

URGE PRESIDENT BUSH TO SIGN ANTI-TORTURE PROVISIONS

February 28, 2008

Why this issue is important? The Church stands firm in denouncing torture as it undermines and debases the dignity of both victims and perpetrators. Pope Benedict XVI said “the prohibition against torture cannot be contravened under any circumstance.”

The Senate voted 51-45 to pass HR 2082, the FY2008 Intelligence Authorization Act, which contains anti-torture legislation (Section 327) expanding the prohibition against torture of detainees to all U.S. intelligence agencies and their agents. Now the bill faces a possible veto by President Bush on **March 5**. We urge you to contact the White House and express your support for President Bush signing those anti-torture provisions of HR 2082 into law.

Background: USCCB was successful in joining with other organizations in pressing the Senate to pass HR 2082 on February 13, 2008 with its anti-torture provisions intact. It was a triumph as it prohibits cruel, inhumane and degrading treatment of prisoners held by U.S. intelligence agencies. Earlier legislation supported by USCCB had prohibited torture of those held by U.S. military and required that interrogation techniques conform to the standard now offered by the U.S. Army Field Manual. While the Conference cannot presume to be experts on the Manual, one of its guiding principles which USCCB supports echoes the Golden Rule, i.e. we should not use any technique against an enemy that we would not like to have used against our own military or civilians.

While USCCB does not take positions on the more technical and other provisions of the Intelligence Authorization Act, we believe the adoption of the anti-torture provision (Section 327) in HR 2082 would go a long way to restoring U.S. credibility in the international community by helping the U.S. regain the moral high ground. Respect for the dignity of every person, ally or enemy, must serve as the foundation of security, justice and peace. We cannot win the war against terror by abandoning fundamental moral values.

ACTION REQUESTED: Ask your members to call the White House at 202-456-1111 or send an email to President Bush at comments@whitehouse.gov to express support for the anti-torture provisions in HR 2082 and urge him to sign this legislation.

For more information contact Virginia Farris. Office of International Justice and Peace, USCCB, 202-541-3182, vfarris@usccb.org. See the op-ed on torture signed by Bishop Thomas Wenski and four other religious leaders which is being offered for placement.

(This op-ed is available for use by newspapers. If you publish it, please contact Rev. Richard Killmer, National Religious Campaign Against Torture 207-450-7242 or 202-547-1920).

End the Torture Nightmare

An op-ed

Last week Congress moved to restore America's moral reputation by voting to end the CIA "enhanced interrogation techniques" program -- the program that admittedly has used waterboarding on at least three terrorist suspects and has likely used other torture techniques on unknown others. The President has said he will veto the good work of the Congress. We call on him not to veto this legislation.

Nothing could be more urgent in a democratic society than to uphold the fundamental values of democracy. No branch of government, including our intelligence services, can be made an exception to this rule. "Enhanced" interrogation practices -- like waterboarding, hypothermia, long-time standing, sleep deprivation and the use of psychotropic drugs -- contradict our democratic values as well as essential principles of morality and faith.

Torture is an intrinsic evil. It exercises a corrosive effect on the very fabric of our society. It is to be rejected not only for the profound damage it wreaks upon the victim, but also because of the damage it inflicts, spiritual and physical, on those who are called upon to practice it and on the citizens of the country in whose name it is done. It contradicts the rule of law which must be a focal virtue for any society that seeks the security and well-being of its citizens.

The experience of humanity is clear: once torture has been permitted, it will spread. It will not be confined to rare cases. It will be broadly applied, despite all efforts to hold it in check. A society that embraces torture must inevitably accept moral breakdown as the outcome of its decision.

America's historic answer is aligned with the view of communities of faith: torture must be repudiated absolutely. There can be no exceptions to this rule. It is a rule that unites religious conscience with reason. As religious leaders, we are committed to protecting the life and dignity of every human person.

The Intelligence Authorization Act of 2008, approved last week by the Senate and sent to the President for signature, would prohibit cruel, inhuman and degrading treatment of terrorist suspects by applying the prohibition on torture outlined in the Army Field Manual. Among other things, the Field Manual incorporates the "golden rule" standard. Interrogators are to engage in no conduct that they would consider abusive if applied to an American prisoner. This measure would go a long way toward ending the shame of our nation by abolishing abusive forms of interrogation. It would help the U.S. to regain the moral high ground and restore our credibility in the international community.

To our dismay President Bush argues that the intelligence services should be able to operate in the shadows and must be given broad latitude in selecting and developing new tools. Congress has acted, however, because it understands and reflects the core convictions of the American people and of the major religious communities to stand firmly against torture and abuse.

The public debate surrounding torture has focused on narrow questions of effectiveness. Yet even a test of efficacy must measure more than supposed short-term benefits, however unlikely even those may be. It must test how the use of these tools affects our nation's reputation in the world abroad. It must ask whether a reputation for abusive interrogation undermines alliances upon which our security must rest and serves as a recruiting tool for the very people who would harm us. How can an instrument of defense be effective if its use causes us to surrender fundamental values and degrades our self-understanding as a nation? The tools we use must reflect our religious values and most cherished ideals.

We urge President Bush to sign the Intelligence Authorization Act. Let him put an end to our national nightmare over torture. Let America assume a position on the right side of history, morality and faith.

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