tried in Chile. His London arrest was a marker laid down at the feet of the likes of Uzbekistan's President Karimov.

On 9 October, the trial of an Afghan warlord suspected of orchestrating torture in Afghanistan opened at the Old Bailey. This is ground-breaking as it tries him for alleged torture in a separate country. It's a real step forward.

Torture is recognised as an international crime and perpetrators can and should be prosecuted in courts far away from the original scene of the crime.

But, contrast this with the fact that simultaneously people in Britain may currently be detained indefinitely under anti-terrorism measures partly on the basis of blood-stained information. Foreign nationals are even now being held indefinitely without trial at top-security prisons at Belmarsh in South London and Woodhill in Buckinghamshire. They have been "certified" as suspected terrorists by the Home Secretary David Blunkett and the special proceedings to justify these measures are the very ones over which the Court of Appeal gave its green light on the use of "third party" torture material.

The fearful symmetry, then, is contained in the fact that we may be locking people up here based on information tortured out of British nationals in places like Guantanamo Bay.

We are at a fork in the road. We go either with Mr Murray and reject torture in all its forms; or we equivocate, look for justifications, and decide that Donald Rumsfeld has a point when he distinguishes between "abuse" and "torture".

In the year of Abu Ghraib and international intelligence failures, we need to break with torture forever. Allowing the virus of torture "evidence" into our legal bloodstream is something we must resist. Anything else and the torturers have won.

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This article was written by an outside contributor and does not necessarily reflect Amnesty International policy.