

## PRISONERS' STRUGGLES

### Canadian Centre for Victims of Torture (CCVT): “Hope after the Horror”

*Jessica Doyle and Riana Marcotte*

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Torture is an adverse reality affecting countless individuals around the world. The violence experienced by its survivors has long-lasting and far-reaching consequences. Forced to leave their homes, loved ones and other victims because of intolerable conditions, people displaced to Canada often have the additional burden of trying to cope with a traumatising past in an unfamiliar territory. Alleviating the suffering of such individuals and their families requires a specific and comprehensive approach, one that the Canadian Centre for Victims of Torture (CCVT) aims to achieve so as to provide the best possible care for torture survivors arriving to Canada.

In 1983, the Canadian Centre for Victims of Torture was established as a non-profit registered charity by a group of Toronto-based doctors, lawyers, social workers and members of community groups. The CCVT is operated by a volunteer-based advisory board, as well as eighteen full-time and part-time staff members. When the CCVT was formed, many of the victims were in the process of claiming refugee status in Canada, and professionals recognized a need for specialized counselling for health, social as well as legal problems faced by this particular group. After the International Rehabilitation Council for Torture Victims in Copenhagen, the CCVT became the second most recognized establishment of this type.

Organizations such as the CCVT are necessary due to the prevalence of torture throughout the world despite the existence of United Nations (UN) declarations against the use of torture. Torture survivors often seek refuge from their countries of origin out of necessity, because of the human rights abuses perpetrated within their states – frequently by government officials. Many of the victims who are able to claim refugee status in Canada come from current war-torn countries, such as Afghanistan and Iraq. Others are coming from areas where ethnic conflict has created unstable and violent situations, such as in Sri Lanka, Ethiopia, Eritrea, and Iran. The Centre has assisted approximately 14,000 survivors from 136 different countries. It is extremely difficult for torture victims to seek and claim refugee status, especially when they lack the documentation. It is imperative that groups such as the CCVT exist to help torture survivors cope once they have gone through the ordeal of escaping their countries of origin.

Torture survivors are imprisoned by the memory of what they have experienced and by the long-lasting physical, psychological and emotional scars. They must rebuild their lives while re-living the moments of torture that contribute to the stress, anxiety and alienation they experience in their new environments. Survivors and families who are forced to leave their native countries are assisted by CCVT-affiliated lawyers, doctors, support workers, as well as other professionals who offer individualized assistance for them to begin the healing process.

The services provided by the CCVT include counselling, language training, legal assistance, crisis intervention, art therapy and aid with settlement into Canada. After learning about each individual survivor's needs, counselling aims to provide torture survivors with the resources necessary for empowerment and integration within their new community settings. The CCVT may also act on behalf of survivors when dealing with potentially overwhelming government departments, such as Citizenship and Immigration Canada. In addition, the Centre facilitates networking with other torture survivors and volunteers in order to alleviate common feelings of isolation. These support groups are available for men, women, children and youth who can benefit from networking with other torture survivors who are able to support each other more effectively because of their common experiences, backgrounds and obstacles. Since many of the individuals and families helped by the CCVT come from different countries, the support they offer to assist torture survivors with settlement and education are integral to the individuals' healing process.

Alongside a dedication to helping survivors of torture, it is also the Centre's mission to promote the respect of human rights and to educate the public about the harsh conditions facing newly arriving torture survivors. Various awards have been created to recognize the valuable contributions that individuals make to build an equitable and just society through sustained and innovative contributions in the community, leadership, initiative, perseverance and originality.

Because denial enables torture practices to continue, the CCVT also advocates for the rights of torture victims. For instance, in a media release from December 10<sup>th</sup> 2009, the CCVT called on the Canadian government to intervene regarding the torture of detainees in Afghanistan, in which the Canadian forces were implicated. The CCVT requested that a public inquiry be made into the allegations in order to determine Canada's role, and to ensure human rights are not devalued by Canadian enforcement and interrogation officers in the future.

Restoring human dignity is also an essential component of the CCVT's mandate. The CCVT has a tremendous responsibility to help survivors once they reach Canada. Language barriers, health needs and

the adaptation to Canadian life are added difficulties for people recovering from horrific and life-changing experiences resulting from torture. It takes time and support for survivors to reach the point where they can live without stress, fear and insecurity. The existence of the CCVT is needed for survivors to regain the human dignity that their torturers attempted to take away.

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Both authors conducted research on the CCVT in a graduate course in Criminology on human rights and crimes against humanity at the University of Ottawa.