

Torture:

Stories of survival

Photographs by Véronique Rolland
together with REDRESS

In association with
the Medical Foundation for the Care of Victims of Torture
and Amnesty International (UK Section)

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Acknowledgements

We are extremely grateful to all those who helped to make this happen, in particular all the survivors who agreed to share with us their stories and to be photographed. Special thanks to Véronique Rolland for her initial conceptualisation of the Project and for her perseverance and dedication in making it a reality, and to Ally Scott, for her time and patience in interviewing survivors and bringing their stories to light. We are also very grateful to Jane Spence of the Medical Foundation for the Care of Victims of Torture, Jaswant Kaur of the Sikh Human Right Group, the Sikh Refugee Support Group, and Osman Hummaida and Katherine Perks of the Sudanese Organisation Against Torture (SOAT) for facilitating the involvement of survivors.

We are also very appreciative of the support provided by Sara Mac Neice, Amnesty International (UK); Baroness Frances D'Souza; Esin Cubucku; Matthew Anstee; Matteo Cassina; Noreena Hertz; Faye Browning at Metro Imaging; Niel at the Pro Centre; Michael Mardon at Kustom; Kate Ryder. A special thank you to David Tweedie who has helped in ways too numerous to mention, and Ian Eves for the cover design. In addition, many thanks to the Russell Press Ltd., Nottingham, for printing and organising this catalogue and to their suppliers: McNaughton Papers; Kodak; Arets Graphics UK, Leicester; and Rossington & Cordon, Nottingham, for supplying the materials.

The Project would not have been possible without the generous support of our donors and others who have contributed to the costs of the event, including: the European Initiative for Democracy and Human Rights, Amnesty International (UK), Goldman Sachs International, Robert Gavron Charitable Trust, and Stuart Wheeler.

Keith Carmichael
Founder and Honorary President of REDRESS



"This important exhibit of torture survivors should strengthen our absolute and unequivocal opposition to torture and ill-treatment under any circumstances, including war and any other public emergency."

[Bianca Jagger]

"... fear has so many layers, level upon level from the conceptual to the physical... To be the one captured, that cornered animal... the realisation that you could be there forever. That of your own effort you can do nothing whatsoever, that you are helpless in a way that you have never been helpless before... the steel door, the stone walls, the cement floor, all substances too obdurate for the human body's petty strength, the flesh unarmed, naked against these forces, fingers, teeth – you have no claws, nor would they be of use. You have entered the animal condition, or, more precisely, one lower down, you have become an object, a thing in a box. Inanimate except for the terrible whirl of consciousness, itself nothing but suffering... Volition is gone entirely, will is useless. You are a creature now, their creature. And they are free to torment you. Any way they wish. They can now inflict any pain or deprivation upon you, and for any reason: amusement, boredom, habit, even simple routine, the routine by which you will be broken, piece by piece... Torture... makes dignity virtually impossible... it deprives the victim of his own truth, undoes the self, coerces it toward its own betrayal."

[Kate Millet, *The Politics of Cruelty*, Viking, 1994]

This exhibition is about courageous individuals in our midst. Young, old, from different backgrounds, religious and political beliefs. All are residing in the United Kingdom. All have suffered torture. Their everyday demeanour underscores that the scourge of torture is very real, something that impinges on us all.

Photographs by Véronique Rolland

Narratives by Ally Scott, edited by Matthew Anstee

Torture: Stories of survival

Torture is the calculated physical and psychological assault on the individual, a practice used to instil fear, punish or degrade, to dehumanise, to obliterate the self. It is often said that anyone who has been tortured remains tortured, long after the physical wounds have healed. But for all those who have undergone the horrors of torture, even the most determined, the process of recovery is a long and uncertain journey. One might think that torture is a phenomenon that occurs only in the most repressive regimes; in fact, torture is widespread in all parts of the world. It is usually perpetrated by police or security forces, but can also be carried out by armed forces or other detaining authorities such as immigration officials, hospital or prison wardens.

There is no exhaustive list of acts that may constitute torture; new methods of cruelty and degradation are invented all the time. Typical forms of torture include severe beatings, extraction of nails or teeth; burns; electric shocks; suspension; suffocation; exposure to excessive light, noise, heat or cold; sexual aggression such as rape or other forms of sexual violence; forced administration of harmful drugs in detention or psychiatric institutions; prolonged denial of rest, sleep, food, water, adequate hygiene, medical assistance; total isolation and sensory deprivation; detention in perpetual uncertainty in terms of space and time; threats to torture or kill relatives; mock executions. Torture may be physical or psychological or both. Courts have also held that 'enforced disappearances', the disappearance and presumed killing of persons without any investigation or confirmation of the whereabouts of the body may constitute a form of continuing torture on the relatives.

Torture affects people in different ways. For example, the use of sexual violence as a method of torture will have a profound but different impact on men and women. Cultural and religious beliefs will intensify the effect of certain acts of cruelty, e.g., the desecration of religious objects, forced nudity or the forced adoption of sexual postures. Most, if not all torture survivors will

suffer long-term psychological symptoms, including nightmares, difficulties with memory or concentration, persistent feelings of fear and anxiety, depression.

Why this exhibition?

Survivors in our midst: The subjects are all survivors who reside in the United Kingdom. The purpose of the exhibition is to challenge the preconceptions that torture is an unthinkable event, affecting a minority of persons exposed to extreme political regimes “far away”. The personalisation of survivors of torture through the use of photographic images and accompanying narratives – the knowing of their name and age, nationality, life experiences, hopes and desires - serves to break down the barriers between the subject and the observer.

Survivors' stories, how they choose to be portrayed: The exhibition explores the relationship between photography and ‘autobiography’. How does the survivor choose to portray her or himself? Is the survivor seeking to show scars, to evoke pain or vulnerability? Is the survivor demonstrating strength, the capacity to endure, to overcome? Here the photographic descriptions become physical markers, a space where absence, loss and perhaps triumph, are irrevocably inscribed. By using a neutral background, the greatest possible space is provided to the subject. The images are shot full length to counter the process of torture, which is about destroying the individual; here the survivor stands as a "whole".

Some common themes explored in the photographs and narratives

To come forward and speak publicly about torture is immensely difficult, and not all survivors of torture would have agreed to participate in this exhibition. Events such as torture are deeply personal, and can evoke a range of emotions including shame, fear, anger and pain. Many survivors will be afraid to speak publicly for fear of risking the security of family members or colleagues still at home, many others have not fully revealed their experiences to families or friends, and may not have come to terms with it themselves.

Many of the survivors in the exhibition expressed frustration that people do not easily understand what they have experienced, or misconstrue the supposed 'reasons' for the torture; *'they think I must have done something wrong'*. Even the most caring and sympathetic of individuals can find it difficult to really take in the immensity of torture. Some of the survivors have spoken about the impact of their experiences on family and friends, and that certain long term relationships had eroded due to the inability of the relationship to cope with the added dimension of torture.

Most of the survivors still speak of painful reminders of torture, even after the passage of many years, small places, smells, crowds, shouting, bustling, the sight of a policeman, *'I don't sleep because I hear the guard opening the door.'* It is common for survivors to suffer a range of psychological symptoms and several have mentioned that they have contemplated suicide.

For the survivors that have come to the United Kingdom to seek refuge from torture, they have to deal with a host of other issues regarding displacement and finding identity and meaning in a new place. For the Britons returning home, somehow it is expected of them that they easily resume their lives. But there is probably even less understanding amongst health and social service agencies or friends and communities about the long-term effects of torture in these latter cases.

When survivors speak of the challenges associated with moving forward with their lives, many mention the frustration they experience by the fact that their torture has not been publicly acknowledged. Survivors have different conceptions of justice, some speak of the importance of criminal prosecutions of their torturers, whereas others speak of other forms of remedies including civil compensation, rehabilitation and the prevention of recurrence. For all, torture has left an indelible mark on their lives and each day is a struggle for the restoration of dignity and the reclaiming of humanity.

In the exhibition, there are 7 accounts of torture in Africa, 6 in the Middle East, 2 in South America, 2 in South Asia and 1 in South East Europe. This breakdown cannot be said to reflect the relative prevalence of torture in one region or another, but rather it is indicative of the individuals and communities in the United Kingdom with whom we have contact.

What can be done?

These narratives should not be taken as a barometer of endurance. People who have not experienced torture have a lot invested in perceiving it as a fate worse than death. But what this extraordinary collection of people require of us who look at their pictures and read their stories is not horror, but understanding. We need to understand that torture is unacceptable and also to marvel at the inspirational resilience of the human spirit.

There are many ways to take a stand against torture. The first is to recognise that torture is intolerable in all its forms, irrespective of who is being tortured and who is the torturer. The recent 'war on terror' has sought to blur the debate on torture; that there may be instances when it is justifiable; that certain practices are not really so bad and shouldn't be considered as torture; that evidence obtained by torture can be used in UK courts. We must remain vigilant against this slippery slope: there is never an excuse to resort to torture. Allegations of torture must be scrupulously investigated, and where sufficient evidence exists, the perpetrators must be brought to justice. Survivors of torture must have access to effective and enforceable remedies and reparation for all that they have suffered. Not only is this the least that can be done, it is also the law, and we must ensure that it is applied.

To become more involved in the fight against torture, consult the websites of contributing organisations: www.redress.org; www.torturecare.org.uk; www.amnesty.org.uk.

*Survivors have expressed their stories in their own words, from their unique perspectives. These do not necessarily reflect the views of the organisations involved in this exhibition.



Kawther Hamed

Sudanese

I used to work as a lawyer in my country and I practised for nine years. I have one daughter called Nada who is eleven years old. I have had a very bad experience both because I am politically active and because I am a woman.

I was arrested several times and my house was often searched by the police. All this affected my daughter's mental health and mine too. The security men would turn up at 2 o'clock in the morning and then my daughter might not see me again for the whole day. At this time she was still breast-feeding so my mum would have to find something for her to eat.

I have been tortured, I've been slapped and insulted and forced to stand without shoes in the hot sun for hours on end. I was given 40 lashes in public. I still get very depressed and I have lower back pain.

My husband is still there, he is an activist and he has been tortured. I'm not happy here because if I was alone I would fight. I came because of my daughter. My husband at that time was underground and she didn't have anybody but me. I want to fight for my country - it's my home, my family, my work, my everything. But I am here for my daughter.

I often think, was it the right decision to come? I came for a very genuine case, a serious one but I'm not sure it's right for her to be in a difficult culture, a different environment. When we came we were Sudanese. My daughter studies here but still she is not British. I hate this situation, to be in between.

Demey Yalcin

Turkish Kurd

I am 23 years old. My life and my family's life was in danger in Turkey; that is why we came here. Two members of my family were killed – my brother and my maternal uncle. My father ran away from the torture. They raided our house nearly every day, often at night and we were taken to a police station where we were tortured. I was tortured for two days, beaten and left naked in a room.

I've been here four years six months. I travelled by myself on my own. I was very young then, 17-18 years old. My grandmother helped me find an agent. She told me I would go to a good country but I didn't know I was coming here. I was very upset because I had to leave my family behind me, I was worried about them. Whenever I saw the police here I would get frightened. My mother and my brother and my sister joined me, and then my father came. It's good here because I am together with my family. I don't really get frightened anymore that the police might come because I have leave to remain in this country.

I am still on medication. If I don't take it I start screaming, it's very difficult for me to get rid of all these thoughts. People like my GP say I should just forget about it and it makes me very angry. It is easy to say, but it is not easy for me to do. When I am alone I have flashbacks. I can only speak to people in the Medical Foundation. I can't really talk about it to anyone else. I keep it inside. I am not very strong. Sometimes I ask myself why I am alive. I attempted suicide a couple of times. I can't trust men. I have never had a boyfriend because of what happened to me.

I'm at school at the moment learning English. I'm going to be a nurse.





Maukhtiar Singh

Punjabi Sikh

I was a priest in a Sikh temple in Punjab. I heard that the police were enquiring about my whereabouts and the village committee asked me to come with them to the police station.

They lay me down on the floor and started asking me questions. I had been to England and was a priest in Smethwick in Birmingham. They were asking me about this person and that person that I met when I was in Britain, and where I'd put the arms. They stripped me and slapped me on the back with a strip of leather called a chittar 15 times. I screamed out and was in a lot of pain. When eventually they released me all the skin had come off. They said, you're lying to us, tell us the truth.

I was interrogated for seven or eight hours and made to stand all night. The next day they put the light on and made me look at it. They put a big roller on my thighs and people stood on it while it was rolled up and down my legs. Then I was taken to see an officer and that's when they started to stretch my legs. I screamed so they put cloth in my mouth. That night I was kept awake again, standing.

In the meantime my family were looking for me, going from one police station to the next, making enquiries. In frustration my family set up a road-block and the inspector general got involved. Everyone knew I wasn't involved in political activities – I was the local priest.

The inspector general phoned the police station where I was held and told them I was innocent. When my family turned up I couldn't walk. The senior officer came and put a gun to my head and said if you tell anyone what we did to you we'll pick you up again and kill you. I was terrified they would come and get me again. I didn't want to come to the UK, but I couldn't stay there.

When I was in Smethwick, Birmingham there was another Maukhtiar Singh living there. He is politically active and the police in Punjab presumed I was working with him. That is why I was tortured. Later he was detained by the British authorities; they were trying to deport him. If he was deported he would be tortured like I was, so I gave evidence in the Old Bailey about my treatment so that he would not be sent back. Because I did this I know if I was to go home I would be detained and tortured. For me that is the hardest part.

I'm in a lot of pain in my arms, back and shoulders. I need to work because it takes my mind off everything, but it's a hard, heavy job - I work in a foundry. I miss my family who are still in India and I'm not coping myself so I couldn't have a family of my own. Its hard because back in India I was a local priest, people respected me, here I'm by myself, I have no one.

After what I've been through I feel like my heart has been broken, I am like the living dead. People don't understand, they make jokes of it, they don't believe me or think I must have done something wrong for the police to detain me in the first place. At the moment I haven't got the urge to live. I can't get it out of my head. I have to leave it up to god.



Amani Hamadalla

Sudanese

I'm 36 and I come from Sudan. I came to England four years ago as a refugee. I'm here looking for clues about my father.

There was a coup in Sudan in July 1971 and my father was here in London at that time. He was on his way back to Sudan when the British plane he had boarded was forced to land in Tripoli. He was kidnapped by the Libyan Government and killed. I was three when he died.

I had a difficult childhood. My mother, my brother and I were searching for the truth for a long time. We still don't know exactly what happened to my father. I have the right to know why he died. I need to know where his grave is, as everybody has the right to know where their father or mother is buried. I lost him and it means a lot to me.

Twice I found myself in hospital and each time I stayed for a month. My brother became ill as well so my mother wanted to stop looking, she was just thinking of us. I considered not carrying on but when I remember what happened to him I want to keep on going. I think I have the determination to continue. I am waiting for acknowledgement and an apology, then I'll be happy.

I am homesick and I want to be with my people but I choose to stay. I have my new family here, my children are in school and I have started a new life.

Keith Carmichael

British

Between 1981-1984 I was interned in Saudi Arabia without any charge or trial. I was badly mistreated and during one incident I suffered an aggravated assault which fractured my spine.

When you've been tortured you feel very isolated because some people will think, well for that to have happened you must have done something very wrong. You trust very few people. Over the process of time you've lost all your so-called friends and acquaintances because they don't want to be associated with someone who's hit problems like this.

You find it rather difficult to cope with anything, even to focus. You hear a noise, or you have to go in a lift and there are echoes and triggers of what happened to you. You go into a syndrome of traumatic reminders – smells, crowds, shouting, bustling - things like that.

I knew I must have a mission to be able to cope. I thought, I'm going to find a way of seeking redress and if I can find a way, if I can be the pilot, I can help others. In 1991 I constructed the first outline for REDRESS, the charitable organisation.

I think anyone that's suffered torture must find within himself or herself some sort of mission. They've got to be prepared to accept that they are going to be different and accept to a certain degree what has happened. If they can say "I am not going to be beaten down, I'm going to become a contributing member of my community again", that will prove to the torturers that they have beaten them, that they have survived.



Della Murad

Iraqi Kurd

I'm from Halabja and I left there for Baghdad for political reasons in 1962. I lived in Baghdad until I finished university and I then got my first job as a teacher in Halabja. I am a mother of four children – they are 22, 20, and ten-year old twins. I am very blessed.

It was horror that brought me out of Iraq, the horror of Saddam. All my family, all my friends, they all lived in Halabja. When I was a teacher it was the time when the regime was really very brutal and I was caught twice. The only thing that saved me to be honest with you is my language. I spoke with a very fluent Baghdad accent so they thought I lived in Baghdad, I don't think she has anything to do with politicians.

We lived in the mountains for one year and my health was deteriorating. There were constant gas attacks at that time, but we didn't know it was happening. We really didn't know. Most of my friends had burns, people were sick, some thought there was poison in the water but we had no clue. I had two small children to look after and I was sick all the time. We were moving around, we couldn't stay in one place. Later, when the major attack happened I was in Germany, and then we realised. Everything fell into place. He was using the gas then, in all the villages, little by little.

Later I was diagnosed with a rare form of cancer and the doctors said they thought it was a result of a chemical attack.

It was constant horror, constant. They would take your students from your classrooms and the next day they would tell you - you must come and watch them being hanged in the square. You had to clap! You had to say, well done! They were my students, my children. I think this for me was worst than anything else.

I love Halabja, I'd rather be there more than anywhere else in the world. But now I am a piece of furniture that cannot be moved. My children are growing up here and I have friends that I wouldn't leave for the world. But I am so happy that the people there are happy at last. They are breathing and free.

I think to survive you must have faith. Loving life is the core of everything. For me, every time anything happened I would say, I know I have to go through it and I will come out the other side. I knew I was going to survive.

I think I have purpose too - I have raised the most wonderful children; bringing good children into the world is a very great thing. I also design traditional Kurdish clothes. I love glamour - it's my department! I used to go out when I was five and look at the women and come back and put up my hair and cut my clothes to be exactly like the ones the women were wearing. My mother had good clothes back then, but my brother died when he was only nineteen and ever since she has always worn black. But she loves my designs. It's probably the thing she has wanted to do all her life and now I am doing it for her. She says to me, promise me one thing - that you will never wear black.





Crispen Kulinji
Zimbabwean

I was arrested more than 50 times because I am an MDC member. In March 2003 two truckloads of soldiers arrived at my parents place. They had my sister and my names but they didn't know what we looked like. They bashed down the door and went straight into my mum's bedroom. They dragged her naked from the bed and gang raped her. I saw this with my own eyes. I said 'I'm Crispen Kulinji, it's me.' They started beating me. My mum managed to escape, I don't know how, but she did.

They took me away, blindfolded me and gave me electric shock on my feet, legs and tongue. I remember falling down and they beat me until it went black. After a couple of hours I regained consciousness. It was quiet and I was in a pit. I forced myself out and I managed to crawl for a kilometre until I saw a main road. I was covered in blood and mud. Eventually I made it to the hospital and I was in a coma for four days. I was in hospital for six months.

I feel sad that my mum was involved, she doesn't even support the party. There is nowhere she can go. I just pray that one day things will be fine back home. We have been waiting for this day for a long time now. I eat sleep and drink politics and I will not rest until there is a democratic government.

I became a Christian. The day I was attacked about six people died so I just consider myself to be very fortunate to be alive. It taught me that God is alive and God loves us. That is what I learnt from what I went through.

Hashem Redha*Bahrainian*

I've been in prison 12 years, 6 months, 3 days and 6 hours. There was no case against me but they tortured me many many times. There is no morning, no afternoon, no night. You can't sleep. They tortured me very hard.

They put me in the falanga position where you are hung upside down and they beat my legs. They put nails in my fingers and burnt them with a cigarette lighter. All the time I am in a small cell, one metre by six feet. It is very hot and very dirty.

I take a hunger strike action three times. The last time it took 34 days. I stitched my lips to show that this time I was very serious. I say, this time, when I die take my body to my family.

One day they release me. In August 1996 I come here and after ten years I have leave to remain. And still I am worried about me and my family.

I've been tortured physically and mentally and in everyway I am disabled. I'm disabled in giving the love to my wife and children. Our children need to play with me, but I can't do it. I'm looking to go away from this life and say, don't think about me again.

I see them torture our people, I see the blood on the walls, I don't sleep because I hear the guard opening the door. Still I hear them tell me 'you're nothing, you're nothing'. This is my life now, because of nothing. They put me in prison for nothing.





Perico Rodriguez
Argentinian

I came in to the UK in 1979. I had been in prison in Argentina for 3 years without trial and without charge.

I was arrested and imprisoned for my political activity because I belonged to a movement that wanted social and economic change for the better of all Argentinian people. I was one of thousands detained and tortured at that time. I was taken for interrogation from prison three times and every time they said my name I thought, oh my goodness it's the end. You almost say goodbye.

The method of torture was electric shock. We were blind folded all the time and you are subjected to people who can do anything they want and cause immense suffering and pain. Interrogation could last 15 days to one month. Then there was a decision as to whether you would be killed or taken back to prison.

In prison we took a decision to survive. We say we have to 'preserve ourselves', not to enjoy, not to live, but to 'preserve ourselves'. They took away books, pens, paper. But what we decided was that we would each give a lecture. It doesn't matter if you were a chemist, lawyer, doctor or carpenter you would teach your speciality. We learnt how to make furniture, we learnt medicine - well we didn't learn much because medics always use strange and unnecessary terminology! But nevertheless we listened and we took it very seriously. It was our survival and it kept us busy. Sometimes someone would want to talk to you and you would say, no I can't I'm very busy, because you'd be preparing your dissertation.

My case was interesting because before I went to prison I was living in a town in the mountains. There was a couple who were travelling all over Latin America and they were hitchhiking. When I saw them I didn't want to stop, but I felt sorry for them because it was cold, so I went back in my car and I give them a lift to the town. They stayed with me in our house with my wife and children. They were English and when they left I just thought, I'm never going to see these people again. Then a year after I was arrested a friend of ours said to my wife, why don't you write to those people in Europe? They were Amnesty members and they started an extraordinarily big campaign for my release.

On my release my family and I came to England. At that time there were very few political refugees here. I had to realise two things, how to keep physical and mental sanity in a country with a completely different culture and language, and how to make sense of our exile. The answer is something that has been important to me all my life – it is the answer to a famous question: Yes, I am my brother's keeper. I have a responsibility for many other people. And to work with many other people is very important for understanding both yourself and others.

I am a counsellor with the Medical Foundation and I try to help people to normalise their life. I'm not saying torture is a nice thing, or that it is nothing. But the human spirit continues. Refugees are very often not here one hundred per cent. They are thinking about the family they left behind, their friends, their language, their custom. The reality is that going back is very unrealistic for many people – economically and politically. We have to help people make decisions, to decide to stay here.

I am not denying the trauma of torture, but in only very a few situations is trauma permanent - an experience that is impossible to 'cure'. I know when I see someone who has just arrived and is traumatised for a number of reasons, I know that this person is going to be OK. The sadness, if it endures, is more related to the loss of family, or culture or social status.

We have to understand both how 'evil' and how 'good' human beings are. This is who we are; we are not perfect. For instance, in my case when I was being tortured they would have coffee breaks. They would stop and sit with their cups, and talk about fishing. Where would be the best river to their kids to fish, for instance. Then they would say, right, lets get on with him. And I would be sitting there. Many of these people are also nice people. The root of survival is understanding this.

William Sampson
British

I was picked up in Riyadh at the end of 2000 and tortured until I falsely confessed to having been involved in two bombings, one of which resulted in the death of a British national.

I knew they had arrested a number of westerners and that I was the only one without a wife and kids. I also knew the crime I had been accused of carried the death penalty. If the Saudi's were to release us, having accused us of this crime of murder, it might prove particularly embarrassing, but if they executed several of us they would run into human rights issues with the West. What I saw them doing was executing one person and showing mercy to the others. I thought, since there is nobody who is dependent upon me, I'll stand up to be executed. I'll make them want to get rid of me. So I made that decision and became a complete and utter jerk.

By giving myself an objective I provided myself with a greater degree of psychological protection than otherwise would have been the case. It gives you a process of control that is precisely what interrogation is supposed to strip away. I began a series of protests in my prison cell. They withdrew all my privileges so I ended up walking round my prison cell naked and covered in my own faeces. It bothered them a lot more than it bothered me and that was the exact point of what I was doing.

Because you spend weeks, months without any stimulation you need to learn how to live in your mind. And you need to find something everyday about your situation that you can laugh at. I had a huge cell and as a result I could walk laps like an animal pacing its cage. There I was barefoot, naked, covered in shit, as hairy as a yetty with this huge face fungus because I hadn't had a shave in so long, walking round this cell. Every once in a while I would catch sight of myself in these polished metal plates on the walls which were used as mirrors, and I would howl with laughter. I have never seen anything look so absurd and ridiculous. I was able to look at it from a Monty Python-esque point of view and it made me laugh.

You never get rid of the physical effects of torture. I have orthopaedic damage from my middle spine to my feet, a heart condition, hearing loss in one ear, and joint stiffness in my shoulders and arms. My body is 15 to 20 years older than it should be, but the psychological effects, which can be worse, were ameliorated by my behaviour in prison.

The politics of what happened to us is very interesting. The British Government knew we were innocent but were completely unwilling to speak out on our behalf against the Saudis. Why? I used to think it was purely economic. The Saudi Arabian government controls between 22-25% of the world's known oil reserves. They also have contracts with British arms manufacturers in excess of a billion pounds a year.

But there is another more horrifying aspect than the economic one. The British Government supports the rendition of terrorist subjects to countries where they can be tortured. Rendition is the term they use when they take people from one jurisdiction to another where, let us say, normal rules do not apply. Those countries, Syria, Egypt, Jordan, Saudi Arabia, are quite happy to use torture - beating, electricity, sexual molestation - as means of getting information. Western countries intelligence networks greedily grab this information even though time and time again information gathered by torture has shown to be false and easily discredited. It is the British Government's collusion in this violation of the Torture Convention that makes it impossible for them to publicly protest against the Saudis.





Filistoque

Chilean

I was working closely with Salvador Allende in 1973. I was well known, always on the news. Immediately after Pinochet's coup I was detained by the police.

I was blindfolded and taken to the police station. I was handcuffed to a chair all night and every five minutes I was hit over the head. They had some electric cables and they would pull my teeth out with electricity. I had a four-year-old daughter and they told me they would get her and kill her in front of me and then kill me.

Later I was taken to the national stadium which was being used to torture people after the coup. When they closed the stadium they took everyone to a place that was like a concentration camp. About one year later there was a decree and they pushed everyone out and I have been a political refugee in England ever since.

Now I am 73. I have been here for 30 years and every part of my body has problems. But my biggest problem is that my head injuries meant I could never learn English. My three daughters have children but when they speak to me I can't understand what they are saying and I feel bad.

If you cut a wound and you can't heal it, it gets bigger and bigger. That's what has happened to me. Pinochet has never been put in prison so the wound gets bigger. I am not at peace. I want to go back to Chile, but it would be very difficult for me because they took everything – the house, the car, everything. I don't want to be a millionaire, I just want what has been taken away.

Kuljinder Kaur
Punjabi Sikh

My husband's sister is married to a Sikh militant in Pakistan so whenever there is any trouble the police go straight to the family and start harassing them. I feel for my family, many of them have been detained and tortured. Two have been killed and we are all dispersed.

I was arrested the day after I got married. But I wasn't tortured on that occasion, I was released fairly quickly. Then when my son was born both me and my husband were arrested. I was given electric shocks to my back, my temples and my chest. They released me after two nights and then we stopped living at the village. I wasn't able to go home because I was afraid.

I've suffered a lot of psychological problems because I can't go home. I take tablets and my whole body feels very weak. I can't walk properly now. I've had problems with my arms and back and I can't bend over to pick things up, or sit down for a long time. I had a stroke last year and the doctors said it was due to the stress and the pressure.

I've been in England six years now. I have three children, two born in India and one of eighteen months born in this country. I am glad I am here because there they threaten to take your children away and you might never see them again. At least here I am safe. I feel a lot better now I am safe but I never forget what happened to me. People should be free to live their lives, not persecuted for what they believe in.





Olum James

Ugandan

I was born in Gulu district in Northern Uganda. The rebels came to our house one night, they grabbed my two brothers and some boys from other families. They explained that they would kill us if we tried to resist or escape. When my parents refused they were killed.

They took us to a forest. I was 16 and a half at the time. I was with the rebels for three months. You have to obey the things they tell you to do. Some of them were asked to rape ladies and capture girls from schools. I saw many people killed in front of me for the first time. I didn't kill one but I burnt one alive. He was one of our group. He refused to cut off someone's neck, so they say, 'OK, we're going to burn you alive'. They tied him up then told me to pour petrol on him and set him on fire. If you refuse they kill you or give you some treatment.

My two brothers were killed later when the government attacked us. When the government captured me they said 'You killed soldiers, you have to pay for it.' They beat us every morning with electrical cables and canes. We would do weeding in the garden and one day I decided to run. I knew if I ran and I didn't stop they would shoot me. That's what I was looking for. I knew I had no family, no father, no mother, and our house was burnt so there was no need for me. I didn't care what happened. And suddenly no one shot me.

I met some people driving food vehicles to Kenya. I didn't want to go to Kenya, but I knew in Uganda I would be caught. I lived on the streets in Kenya for two weeks. Then some people told me Kenya was not safe for me. A black man, a Kenyan, said he could take me to a safe place, but I didn't trust him. Then there was a white man. He said, 'I'll take you out of this place, but it won't be in Africa it will be somewhere else.' I didn't trust him so much either, but because he was white and because I had been in a missionary school I thought maybe he was more faithful than the others. It was my first time on a plane. When I saw lots of whites and no blacks I realised we weren't going back. Then we got on a train and we came here.

The man who took me told me not to move because I might get lost. I stayed with his friends. They used to leave me and go out. Suddenly one said, 'Your friend has gone, I can't do nothing for you, I don't know you.'

I cried, saying 'I don't know this place'. I asked him where the train station was so I could go back to Uganda. He said, 'You don't have money, you don't have a passport, you don't have anything. You can't go back.' He told me to go the Home Office. He gave me a small piece of paper and said, 'Get bus 109, and where 109 stops, that's where you get off and ask anyone for the Home Office'. I got the bus, it stopped in Brixton and people told me the Home Office wasn't there. Some were swearing at me.

I slept that night in Brixton, at the tube station. An old man who was drinking told me the Home office was in Croydon and that I needed to get another bus. I gave him some money to buy a ticket, but he took the money and didn't give me the ticket. A bus driver told me he would tell me where the Home Office was. When I got there it was Friday and it was closed. I stayed there Friday, Saturday, Sunday. I didn't eat because my money was finished. I just went and sat in one corner and cried, thinking maybe I should throw myself in front of a car, it's the end of my life. I asked some people when the Home Office was open, they said things like 'Shut up' and 'Fuck off'. On Monday I went back there very early in the morning. I saw a lot of people standing there. I saw some black people so I thought 'Maybe I should ask these ones'. That's how I went to Home Office.

I am studying to be an electrician now.



Abe Alu
Ethiopian

I'm from Ethiopia. I've been in London two years. In the beginning it was difficult, now it is easier. I am a survivor.

I was hurt too much and I lost my family, my grandmother, my mum and my dad. I am alone and I have no one. I have a family at the Medical Foundation, they are like my family. Sheila is like my mother. When I have some problems she is there for me. If you don't have family it's really bad. Especially when you are female. I have a lot of friends from my country but they don't tell me their story and I don't tell them mine. If they say they have a mum I say I have a mum. If they say they have a dad I say I have a dad. I don't want to tell them about me. I want to keep it to myself.

What happened to me I can't forget. But when I get a headache and cry I go to Sheila and talk to her. In the beginning when I came to this country it was very hard, before I met Sheila. Now, now it's ok.

Jaafar Al Hasabi

Bahrainian

In 1994 I was a computer technician with my own business. I was politically active against the Sunni government, printing small booklets and distributing them to people through the mosque. This was illegal in Bahrain.

They called me in to the Al-Qala'a to be interrogated. Oh my god you can't believe it. For two hours one guard is slapping, one is kicking, one is punching me. I fall down twice but I am picked up. They say if you don't confess we will put you in a water tank with a stone on your leg and nobody would know. I knew that anyone who went into that place might never come out again.

They released me after three days and put a spy on me. We carried on publishing. After three months they knew who was in our group and I knew I had to leave. I got some clothes and my uncle took me to the airport. Thank god they did not put my name on the border. They took more than seven of our group, put them in jail and tortured them very badly.

Ten years later when I see a policeman I still shake. The torturers are still there. The king has given them immunity. Nobody can touch them.

I will continue to be politically active until my people are free from this dictatorial regime. Here we are free. We can do what we want and practise what we want – this is human. If you are repressed you are not human. You work, maybe you have a family but you don't feel human. Because we are here and we can do whatever we want, we must give light to the people who live in the dark.





Sara Antonio

Angolan

I am Angolan, I'm 18 years old, I'm living here for two years now. I came out of the country because of the political situation. I was tortured and raped.

Now I'm living with an Eritrean family and it is a family that helps me a lot with what happened to me in my country. And I go to the Medical Foundation where I met Sheila, a lady that I like very much and she has followed me since my arrival here. It was very difficult at the beginning but through talking to the family, and the groups that I frequent, I am ok with what happened to me. I have started to go to church as well.

The family I live with sees me less like a refugee and more like a daughter. There is no difference between the way the mother treats me and the way she treats her own daughter. It is like having a family here. They have been through something similar and when they arrived they didn't have any help, so they wanted me to have more support than they did. They understand the pain.

Les Walker

British

I had lived in Saudi Arabia for 25 years before I was taken on 24th February 2001. I was systematically tortured over ten weeks.

During the initial period when I was in solitary confinement and being interrogated intensely I would imagine going on long walks with my dog. It would upset the interrogators because I would be mentally somewhere else. When I moved to a high security prison I was allowed out in an exercise yard, which was heaven for me. I would go on long imaginary walks round the yard holding a lead. They thought I was totally crazy, which I was, through being locked up for a long time on my own with no mental stimulus.

One thing that really hurt was being blindfolded and just catching sight of Made In England on the handcuffs. Boy did that hurt.

After 13 months I went in with another British detainee into one cell. That was the highlight, meeting somebody and talking to somebody in your own language. We didn't stop talking for 24 hours. We used to upset the medical people as a way of fighting back. Before going to see the doctor I would take some salt to elevate my blood pressure. It was our game.

I want to try and get that time out of my mind but I can't. I struggle through flashbacks. Nights can be terrible and sometimes I wake up screaming. It drives the wife mad. If I've had three or four bottles of beer that's when I have the problem. Probably my imagination is running away with me. Let's hope we can get over it.





Patson Muzuwa

Zimbabwean

I left Zimbabwe in November 2001. I had been arrested 9 times by the police on special instructions from the government to stop me campaigning against them.

I was reporting to the police for a year. I was not even allowed even to go to a funeral without telling members of the intelligence. Whatever I was doing was monitored by this regime.

I was tortured three times. I was electrified, put in a drum of cold water and beaten under the foot uncountable times. On the last incident I was taken from the house at 2am by the militias. They beat me because I didn't want to get into their truck. A British journalist booked me a ticket to come here when I had a broken arm and stitches in the head and had been beaten with rubber baton sticks.

When I arrived in the UK I phoned up and said I'm very sorry I'm no longer coming to Zimbabwe. They were quite shocked. They said we'll get you from the UK. I said that's fine this is my address and I'll be protesting outside the Zimbabwe Embassy on Saturday. They saw me on CNN and ABC talking about my experiences.

I always demonstrate wherever possible against what the government is doing. This is my life in the UK – to put Zimbabwe in the spotlight. I am deeply embarrassed when I meet people who think asylum seekers like me are just people who need some money. I'm not here to study, I'm not here to make a fortune, I'm not in this country to steal any benefits from anyone, I pay my own taxes. I want to be seen as a refugee and not as a thief.

