

"La torture, fin d'un tabou?"

Club Suisse de la Presse, Geneve, 12. avril 2017

(Nils Melzer, UN Special Rapporteur on Torture)

Ladies and Gentlemen,

Thank you for having invited me to participate in this important discussion today. The question put before us today - "*La Torture, fin d'un tabou?*" - could not be more timely, more fundamental, and more important for our future and the future of our children.

The bleak and sobering truth is that, today, torture and other cruel, inhuman or degrading treatment or punishment continues to be practiced in most, if not all, parts of the world. This is so:

- despite the universal prohibition of torture in numerous international treaties,
- despite the general recognition of the absolute, non-derogable and peremptory nature of that prohibition,
- despite an incessant stream of solemn declarations on the part of States and multilateral organisations confirming that prohibition, and
- despite many decades of dedicated efforts by countless national, international, governmental and non-governmental stakeholders.

Ladies and Gentlemen, let us not fool ourselves:

- We live in a time when a century of documented horrors, suffering and self-destruction brought about two World Wars and countless other situations of conflict and violence seems to have been forgotten in some sort of collective amnesia.
- We live in a time when torture is increasingly trivialized, and even promoted in the name of national security and counterterrorism, not only through violent political narratives, but increasingly also in mainstream entertainment and popular belief.
- And we live in a time when even the most powerful of nations cannot seem to muster up the strength, responsibility and determination to unequivocally stand behind and enforce the absolute and universal prohibition of torture. That one rule which knows no exceptions; that one rule which constitutes the most fundamental achievement of humanity; and that one prohibition which distinguishes civilization from barbarism.

In such times, there is no space for compromise, for definitional blurriness or conceptual grey-zones:

It is not true, that methods such as waterboarding, stress-positions, sleep-deprivation or prolonged solitary confinement

are somehow "different". They all aim at inflicting excruciating pain or anguish for purposes of interrogation, intimidation or punishment. They are - plain and simply - torture - nothing less.

Contrary to what mainstream TV makes believe - it also is not true that such methods could ever be used in a "sanitized" way, as some kind of "half-legal" means of last resort to neutralize the threat of the proverbial "ticking bomb".

The reality of torture is dirty, it is ugly, it stinks of vomit, blood and excrements, it is sickening, heart-wrenching and absolutely horrifying. No one who has ever faced the reality of torture could ever still cling to the illusion of it being compatible with humanity, with dignity, with any notion of respectable and responsible human life.

Those who know the reality of torture, those who have suffered it, those who have inflicted it and those who have tried to heal the physical, mental and emotional wounds resulting from it, know that torture destroys deeply, utterly and irreversibly. That it destroys not only the physical, mental and emotional integrity of the victim, but also that of their torturer, and that of their families, and that of the societal system and, ultimately, the moral and cultural integrity of mankind as a whole.

Torture, ladies and gentlemen, is the moral abyss of mankind, it is the sacrifice of our humanity on the altar of our fears, it is the

total capitulation not only of our personal integrity but, - in its extreme consequence - it is the very end of civilization itself.

So let's not fool ourselves. The truth is that any tolerance, any complacency or any acquiescence concerning the threat or use of torture, however exceptional and well argued, will inevitably lead down a slippery slope towards complete arbitrariness and brute force, ultimately ending in disgrace for all of humanity.

So this is not a time for hesitation and compromise, but a time to speak out clearly, to pull our strengths and resources together, a time to renew our spirit and values, a time to focus and push ahead.

The responsibility to fight against torture and uphold humanity falls on all of us, on you, on me and on countless other men and women in all corners of this planet. For it is us who elect or tolerate our governments, it is us who turn a blind eye on the suffering of our neighbour, and it is us who determine public opinion. In times like these there is no guarantee that our speaking out will stop mankind from taking another collective tour through the darkest depths of human nature. To do all we can do and still to fail is one thing. But to fail to do even what we could have done, is quite another. As for me, I'd rather pay the price for speaking out than the price for keeping silent.
