REDRESS
Ending torture, seeking justice for survivors

BULLETIN
No. 11

THE ANTI-TORTURE MOVEMENT UNDER THREAT

© From top to bottom: Juan Delavele/Reuters (Sepur Zarco case); Christian Hartman/Reuters (a protest over human rights abuses in Egypt); CVWN (training in Nepal).

DIRECTOR'S LETTER

Decades-Long Gains against Torture under Threat

Since taking office in January, US President Donald Trump's sharp cuts to US foreign development assistance and attacks on institutions promoting international accountability have threatened to undermine decades-long progress to eradicate torture. Some of these achievements–in raising awareness, preventing torture, supporting victims, and holding perpetrators accountable–are described by Claude Heller, Chair of the Committee Against Torture, in this bulletin.

Trump's executive order pausing most US foreign development assistance, coupled with cuts in foreign aid from other countries such as the UK, Netherlands, France and Germany, has had a severe impact on many of our civil society partners in the United Against Torture (UATC) and Global Initiative against Impunity (GIAI), of which REDRESS is part.

The USAID cuts have forced organisations like the Center for Victims of Torture, based in the US and known for providing direct, life-saving care to survivors, to shut down virtually all its international programs and furlough or terminate contracts with 75% of its staff. The United Against Torture Consortium has also documented the complete halt of rehabilitation services for torture survivors in four countries where its partners operate, including communities devastated by the war in Ethiopia. 18 other rehabilitation programs are facing acute funding shortages.

In this concerning context, the UATC has urged international donors to maintain their strong commitment to preventing torture and providing redress to victims.

Meanwhile, the Trump administration's attacks on the International Criminal Court (ICC) have posed a serious threat to justice for victims of grave abuses. In February, Trump issued an executive order, authorising asset freezes and entry bans on ICC officials and others supporting the Court's investigations involving US nationals and nationals of US allies that have not consented to its jurisdiction.

REDRESS has joined others in expressing grave concern over this development, given the ICC's crucial role in investigating the worst's most serious international crimes, such as genocide, crimes against humanity and war crimes, and the fact that many victims around the world rely on the ICC as their last hope for accountability.

"In this concerning context, the UATC has urged international donors to maintain their strong commitment to preventing torture and providing redress to victims."

As Claude Heller emphasises in his interview, the proliferation of internal conflicts and wars continues to fuel the persistence of torture and ill-treatment. At the same time, the rise of populist and extremist political movements is eroding democratic values and undermining the progress made protecting human rights, violating long-held norms, as the UN Charter.

Progress in this area, he notes, will require the mobilisation of civil society across borders, as many of these challenges are interconnected. Crucially, it will also demand renewed global cooperation and a steadfast commitment from States to uphold human rights.

Rupert Skilbeck,
Director of **REDRESS**

The Convention Against Torture at 40 years: Claude Heller reflects on progress toward ending torture

On 10 December 2024, the UN General Assembly marked 40 years since adopting the Convention against Torture. While progress has been made in raising awareness, preventing torture, supporting victims, and holding perpetrators accountable, challenges like impunity, reparation gaps, and evolving forms of torture persist. Claude Heller, Chair of the Committee against Torture, reflects on these achievements and ongoing challenges.

– How did you get involved in the fight against torture?

My involvement is tied to my personal and family history. My parents were political refugees in Mexico after the Spanish Civil War and World War II. From my childhood, I was aware of the horrors my family experienced, such as being in concentration camps. These traumatic stories made me very sensitive to human rights issues in my own country, Latin America and the world. As a diplomat, I contributed to building the UN human rights system. Joining the Committee against Torture in 2016 gave me the opportunity to apply my background and have a real impact.

– What are the Committee Against Torture's key achievements in preventing torture globally?

The Convention against Torture, adopted 40 years ago, reflected the challenges of its time, such as Latin American dictatorships and conflicts in Africa, Europe, the Middle East and Asia. It brought human rights and torture prevention to the global agenda. The Convention has been ratified by 175 states, becoming a critical reference for legislation against torture worldwide. However, ratification is not enough. Implementation is a complex process considering historical, social, economic and geopolitical factors, as well as the involvement of non-state actors. The Committee against Torture has helped identify these challenges, emphasizing the need for a culture of human rights, training for security forces, military judges, doctors and lawyers, and addressing the complexities of varied contexts.

– Are there any growing challenges within your work?

A large majority of States have issues linked to the Convention, such as overcrowding of prisons, the violence in the penitentiary system, the lack of a policy for rehabilitation and deplorable conditions of detention, etc. We are also seeing setbacks in human rights through the right to asylum being denied by some States, and the criminalisation of migration. We have to adapt and respond to these new policies of a populist trend coming from extremist political parties. The proliferation of internal conflicts and wars implies the persistence of torture and ill-treatment.

© UN Photo/Rick Bajornas. Claude Heller, Chair of the UN Committee against Torture.

– What is your vision for the future?

Human rights mechanisms and procedures must adapt to emerging issues taking into account the erosion of democratic values and the violation of the UN Charter. Progress will require global collaboration and renewed commitment from States in the field of human rights. It is important to mobilise civil societies in favour of a movement that transcends borders because too many problems are interconnected. Only then can the Convention contribute to a more just and peaceful world where human dignity is respected.

Read the full interview with Claude Heller

This content was produced by the United Against Torture Consortium, of which REDRESS is part.

Why the UK Must Take Torture Seriously

By **Joss Gillespie**, Communications Assistant

Everyone deserves to live in safety, free from torture. However, over the past 14 years, successive UK governments have gradually chipped away at the absolute ban on torture – a framework designed to protect us all – undermining international law and putting survivors of torture at risk.

The UK discontinued its anti-torture strategy in 2015 and has since introduced domestic legislation that seeks to cover up historic crimes, including those committed by British soldiers in Iraq and Northern Ireland. It has also eroded protections for asylum seekers, many of whom are survivors of torture, by introducing laws such as the Illegal Migration Act and the Safety of Rwanda Act, in breach of both the Refugee Convention and the UN Convention against Torture.

The new UK government has committed to repealing some of these laws and has reaffirmed the country's commitment to human rights. But much work still needs to be done to reverse the UK's backsliding on its obligations under international law, which has led to a number of issues being flagged by UN bodies that monitor compliance with international law.

© Joss Gillespie. Members of the Survivor Advisory Group gather at a Parliamentary event marking the 40th anniversary of the Convention Against Torture.

The UN Committee against Torture raised concerns during its last two reviews of the UK, conducted in 2013 and 2019, regarding the UK's fulfilment of its obligations under the Convention against Torture. In 2024, the Human Rights Committee expressed its own concerns about some of the same issues.

A comprehensive plan to prevent torture, ensure justice for survivors, and hold perpetrators accountable is urgently needed. Both the current government and opposition parties must demonstrate that the UK takes the issue of torture seriously and propose such a plan.

Survivors of Torture: The UK Must Lead the Fight against Torture

The Survivors Advisory Group, a network of UK-based survivors of torture who work in consultation with REDRESS to improve access to justice and reparation for survivors, has developed a call to action: the Survivors Manifesto. It provides recommendations to the UK government on how to protect the torture ban and centre the voices of survivors in UK policy on justice and reparation.

As Sepideh Sahar, a member of the group, notes: "Torture can happen to anyone. Among us, there are journalists, politicians, students, civilians and so on."

During an event in Parliament in October 2024, marking the 40th anniversary of the Convention against Torture, survivors, including Sarah, and parliamentarians discussed how the UK can become once more a global leader in torture prevention and accountability.

SURVIVORS OF TORTURE
MANIFESTO
REDRESS
Developed by the Survivor Advisory Group, survivors of torture who use their expertise to advocate for torture prevention and accountability.
WE CALL ON THE UK GOVERNMENT TO:
1 RESTORE THE UK'S REPUTATION AS A GLOBAL LEADER IN TORTURE PREVENTION AND ACCOUNTABILITY
2 PLACE TORTURE SURVIVORS' VOICES AT THE CENTRE OF UK POLICY ON JUSTICE AND REPARATIONS
3 INVESTIGATE AND PROSECUTE PERPETRATORS OF TORTURE USING UNIVERSAL JURISDICTION
4 IMPROVE THE USE OF MAGNITSKY SANCTIONS AS A TOOL IN PREVENTING TORTURE
5 STRENGTHEN SUPPORT FOR BRITISH NATIONALS AT RISK OF HUMAN RIGHTS ABUSES ABROAD
6 REMOVE THE LEGACY OF PAST GOVERNMENTS' 'HOSTILE ENVIRONMENT' ASYLUM POLICY
7 INCREASE RESOURCES FOR TORTURE REHABILITATION FOR UK SURVIVORS

The event was hosted by REDRESS Patron Baroness Frances D'Souza, who commented that recent policy shifts in the UK had "ridden roughshod" over its compliance with the Convention. Lord Hermer KC, the Attorney General, also spoke, reaffirming the government's commitment to upholding human rights, and "ensuring our domestic compliance with the Convention".

Survivors urged the UK government to develop a comprehensive plan for preventing torture. Since the UK government abandoned the FCDO's Strategy for the Prevention of Torture, its central anti-torture policy, in 2015, torture and other human rights commitments have been absorbed into a much broader, less focused agenda.

The UK's Role in Repairing the Harm to Survivors in Ukraine

By **Lyra Nightingale**, Legal Advisor

Since Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine three years ago, over 30,000 civilians have been injured, and more than 10,000 have lost their lives, with countless others enduring lasting trauma.

In response to these actions, the UK has imposed extensive sanctions on Russia. More than 2,200 individuals, entities, and ships have been targeted, with assets frozen amounting to at least £22.7 billion. The UK has also collected nearly £50 million from, at least in part, its enforcement of the UK Russia sanctions.

But one key question remains: where has the money gone? Unfortunately, not to survivors of the atrocities. Instead, the near £50 million will find its way back into UK government coffers.

Rather than being absorbed into the state budget, at least a portion of these proceeds should be used to provide reparations to Ukraine's survivors. Reparations are not just about compensation; they are about rehabilitation and providing survivors with access to healthcare, legal aid, and support to reclaim property or lost loved ones.

REDRESS has called on the UK Government to repurpose fines and penalties imposed by the UK's enforcement agencies for violations of sanctions to fund reparations for survivors of serious human rights violations and serious corruption.

Even a portion of the penalties could compensate survivors of the very conduct sanctions seek to address. Penalties imposed for inadvertent breaches or for actions with indirect links to sanctionable conduct can also be used to benefit survivors. By not taking this approach and keeping the penalties for itself, the UK is lagging significantly behind other jurisdictions, such as the US.

© Reuters/Carlos Barria. Civilians pay tribute to victims of a Russian missile attack in Uman, Ukraine.

Financing reparation for victims of grave human rights violations would provide immediate, life-saving support to the Ukrainian people, who have endured unimaginable hardship. The UK is uniquely positioned to alleviate the suffering of Ukraine's war survivors. There is no time to waste. The UK must demonstrate that its commitment to the survivors of the conflict is more than just words.

Watch an interview with Lyra Nightingale, Legal Advisor, on The Today Programme.

Chelsea Fans: Give Frozen Chelsea FC Funds to Victims

In 2022, when Roman Abramovich sold Chelsea FC Football Club for £2.5 billion, he pledged to use the proceeds "for the benefit of all victims of the war in Ukraine". Three years later, that money is still frozen in a UK bank account. Not a penny has been released for survivors.

REDRESS went to Stamford Bridge, home of Chelsea FC, to ask fans what they thought about the money. The verdict was clear: "Please send the money where it's supposed to go, which is to the people of Ukraine."

Watch it on YouTube

End the Cruel Game of State Hostage-Taking

©UN Photo/Loey Felipe. Dr. Alice Edwards, the UN Special Rapporteur on Torture.

By **Chris Esdaile**, Senior Legal Advisor

Hostage-taking is an abhorrent and inhuman act and can amount to ill-treatment or torture under international law.

A long-time tactic of armed groups and criminals, in recent years, State hostage-taking has increased significantly and is expanding into all regions, according to a recent report of Dr. Alice Edwards, the UN Special Rapporteur on Torture.

The report, presented to the UN Human Rights Council in March, echoes REDRESS's long-standing position that hostage-taking by States will usually amount to cruel, inhuman or degrading treatment and, in severe cases, torture.

REDRESS contributed evidence to the report, emphasising the key elements which distinguish such abuse from other forms of torture. These include the intentional abuse of an individual for diplomatic leverage, the denial of a detainee's basic rights (or, sometimes worse, selectively granting only some rights) over an extended period, the psychological effects of the manipulation of the detainee's rights, and the systematic manipulation of affected families.

The report calls for the recognition of hostage-taking as a form of torture and urges the international community to act decisively to prevent all forms of hostage-taking by holding perpetrators accountable through mechanisms like universal jurisdiction and Magnitsky sanctions.

REDRESS strongly supports this call, having long advocated for global recognition of State hostage-taking as a systemic practice that causes profound suffering, cynically using victims as bargaining chips in international negotiations.

The report also supports REDRESS's call for States to officially recognise arbitrary detention for leverage as hostage-taking and create national teams specifically tasked with managing these cases.

Drawing on evidence from REDRESS, the report highlights an alarming rise in certain States detaining foreign nationals arbitrarily on fabricated or exaggerated charges to advance their political, financial or military goals. The expert identified States such as China, Iran, Myanmar, North Korea, Russia, the United Arab Emirates and Venezuela as being involved in these politically motivated detentions.

REDRESS has legally represented individuals impacted by arbitrary detention and State hostage-taking, including Nazanin Zaghari-Ratcliffe, a British-Iranian charity worker who was arbitrarily detained and tortured in Iran between 2016 and 2022, and her husband Richard Ratcliffe.

India Must End the Injustice in Jagtar Singh Johal's Case

© Free Jaggi Now

Following his acquittal in a case against him in India in March, the prison conditions of British human rights activist Jagtar Singh Johal have worsened after his transfer to detention in Delhi, where he is subject to solitary confinement, according to his family.

In April, the All-Party Parliamentary Group on Arbitrary Detention held a hearing about his case, where it heard evidence from Gurpreet Singh Johal, Jagtar's brother; REDRESS Director Rupert Skilbeck; Dan Dolan, Deputy Executive Director at Reprieve, and Martin Docherty-Hughes, Jagtar's former MP.

"On 20th March, Jagtar said he had been put in solitary confinement, excluded from other prisoners," said Johal. "He is in a room with a 24/7 guard with a camera against him. This is mentally affecting him, which is very concerning."

Despite his acquittal, Jagtar, who has been detained for seven years in India, faces eight additional cases filed by India's National Investigation Agency, all based on the same "confession" that was allegedly extracted under torture.

REDRESS and Reprieve, who have been providing legal assistance to Jagtar's family in the UK, called on the UK government to take decisive and urgent action to bring Jagtar home.

Celebrating the Anti-Torture Champions

By **Renata Politi**, Legal Adviser

Around the world, torture is used to silence dissent and deepen the oppression of marginalised and excluded communities. Human rights defenders, journalists, lawyers, and protesters are often subjected to torture or its threat – a tactic that spreads fear, stifles civil society, and undermines efforts to demand accountability from those in power.

Discriminatory torture also remains widespread, targeting women, LGBTIQ+ persons, refugees, migrants, and other individuals - often compounded by deep-rooted structural inequalities that limit access to justice. In many States, such abuses are met with tolerance or inaction, denying survivors justice and exposing them to continued harm.

Despite the risks, courageous individuals and organisations continue to challenge these abuses. Lawyers worldwide have been playing a crucial role in challenging impunity and seeking justice for victims and survivors.

To support these efforts, REDRESS launched the Innovative Lawyers Awards under the umbrella of the United Against Torture Consortium (UATC), with financial support from the EU. The awards recognise and empower emerging lawyers in the anti-torture movement, providing financial support and connecting them to a global network of peers. The initiative aims to inspire legal practitioners to continue working against torture in their communities.

Eight innovative lawyers from different parts of the globe received the awards last year for their exceptional work. Among them were Emilija Švobaitė, who has challenged torture in Lithuania's border area and other places hidden from public view and Nina Barrouin, who has been supporting victims in pivotal cases of police brutality and systemic torture in Brazil.

Innovative Lawyers Awards Winners

Other winners include Manushika Cooray, who has been tackling torture in Sri Lanka as a female lawyer and advancing the anti-torture movement by co-founding the Human Rights Law Chamber; Edwin Makwati, who provides free legal assistance to torture victims in Botswana and South Africa, and Roberta Ruiz, who litigates cases in Mexico on behalf of LGBTI+ individuals, particularly trans women.

The awards have also recognised the work of Laura Media, who represents torture victims in Spanish courts in key strategic cases; Brenda Khwale, who provides legal aid and facilitates psychosocial support to survivors who suffered torture in detention centres in Malawi, and Okwara Masafu, who fights against torture and discrimination targeting LGBTIQ+ individuals in Kenya.

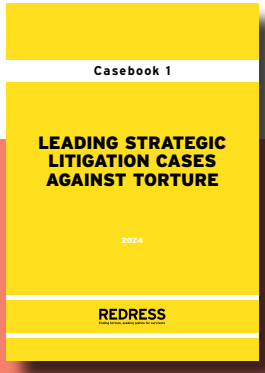
By recognising and supporting these lawyers, REDRESS aims to strengthen the global anti-torture movement and encourage more legal professionals to challenge injustice and impunity.

Meet the winners

Challenging Torture Through Strategic Litigation

REDRESS has a strong track record of using strategic litigation to challenge torture, ensuring justice and reparation for survivors. This holistic approach not only addresses individual cases but also challenges the broader policies that enable torture.

Although legal processes can be lengthy, they are crucial in advancing human rights and accountability. To support this, REDRESS has launched a series of torture litigation casebooks, featuring case studies from around the world to highlight best practices and strengthen the capacity of human rights lawyers.



The first one in the series includes 23 case studies of strategic litigation against torture. Other casebook in the series will feature UK cases, dissent cases, and discrimination cases. Published alongside practice notes, the casebooks serve as a practical guide for lawyers and activists, offering effective strategies for litigating torture cases.

The casebooks have been produced under the United Against Torture Consortium initiative, co-funded by the EU.

Read our blog pieces examining strategic cases

Support our work

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For 30 years REDRESS has worked to deliver justice and reparation for survivors of torture, many targeted because of discrimination or to suppress dissent, while also seeking to promote solidarity in the anti-torture movement.

Supporting REDRESS means helping us to pursue legal claims with survivors, prosecute perpetrators, and change policies to protect people at risk. Our supporters stand with marginalised individuals and movements challenging injustice by helping us to challenge torture that is used to suppress these groups. They also strengthen the anti-torture movement by enabling us to work in collaboration with local partners around the world, many of whom operate in extremely difficult circumstances.

If you would like to hear more about our work and how you can support, please contact Anoushka Canagaretna, Programme Development Manager, on anoushka@redress.org.

Become a regular supporter

It is the vital contributions of REDRESS' supporters which allow us to continue challenging torture where and whenever it occurs. In order to maintain ongoing casework to represent those wrongfully imprisoned or targeted for their identity or activism, we rely on donations that can support this long-term work.

Litigation of this nature often takes several years to reach a judgement, so sustained support allows us to see these cases through, supporting survivors with the assistance they need to pursue justice.

We are constantly striving to promote the voices of communities affected by torture and the organisations assisting them, increase awareness and advocate for judgements that will prevent further abuses from taking place. Supporter donations facilitate this work to realise our vision of a world without torture.

Support our ongoing cases: redress.org/donate