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Torture

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and the conference organizers plan to vote on a resolution asking all governments to ban torture.

The regular use of torture by governments has been steadily rising during the past 20 years, according to Sister Dianna Ortiz, an Ursuline nun who heads The Torture Abolition and Survivors Support Coalition. The group maintains a Web site at www.torture-free-world.org.

Operating under the auspices of the Guatemala Human Rights Commission/USA, TASSC organized this week's Catholic University of America conference, she said during a telephone interview from Washington, D.C. Human rights groups have estimated that 150 governments currently use torture on a regular basis, she said, an increase of more than 50 percent since the 1980s. Human rights workers, journalists and such watchdog groups as Amnesty International also have pointed out that such democracies as France, Great Britain and the United States have used torture, and/or supported its use by allies, when it suited their purposes.

"We believe that we are rapidly reaching the point where it will be remarkable to find a government that does not torture," Sister Ortiz said.

Yet, even as torture increases around the world, its opponents are increasingly speaking out against its use.

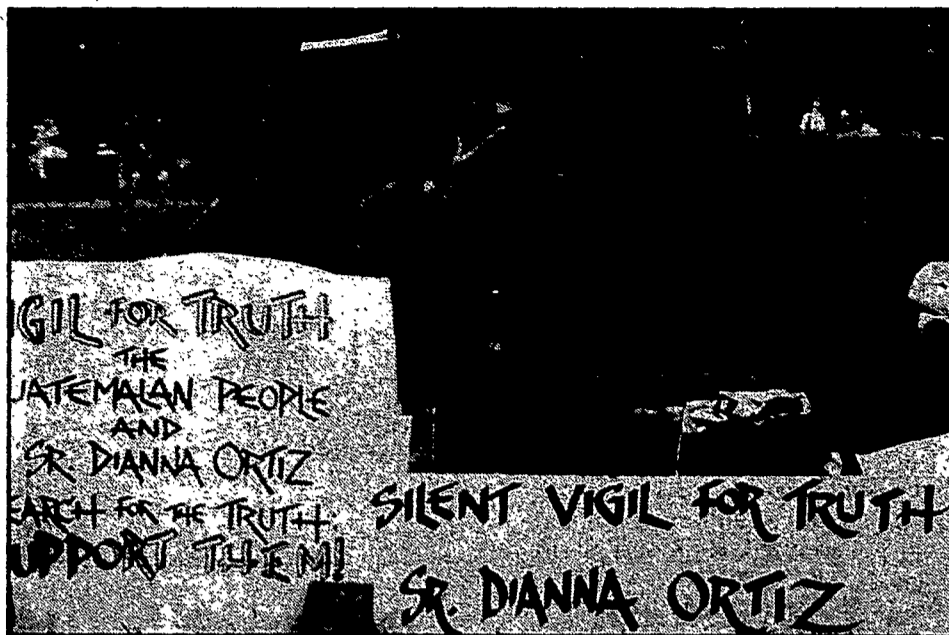
"My experience is that (torture) doesn't solve anything," Sister Korn said. "It just creates more anger and hatred, and it does not eliminate the possibility of more violence."

Pundits for pain

TASSC organized the Washington conference because columns entertaining the idea of legalizing torture in the United States have been published since Sept. 11 in such mainstream periodicals as the *Los Angeles Times*, *The Wall Street Journal* and *Newsweek*. And commentators from such networks as PBS and MSNBC have also called for torturing suspected terrorists.

"Some torture clearly works," Jonathan Alter wrote in the Nov. 5 edition of *Newsweek*. "Jordan broke the most notorious terrorist of the 1980s, Abu Nidal, by threatening his family." He added that plots against airliners and Pope John Paul II were discovered by Filipino torturers. Alter claimed he opposed legalizing torture, but said "we'll have to think about transferring some suspects to our less squeamish allies, even if that's hypocritical."

Legal torture's best-known proponent has been famed civil libertarian lawyer Alan Dershowitz, who has suggested that judges be allowed to issue warrants to police giving them the right to torture suspects for information in a non-lethal manner. Such information could only be used to prevent crimes, not to incriminate the



Bob Roller/CNS

Ursuline Sister Dianna Ortiz maintains her bread-and-water fast across from the White House in April of 1996. She wanted U.S. officials to release information about her 1989 abduction and torture in Guatemala. Accused by some officials of lying, the government eventually released information that vindicated her.

suspect being tortured, Dershowitz has stated. He has added that he's pushing for such warrants because he believes torture happens illegally anyway, and that it's important to have some judicial oversight in the process. Unlike Alter, Dershowitz doesn't want the United States to be hypocritical.

"If anybody has any doubt that our CIA, over time, has taught people to torture, has encouraged torture, has probably tortured itself in extreme cases, I have a bridge to sell you in Brooklyn," Dershowitz said on the Jan. 20 broadcast of "60 Minutes."

Brutal bandwagon

Talk of legalizing torture in the United States is more frightening to Sister Ortiz than it is to most people because she was tortured for five days in Guatemala, where she worked as a missionary schoolteacher. What's even more terrifying for her is that she believes the U.S. government may have played a role in her mistreatment. The ordeal affects her to this day. When asked her age, for example, she hesitated in responding. She apologized and said she was in her 40s and then, finally, 43.

"I know it sounds ridiculous, but I was asked that a lot during my interrogation," she said. "It just brings back memories for me."

In 1989, she said she was kidnapped by Guatemalan government security agents, gang-raped repeatedly and burned on her back 100 times with cigarettes. She said she was also lowered into a pit filled with injured men, women and children, writhing in agony over dead bodies and swarms of rats. She said she was also forced to stab another person.

One of her captors later said they had mistaken her for someone else, but she said she believes she was targeted for the crime of teaching Mayan children how to read.

Literate people know how to stand up for their rights, she noted. According to observers, Central American governments persecuted Catholic church workers for helping the poor during the 1980s.

Eventually, she was introduced to "Alejandro," who she believes was an American because he spoke fluent English with an American accent, and spoke Spanish poorly. Alejandro began driving her in a jeep to meet "a friend" in the U.S. embassy who would help her leave the country, she recalled. Convinced it was a trick and that she was going to be killed, she managed to escape the jeep.

"I learned a hard lesson," she said. "No one is safe from torture."

Sister Ortiz made headlines in 1996 when she held a five-week vigil outside the White House, demanding the federal government declassify information related to its role in her ordeal and those of thousands of Guatemalans persecuted by their U.S.-backed rulers over the years. U.S. officials in Guatemala had originally accused her of lying about her ordeal, and one official said she was burned in a "kinky" sex encounter. Eventually, however, the government released CIA documents that confirmed officials knew her story to be true.

Sister Ortiz said her experience made her feel betrayed by her government, but also gave her a sense of mission on behalf of other people being tortured.

"I could say from my own experience, I don't even support the torture of my perpetrators," she said. "The person who is tortured is not the only one who is affected. The person who inflicts the torture is affected."

Voice of the victims

Sister Ortiz said participants in the Catholic University conference will vote in

favor of a resolution asking all governments to ratify an international treaty barring the use of torture, and asking the United States to lead the way.

"In recent months a number of academics, journalists, and U.S. government workers have discussed the legalization of torture," the resolution states. "As survivors of torture we are deeply disturbed by these developments and discussions. In the past the practice of torture was usually associated with dictatorships and pariah governments; today some democracies are practicing it and using all kinds of legal contortions to justify it. We condemn in the strongest terms all forms of torture and forced confessions."

In part, the resolution also asks that the United States create a "truth commission," similar to ones that investigated governmental abuses in South Africa and Guatemala, that would "investigate the involvement of U.S. agencies in torture and other crimes against humanity."

The resolution also asks the U.S. government to prosecute torturers currently residing in the United States, and increase financial and political support for "the more than 500,000 survivors of torture in the United States and millions in other parts of the world."

The resolution concludes by stating: "We extend our hands and invite all to join us in building a future where human rights are always respected and where the world's children will live free of torture and free of the fear of torture."

Nigerian immigrant Omoyele Sowore, a conference participant, was tortured on eight separate occasions in his African homeland for working against the military's role in the government. Like Sister Ortiz, he shunned vengeance, and said he would never torture those who beat him if given the chance. He also urged Americans to realize that all nations undergo crises from time to time, and that even the threat of terrorism is no reason to suspend civil liberties and institutionalize torture.

"I don't think Sept. 11 should be the reason for the U.S. to jettison the libertarian culture it has," he said in a phone interview from Washington. "(Legalized torture) gives the government exclusive rights to do what it wants to whoever it considers a suspect."

When asked if she would allow the torture of terrorists who were withholding information that might save other people's lives, Sister Ortiz said no. Like other torture critics, she also questioned its usefulness in gaining intelligence.

"People will say things when they're under great duress," she said. "We'll do or say anything to prevent the next blow, to prevent the next cigarette burn, to prevent the next rape."

"For us (victims), torture is a form a terrorism," she added. "I don't have pity for anyone who commits crimes against humanity. I think people have to be punished — but legally."

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