

## **Preventing Torture Everywhere**

### **A NRCAT Video and Interfaith Discussion Guide**

#### **Introduction**

Since January 2006, the National Religious Campaign Against Torture (NRCAT), a coalition of more than 300 religious organizations, has worked to assure that U.S.-sponsored torture ends forever. There is still unfinished business. In 2009, the NRCAT Board voted to continue our work and expand it to include ending torture in U.S. prisons and encouraging U.S. policies that end torture by other countries.

One of the vehicles that can help prevent torture everywhere is the Optional Protocol to the Convention Against Torture (OPCAT), a UN treaty created in 2002 that requires participating nations to create mechanisms to prevent torture from occurring in detention centers, police stations, and prisons. It also permits international experts to inspect those same facilities. As of March 17, 2011, 57 nations have ratified OPCAT and 22 additional nations have signed it. Unfortunately, in 2002, the U.S. was one of only four countries to vote against OPCAT in the UN General Assembly. Since its passage, the U.S. has neither signed nor ratified OPCAT.

The video “Preventing Torture Everywhere” includes testimonies from torture survivors, provides background information about OPCAT, describes current conditions in U.S. detention facilities, and offers suggestions for people of faith to take action on this issue.

The speakers on the video are: Cecile, tortured in Cameroon; Abebe, tortured in Ethiopia; Juan Mendez, U.S. Special Rapporteur on Torture and tortured in Argentina; Orlando, tortured in the Philippines; Rev. Richard Killmer, Executive Director, National Religious Campaign Against Torture; Linda Gustitus, President, National Religious Campaign Against Torture; and Amy Fetting, Attorney, American Civil Liberties Union.

#### **Suggestions for Using this Video**

This video is designed to be shown and discussed in congregations and religious organizations. It best lends itself to a small group discussion or an adult education setting. If your congregation has an adult class that meets weekly to address a variety of issues, you might consider asking if the video could be shown in that setting.

Below is a discussion guide for a one hour session that is appropriate for a variety of denominations and faith groups. Please feel free to adapt it according to the faith tradition of your own congregation or faith group.

This resource could also be used in:

- An older youth or college group
- A women's or men's organization
- A social ministry committee or meeting
- A prayer group
- An interfaith setting

### **Preparing for the Discussion**

We suggest that facilitators preview the video and read through the discussion guide to decide how you would like to present the material. Think through your own feelings and responses, so you are not surprised during the discussion. Feel free to incorporate your own thoughts, questions, and prayers into the discussion. There may be a variety of opinions expressed during the discussion, and openness and honesty should be encouraged.

Here is a quick preparation checklist:

- Advertise early and often about the upcoming discussion session within the congregation. Announce it in worship. Determine who will participate in leadership and reading of questions/meditations.
- Test the video with the equipment (DVD player and TV or Computer and Projector) you will be using for the session.
- Print the petition version of the NRCAT statement on OPCAT (Appendix 3). The statement with the signatures by the heads of 52 major religious organizations is found in Appendix 2. For other resources and the latest list of heads of faith groups and religious organizations who have endorsed the statement, go to [www.nrcat.org/opcat](http://www.nrcat.org/opcat).
- Occasionally, participants will ask for the definition of torture that is being used. The definition from the Convention Against Torture, which is U.S. law, is in question 6 of the Frequently Asked Questions about OPCAT (Appendix 1).

It would help NRCAT if you would send an email to [campaign@nrcat.org](mailto:campaign@nrcat.org) with a brief description of the discussion held in your congregation. Please include your name, the name of your congregation, the number of people attending, the date of the discussion, and anything you would like to share about the discussion.

## Session Outline

### **Welcome and introductions** (5 minutes)

Open with prayer, if that is your tradition, and ask participants to introduce themselves as needed. Then introduce the video “Preventing Torture Everywhere” by saying something like:

Each of us comes to this discussion session on torture with many thoughts, feelings, and beliefs. We may have conflicting views. We ask that you keep an open mind to one another’s opinions during this session.

The purpose of this discussion is for us to begin to discuss U.S. practices and to look at that policy through the lens of our faith, which teaches that each human being has inherent worth and dignity. We will specifically be exploring the ways in which the Optional Protocol to the Convention Against Torture (OPCAT) can be used to prevent torture. OPCAT is a treaty that has been ratified by 57 nations and signed by an additional 22 nations. However, the U.S. government has neither signed nor ratified the treaty at this point.

### **Video Screening** (10 minutes)

Insert DVD and select “Play” from the main menu. The video will begin screening immediately.

### **Discussion** (40 minutes total)

Now we’ll discuss some of the issues raised in this video.

1. In the video, we heard stories from torture survivors describing their experiences. What reactions did you have while listening to these stories? Do you think your reaction was influenced in any way by your faith? (5 minutes)
2. What do you believe your faith tells you about torture? (5 minutes)
3. All faiths have the basic teaching that human beings are created with dignity and worth and some believe that human beings are created in the image of God. How does this concept inform our understanding of torture? (5 minutes)
4. Linda Gustitus talked about the “enhanced interrogation tactics” that the U.S. government has employed against detainees. We often hear this described as a security issue. How do you think about this in the context of your faith? Are there circumstances in which our perceived need for security should trump our religious values? (10 minutes)

5. Amy Fettig and Rev. Richard Killmer both discussed the use of solitary confinement in U.S. prisons, which is considered a form of torture in other developed countries. Do you agree that solitary confinement is a form of torture? Why or why not? (5 minutes)
6. Amy Fettig explained the practice of shackling prisoners during childbirth, which she described as “pervasive in this country.” Only 10 states prohibit placing women in shackles as they give birth in prison. Do you think it is necessary to work to abolish this kind of shackling in U.S. prisons across the country? Why or why not? (5 minutes)
7. Do you think this country can help set an example for preventing torture? Do you believe the U.S.’s ratification of OPCAT would help encourage other countries to end the practice of torture? (5 minutes)

**Distribution of the NRCAT statement on the Optional Protocol to the Convention Against Torture and Closing Prayer** (5 minutes)

Distribute copies of the petition format of NRCAT’s statement on OPCAT and ask those who wish to sign it to do so. Inform the participants that the petitions will be sent to the White House and ask them how you might urge other members of the congregation to endorse the statement. Please send the petitions with the collected names to:

National Religious Campaign Against Torture  
110 Maryland Ave. NE, Suite 502  
Washington, DC 20002.

End with a closing prayer or the way that your class typically closes its session.

### **Additional Resources**

As a facilitator, you may want to visit or encourage participants to visit [www.nrcat.org](http://www.nrcat.org), where there is more information about:

- **U.S. –Sponsored Torture:** [http://www.nrcat.org/post911\\_detainees](http://www.nrcat.org/post911_detainees)
- **Torture in U.S. prisons:** [www.nrcat.org/prisons](http://www.nrcat.org/prisons)
- **Statements by denominations and faith groups:** [www.nrcat.org/religious\\_statements](http://www.nrcat.org/religious_statements)
- **Information about NRCAT:** [www.nrcat.org/about](http://www.nrcat.org/about)

## Frequently Asked Questions about OPCAT

1. *What is OPCAT?*

OPCAT stands for the Optional Protocol to the Convention Against Torture, a treaty that assures that the Convention Against Torture is enforced. Each ratifying country must create an entity that is called a National Preventive Mechanism that can make visits to detention facilities, conducts interviews with persons being held, and makes recommendations to prevent torture and abuse. In addition, OPCAT also allows international inspectors periodic access to all places of confinement under the jurisdiction of ratifying countries to monitor the work of the National Preventive Mechanisms.

2. *What types of places of confinement does OPCAT allow access to?*

OPCAT assures National Preventive Mechanisms and international inspectors access to all places of confinement. These include jails, prisons, immigrant detention centers, psychiatric institutions, and any other facilities in which individuals are involuntarily detained.

3. *How many countries have ratified OPCAT?*

As of March 21, 2011, 57 nations have ratified OPCAT, and an additional 22 nations have signed it.

4. *What is the U.S. position on OPCAT?*

In 2002, the U.S. was one of only four countries to vote against OPCAT in the UN General Assembly. Since its passage by the United Nations, the U.S. has neither signed nor ratified OPCAT.

5. *What is the process for the U.S. to adopt OPCAT?*

The President must sign the treaty and submit it to the Senate for ratification. It takes 67 votes in the Senate to ratify a treaty.

6. *What is the definition for torture?*

NRCAT uses the definition of torture included in Article I of the U.N Convention Against Torture and Other Cruel, Inhuman or Degrading Treatment or Punishment. The Convention came into force on June 26, 1987, following ratification by the 20th nation. June 26th is now recognized as the UN International Day in Support of Torture Victims.

The Convention was signed by the U.S. in 1988 and ratified by the U.S. Congress in 1994, thereby becoming U.S. law.

Here is the definition of torture from Article I of the Convention:

*“For the purposes of this Convention, the term ‘torture’ means any act by which severe pain or suffering, whether physical or mental, is intentionally inflicted on a person for such purposes as obtaining from him or a third person information or a confession, punishing him for an act he or a third person has committed or is suspected of having committed, or intimidating or coercing him or a third person, or for any reason based on discrimination of any kind, when such pain or suffering is inflicted by or at the instigation of or with the consent or acquiescence of a public official or other person acting in an official capacity. It does not include pain or suffering arising only from, inherent in or incidental to lawful sanctions.”*

The Convention against Torture also prohibits cruel, inhuman and degrading treatment which does not amount to torture.

## **Join the Treaty:**

### **The U.S. Should Act to Prevent Torture Everywhere**

Torture and cruel, inhuman or degrading treatment are contrary to our common religious belief in the fundamental dignity of each human being. We call upon the U.S. government, once a leader in the effort to end the use of torture, to reclaim that role by signing and ratifying the Optional Protocol to the Convention Against Torture (OPCAT).

One of the most important steps a nation can take to end torture and cruel, inhuman or degrading treatment is to provide independent oversight of the conditions in which people are detained. By creating mechanisms that can prevent torture, including international inspection teams, OPCAT builds upon the prohibition against torture contained in the Convention Against Torture, a treaty to which the U.S. is already a party and which is U.S. law. OPCAT requires each nation that ratifies the treaty to develop its own independent mechanism for monitoring detention facilities, including prisons and police stations.

We believe that if the U.S. joins OPCAT and provides robust oversight of its places of detention, it will be significantly more difficult for cases of torture and cruel, inhuman or degrading treatment to occur within the U.S. Ratifying OPCAT would also enhance our government's effectiveness in urging other countries to end their use of torture.

As people of many faiths and creeds, we oppose torture. We call upon our government to do everything it can to prevent torture everywhere. We call upon the President to sign OPCAT, and we call upon the U.S. Senate to ratify it.

*The names of the senior religious leaders endorsing this statement. For an updated list go to [www.nrcat.org/opcat](http://www.nrcat.org/opcat)*

Rev. Dr. Michael Kinnamon  
General Secretary  
National Council of Churches

Imam Mohamed Magid  
President  
Islamic Society of North America

Sr. Mary Hughes, OP  
President  
Leadership Conference of Women Religious

Rev. Dr. A. Roy Medley  
General Secretary  
American Baptist Churches USA

Rabbi Eric Yoffie  
President  
Union for Reform Judaism

Rev. Wes Granberg-Michaelson  
General Secretary  
Reformed Church in America

Bishop Larry M. Goodpaster  
President, Council of Bishops  
United Methodist Church

Dr. Tarunjit Singh Butalia  
Secretary General  
World Sikh Council - America Region

Rev. Dr. Sharon E. Watkins  
General Minister and President  
Christian Church (Disciples of Christ)

Very Rev. Thomas P. Cassidy, SCJ  
President  
Conference of Major Superiors of Men

Rabbi David Saperstein  
Director, Religious Action Center  
Union for Reform Judaism

Archbishop Vicken Aykazian  
Legate  
Armenian Church of America

Bishop Demetrios of Mokissos  
Metropolis of Chicago  
Greek Orthodox Church

Rev. Geoffrey Black  
General Minister and President  
United Church of Christ

Rev. Richard Cizik  
President  
New Evangelical Partnership for the  
Common Good

Archbishop Nicolae Condrea  
Romanian Orthodox Archdiocese in the  
Americas

Rev. Gradye Parsons  
Stated Clerk of the General Assembly  
Presbyterian Church, USA

Rev. Peter Morales  
President  
Unitarian Universalist Association of  
Congregations

Suhag Shukla  
Hindu American Foundation  
Managing Director and Legal Counsel

Most Reverend Michael Seneco  
Presiding Bishop  
North American Old Catholic Church

Marie Dennis  
Director  
Maryknoll Office for Global Concerns

Stanley J. Noffsinger  
General Secretary  
Church of the Brethren

Rabbi Charles Feinberg  
Co-Chair  
Rabbis for Human Rights- North America

Diane Randall  
Executive Secretary  
Friends Committee on National Legislation

Nancy Ratzan  
President  
National Council of Jewish Women

Rev. Dr. William F. Schulz  
President and Chief Executive Officer  
Unitarian Universalist Service Committee

Arthur M. Larrabee  
General Secretary  
Philadelphia Yearly Meeting of the  
Religious Society of Friends

Rabbi Ellen Lippmann  
Co-Chair  
Rabbis for Human Rights - North America

Jim Winkler  
General Secretary  
General Board of Church and Society  
The United Methodist Church

Rabbi Fredi Cooper  
President  
Reconstructionist Rabbinical Association

Ervin R. Stutzman  
Executive Director  
Mennonite Church USA

Shan Cretin  
General Secretary  
American Friends Service Committee

Dr. Sayyid Syeed  
National Director  
Interfaith and Community Alliances  
Islamic Society of North America

Rabbi Shawn Zevit  
Director of Congregational Services  
Jewish Reconstructionist

Anthony Vance  
Director, External Affairs  
National Spiritual Assembly of the  
Bahá'ís of the United States

Rev. Russell L. Meyer  
Executive Director  
Florida Council of Churches

Rev. Jonathan Barton  
General Minister  
Virginia Council of Churches

Scott D. Anderson  
Executive Director  
Wisconsin Council of Churches

Bruce Knotts  
Executive Director  
Unitarian Universalist United Nations Office

Bee Moorhead  
Executive Director  
Texas Impact

Rev. Gary L. Harke  
Executive Director  
The Pennsylvania Council of Churches

Rev. J. George Reed  
Executive Director  
North Carolina Council of Churches

Rev. Dennis D. Sparks  
Executive Director  
West Virginia Council of Churches

Rev. Dr. Jim Ryan  
Executive Director  
Colorado Council of Churches

Rev. Brenda Lynn Kneece  
Executive Minister  
South Carolina Christian Action Council

Rev. Jill Saxby  
Executive Director  
Maine Council of Churches

Joan Diefenbach  
Executive Director  
New Jersey Council of Churches

David Lamarre-Vincent  
Executive Director  
New Hampshire Bible Society

Rev. Dr. Rick Schlosser  
Executive Director  
California Council of Churches/ IMPACT

David Leslie  
Executive Director  
Ecumenical Ministries of Oregon

Alice M. Woldt  
Executive Director  
Washington Association of Churches

Rev. Jack Johnson  
Executive Director  
Massachusetts Council of Churches

**Mail Petition to:**

***National Religious Campaign Against Torture***

110 Maryland Ave., NE, Suite 502; Washington, DC 20002

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Name — <b>PLEASE PRINT</b>	<b>E-mail – We must have an email address for your name to be registered</b>	<b>Phone #</b>	<b>City &amp; State</b>	<b>ZIP Code</b>

