After 21 Years, It’s Time to Close the Guantánamo Bay Prison

For more than two decades, the notorious prison has been “a stain on the moral fiber of America.”

When CVT Policy Analyst Yumna Rizvi recently spent a week at the Guantánamo Bay Naval Base, she saw many of the same comforting signs of home found at most overseas military installations, from Starbucks coffee and a bowling alley, to a movie theater and a restaurant advertising Taco Tuesdays.

But Yumna was there to get a close-up view of an entirely different side of America: the inner workings of the Guantánamo Bay Detention Camp, which has stood for more than two decades as a shameful symbol of injustice and torture. Practices at Guantánamo not only violate the U.S. Constitution, they are also in breach of international law.

It was 21 years ago this month that the first twenty prisoners arrived at Guantánamo Bay. Over the years, roughly 800 men and boys have been held there. Many of the detainees were sold to the U.S. for a bounty by groups looking to profit from the U.S. invasion of Afghanistan. All of them have experienced indefinite detention and have suffered egregious violations of their human and legal rights.

And many have been tortured. In wrenching testimony during his sentencing hearing a little more than a year ago, Majid Khan, who had been held at the prison since 2006, described the brutality he endured—how the “torture doctor” would sharpen feeding tubes and smear them with hot sauce before forcing them down his nose, and how other CIA medics would rape him with a garden hose under the guise of “rectal feeding.”

His testimony was so powerful, seven of the eight senior military officers sitting on the panel handwrote a letter urging clemency because the torture inflicted on Khan was “a stain on the moral fiber of America” and the overall circumstances of his long imprisonment “an affront to American values and concept of justice.”

Their letter stands as a damning indictment not just of Khan’s brutal treatment, but of the very existence of the Guantánamo Bay prison and relying on Military Commissions to dispense “justice.”

Yumna, who was at the camp to observe pretrial hearings for another prisoner, Abd al-Rahim al-Nashiri, describes in an essay for the online publication Inkstick why the Military Commissions approach is as unw workable as it is morally repugnant:

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Dear Friend,

At CVT, our mission is nothing short of changing the world.

Together with allied organizations, international partners and—crucially—dedicated friends like you, we are bending the arc of history away from indifference and inaction, and towards justice and human rights.

Of course, this is a generational struggle. You can’t change the world in a day. But our day-to-day work does transform the lives of individual survivors. And that’s something I hope you will keep in mind whenever you measure how far short the reality of today’s world is from the vision you and I share of what it should be.

Because by changing the life of even one person, we are changing their world. And thanks to your kind support, we are doing it … again and again and again. That’s why CVT’s agenda for 2023 starts where it always does—with helping more survivors recover from their wounds, rebuild their lives and rediscover hope.

Providing direct care to survivors is at the heart of our mission and it always will be. But there’s a lot more on our agenda for the next 12 months. For reasons outlined in the lead article in this issue of The StoryCloth, we’re also intensifying our campaign to close the Guantánamo Bay prison. Here are a few of our other priorities for 2023:

• Building support for fundamental reform of our refugee and asylum systems to make them more humane.

• Advancing other policy advocacy work, including increased funding for torture survivor rehabilitation, human rights issues and combatting police violence.

• Expanding our torture survivor programs in the United States and around the world.

• Expanding trauma-informed care at the southern border via innovative programs like Proyecto Mariposa (Project Butterfly), that combines in-person and virtual assistance for asylum seekers entering the Tucson, Arizona shelter.

All of this, and so much more, could not happen without the compassion, generosity and commitment people like you bring to our shared mission. For that, you have our deepest thanks.

Sincerely,

Dr. Simon Adams
President and CEO
December 2022 CVT marked ten years of bringing lifesaving care to torture survivors in Ethiopia. Initially, our first clients were refugees living in camps in the Tigray region, in the northern part of the country, who had been forced to flee their homes in neighboring Eritrea. We had little idea at the time how the need for our services would explode over the next ten years—and how our staff would have to overcome unprecedented challenges, risking their very lives, to fill that need.

In 2019, we expanded our reach in Ethiopia by providing urgently needed mental health services to South Sudanese refugees in the western part of the country. We were still building up that program when a civil war broke out in the Tigray region in November of 2020. For a time, we couldn’t even contact our team, who were living through airstrikes and surrounded by several armies. For months, CVT was the only mental health organization operating in many parts of that region.

But even as the war came into the towns and refugee camps where our staff live and work, they also saw the growing number of Ethiopians displaced by the fighting and impacted by trauma who needed help. Our team organized to provide psychological first aid and other forms of crisis stabilization in the camps for internally displaced Ethiopians. That’s why CVT Ethiopia’s director, Firew Kefyalew Mekonnen, describes the staff he oversees as his “heroes.” Dr. Simon Adams, CVT’s President and CEO, was in Ethiopia during December, and similarly described how CVT’s team in northern Ethiopia “personify the humanitarian principles that guide our organization. Their personal commitment to service in the midst of war and civilian suffering should be an inspiration to all of us.”

Now, the recent cease-fire agreement in the two-year civil war in northern Ethiopia offers new hope to end the suffering of millions of people and for CVT to help more survivors with our healing care.

All of us at CVT are grateful for the caring community of supporters like you who make our work in Ethiopia—and all around the world—possible.

It’s Time to Close Guantánamo Bay Prison

(from page 1)

“Captured in 2002, Nashiri spent almost four years being tortured in different black sites around the world before he was brought to Guantánamo in 2006. Videotapes of his torture have been destroyed. His case … is now in its 11th year of pretrial hearings with no trial date set.

“A core issue being litigated is to what extent the government can admit evidence obtained by torture. Using such evidence is prohibited under domestic and international law, but in many ways, the Military Commissions were intended to play by different rules. I watched the prosecution try to build the case that Nashiri was no longer affected by four years of systematic physical and psychological torture when—not long after arriving at Guantánamo, and notwithstanding that he hadn’t (and still hasn’t) received any treatment for his torture—he was interrogated by officials from the same government who tortured him, at one of the same locations where he was tortured. The argument would be laughable if it weren’t so disturbing.”

The horrific absurdity stayed with Yumna after she left the hearings. When she passed road signs urging drivers to watch out for endangered wildlife like iguanas and boas, she couldn’t help thinking that “apparently, they have more rights than humans here.”

By any measure, Guantánamo Bay is a gross violation of universal human rights. If it existed in any other part of the world, our government would publicly condemn it. But for more than two decades, through both Republican and Democratic administrations, the abuse has continued. Despite President Biden’s promise to close Guantánamo, it remains open. At the cost of $540 million per year, Guantánamo is the most expensive prison on earth.

CVT is marking this month’s 21st anniversary of Guantánamo Bay’s opening by intensifying our advocacy campaign to close it once and for all. With the partnership of caring people like you, we hope to finally put an end to this dark chapter in American history.
Monthly Giving Can Benefit Both You and CVT

Many of our supporters choose to join the CVT Circle of Hope by having a gift automatically charged every month to a credit card or transferred electronically from a checking account. Monthly giving ensures CVT has a reliable source of income to provide care at our Healing Centers and respond quickly to emergencies, but it also has important benefits for you:

• As a monthly giver, your membership is always current, so you never have to worry about renewing your membership.
• Your contributions are made electronically, with complete security, so you don’t have to deal with any paperwork or remember to mail in your contribution.
• Since your total contribution is spaced out over the year, it makes budgeting easier for you (and CVT).
• By cutting down on postage and processing costs, even more of your contribution will go directly where you want it to—helping survivors heal and bringing us closer to a world without torture.

As a member of the Circle of Hope, you will receive an annual statement in January with all of your contributions for the previous year. And, of course, you can change, suspend or cancel your giving at any time. To join the Circle of Hope, contact us at (612) 436-4808 or giving@cvt.org.

Other Ways You Can Help Survivors Rediscover Hope

Here are a few more ways you can help even more survivors heal their wounds, rebuild their lives and rediscover joy and hope in the future.

Employer-Matching. Many employers will match charitable giving from their employees, doubling or even tripling their contributions. Contact your employer’s human resources department to find out whether this is a way you can leverage your impact.

Donor Advised Funds. If you have set up a donor advised fund (DAF), you can contact its representative to make a grant recommendation for CVT. You will need the following information:

Organization Name: The Center for Victims of Torture
Organization EIN: 36-3383933
Organization Address: 2356 University Ave W,
Suite 430, St. Paul, MN 55114

If you are interested in learning more about starting a DAF, or need assistance in making a gift from an existing DAF, please contact Laura Kuhlmann at Lkuhlmann@cvt.org.

Legacy Giving. Many donors who do not have the resources to make substantial gifts during their lifetimes find it possible to be extraordinarily generous through their estate planning. A gift of this kind will extend your legacy of caring while also offering potential financial benefits to you and your loved ones. There are a variety of options available to you to make a legacy gift to CVT, including bequests through your will or living trust, naming CVT a beneficiary of your life insurance or retirement plan, making a qualified charitable distribution from your IRA and setting up a charitable gift annuity.

For more information on any of these options or other ways to make a legacy gift to the Center for Victims of Torture, please contact Laura Kuhlmann at Lkuhlmann@cvt.org. Of course, you should always consult with your attorney, accountant or financial planner to ensure that your gift fits your personal situation.

If you wish to make an immediate gift, visit us online at www.cvt.org, send a check to 2356 University Avenue W, Suite 430, St. Paul, MN 55114, or call (612) 436-4808.

Thank you for your ongoing commitment to healing the wounds of torture.