

OP ED FOR AIR 2011 LAUNCH

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For those working in human rights, the events of the last week have led to some interesting but challenging debates. We have heard government officials and pundits argue that torture led to the discovery of Osama Bin Laden. Somewhere, they claim, in a secret detention centre in Poland or Lithuania, or in an interrogation room in Guantánamo Bay or Bagram, someone gave the critical clue that led to this outcome.

As justifications for the legitimacy of torture hit the headlines, Amnesty International has been preparing to release its annual report into the state of the world's human rights. With the benefit of 50 years of working to prevent torture and promote justice, Amnesty International has found itself re-affirming the centrality of human rights in the key challenges we face today – including the absolute ban on torture.

Some claim that torture works. They argue that last week's events in Pakistan prove that torture played a role in bringing what they would call justice to the thousands of victims of Al Qa'aeda around the world. So how, they ask, can self-righteous human rights activists criticize torture?

But let's look at detention centres. Detention centres in Tunis, Cairo, Tehran, Damascus, Manama and Sana'a. Detention centres where for decades people fighting to promote human rights and democracy have been tortured by what are now being publicly acknowledged as brutal and repressive governments. And the justification is always virtually the same. These people are a threat. In fact they are terrorists.

This is not about one person's terrorist being another person's freedom fighter. This is about states abusing their power both against those whose actions themselves are criminal and abusive and those who challenge criminal and abusive behaviour by governments. The reality is that, to achieve their ends, states often torture human rights defenders and end up protecting the terrorist. Too often the system fails and violators reign while defenders are imprisoned. And this is one clear reason why torture can never be justified.

Those who are promoting human rights and defending the marginalized, the excluded, the demonized must be protected from any abuse of power – not just from states but also from the drug lords in Mexico, the Lords Resistance Army in Uganda and the Taleban in Afghanistan and Pakistan. But it is states who have an explicit and visible commitment to human rights is key in preventing attacks on those who are marginalized, regardless of who is the perpetrator.

And that can only happen if torture is absolutely prohibited. There are no exceptions.

There is no question that those who threaten, kill, kidnap or maim must be brought to justice. But that rule should apply equally whether they be individuals harming others or government officials seeking to quell dissent.

In the panic that followed the attacks of 11 September, the US and other western countries were quick to outsource torture to states that were experts in the practice. They could claim that their hands were clean, even as they increased support for governments they knew to be repressive, brutal and corrupt. It is the people of these countries who have paid dearly. The western governments have a debt to pay.

Which brings us back to the Middle East.

Throughout the region we are seeing courageous men and women who are tired of repression, corruption and discrimination saying enough is enough and taking to the streets to demand change. They face batons, bullets, brutality and death. But their demands are clear. Like all of us, they want to live in dignity. Free from fear of violence by security forces and paid thugs. They want to live free from corrupt officials and businesses, to be empowered to influence the way their government acts.

For the women who have been so critical in these protests, their participation is an act of faith. They are engaged in an ongoing struggle to survive the dual scourge of repressive governments and entrenched discrimination against women. They are gambling that, after risking their lives, they too will have a place at the table - not in the kitchen - as the new order is drawn up. Too often the odds have seemed to be stacked against them, making their courage all the more remarkable.

The human rights revolution in the Middle East is at a critical juncture. For years Amnesty International has documented the repressiveness, brutality and corruption of these governments which recent events have laid bare in a way that no one can deny. The callow complicity of governments who claim to champion human rights is equally exposed. People living under repressive governments *from* Myanmar to Cuba, from Uzbekistan to Zimbabwe, are watching to see which if any governments will truly champion human rights and an end to repression, brutality and corruption.

If crisis can also bring about opportunity – we are living in a world of vast possibilities. This is a time for leadership. A time to move beyond the moral failure of governments all over the world and show support of human rights in practice, not just as a politically expedient sound bite.

At Amnesty International we have fifty years' experience of working with the human rights movement to stand up to dictators. But the ordinary people acting with extraordinary courage taking to the streets in the Arab Spring are a living testament to our dream. They are defying the risk of torture and brutality to demand their human rights.

Let us – ordinary individuals working together – recommit to the vision of Peter Benenson, the man who founded Amnesty International, and remember that individuals *can* make a difference. Individuals can act in solidarity - across borders, across class, across beliefs, across all the differences exploited by those seeking to maintain power - to demand that governments end repression, weed out corruption and promote human rights.

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