



Freedom from Torture

SURVIVOR VOICES



A TOOL TO SILENCE:

TORTURE TO CRUSH DISSENT IN

THE DEMOCRATIC REPUBLIC OF CONGO

November 2018

I KNOW

I KNOW HALF A LOAF IS BETTER THAN NOTHING

BUT

SOMETIMES A WHOLE LOAF WOULD BE NICE

I KNOW PEACE IS BETTER THAN WAR

BUT

WHY THEN IS THERE WAR ALL OVER THE WORLD?

I KNOW THINGS WILL NOT ALWAYS LOOK ROSY

BUT

IT WOULD BE GOOD IF THEY DID

I KNOW LIFE IS A JOURNEY

BUT

IT CAN BE TIRING, TO TRAVEL ALL THE TIME

I KNOW THAT HOPE LIKE A BLAZING CANDLE CAN BE

PUT OUT IN A MOMENT

BUT

I ALSO KNOW THAT HOPE, LIKE CANDLELIGHT

CAN LEAD THROUGH DARK MOMENTS

I KNOW THINGS CAN FALL APART

BUT

THEY CAN ALSO COME TOGETHER

I KNOW WE SHALL OVERCOME SOME DAY

BUT

IT WILL TAKE A LOT OF WORK...

TIM MALMO

The voices of survivors are central to the advocacy of Freedom from Torture to prevent torture and secure justice. In preparation for this report, we conducted focus groups and individual discussions with 30 Congolese torture survivors to discuss accountability for torture in the Democratic Republic of the Congo (DRC) and what they would like to see as our advocacy priorities.

The 30 survivors, 17 men and 13 women, are either current or former therapy clients at Freedom from Torture. The discussions took place over several weeks and across Freedom from Torture centres in the United Kingdom. Most conversations were facilitated and led by Survivors Speak OUT, an activist network set up and run by and for former treatment clients of Freedom from Torture to speak out against torture and its impact. Through this report, survivors demand justice for themselves and other survivors of human rights violations and to stand up against the torturers who sought to silence their voices for all time.

“A TOOL TO SILENCE”

“Even though you see something bad you can’t say. You are scared because tomorrow you will disappear.”

Congolese torture survivor

These words of one survivor reflect a point that all groups made – that the authorities use torture as “a punishment” to try to silence people. They seek to make the cost of civic involvement so high and try to instil such profound fear that no one will dare to speak out about violations in the country. One participant spoke of how university students are targeted for being a potential driving force for protest and change. *“We get to the point where young people don’t have heart any more”.*

Participants said that family members were targeted to silence activists:

“Knowing that they cannot touch me directly they might start targeting members of my family, just to silence me. Because I know that if I carry on, it might mean losing my family. It might mean losing my children.”

That fear extended to survivors who took part in the discussions in the relative safety of the United Kingdom, and even in a context of anonymity. Several said that their families would be at risk if it was known that they were participating in such a process. They said that some survivors had chosen not to attend because of the perceived risks. Those who did choose to participate said that they did so, despite what they saw as the risks,¹ because of a commitment to contribute to a process that might improve the situation for people in their home country and ensure no one else would have to suffer what they endured.

“A WAY OF LIFE”

Participants said that torture is commonplace in the DRC – “a way of life” – even though the country is supposed to be a democracy and bans torture. Described as a “system”, they reported that torture is used by:

“We are the witnesses; we are the victims of these abuses.”

Congolese torture survivor

¹ All of the discussions were conducted in strict confidentiality with all contributions anonymised to minimise potential risk to participants and their families.

- state agents to punish politically-involved people and human rights defenders;
- police as a common interrogation technique in criminal matters; and
- prominent and politically-connected individuals in personal or business disputes.

In particular, they said sexual torture was so common that it was “seen as normal”. In the words of one woman, “No one goes to prison for rape any more.”

Participants also spoke of security forces assaulting people in public as standard practice.

“WHEN IT IS ELECTIONS, INNOCENT PEOPLE DIE”

Another dominant theme in the focus group sessions was fear and a sense of hopelessness around the upcoming elections. None of the participants felt that the December 2018 elections were likely to be free and fair. “There will be no change,” was a widely expressed view. One participant said:

“The truth is that the Congolese people have never chosen a president up to now. From 1960, the president that is chosen by the Congolese people is not the one who is leading the country...”

Many participants expressed fear. One said:

“So now we are even scared as the election is approaching and know that we only have two options – either killing or fights. Literally killings and fights.”

“CONGO: THE PLATE EVERYONE COMES TO EAT FROM”

“DRC is one of the richest countries in the world but Congo does not belong to the people, the Congolese people. Every country in the world supports [the President] because they take the riches [from] the country. Not just governments but also companies”

Congolese torture survivor

Participants repeatedly spoke of what they saw as the complicity of international actors – both governments and corporations – in maintaining a system of governance that is widely seen as ruthless and oppressive. They felt that the international community was not interested in effectively challenging human rights violations because of the economic benefits of supporting a corrupt government. Many noted that the exploitation of the country’s natural resources had been going on since colonial times and argued that only those who had “set up the system” had the power to dismantle it.

We heard numerous pleas to the international community (governments and businesses) to:

“Human rights are only for those in power... we, the citizens, do not have human rights.”

Congolese torture survivor

- be honest and fair;
- support the development of strong institutions to control resources;
- stop supporting “big men”; and
- understand that there is enough wealth in the country to share with everyone – Congolese and others.

One participant said:

“We just want a fair deal. They can’t be buying our natural resources and think we don’t see how they are exploiting us. We want a fair deal, a fair trade. That is all we want. Simple.”

Another called on all individuals to speak out about the violations in the DRC, including with reference to minerals such as coltan and cobalt, used in mobile phones:

“Everyone has Congo in their pocket. Everyone has a smartphone . Everyone needs to stand up and say something about change in that country, because if you have a phone or TV, you have part of Congo in your house.”

“SENDING US BACK TO DIE”

“They know what is going on in our country but they still don’t believe us and they are sending people back and they are dying.”

Congolese torture survivor

Participants in the discussions spoke of the difficulties they experienced when trying to claim asylum in other countries, including the United Kingdom. They felt that decision-makers were aware of the human rights violations taking place but that asylum decisions did not reflect this knowledge. Participants voiced anguish at the forced return of Congolese people to what they see as a violent and oppressive system.

They believed that the Government views people in the diaspora as having “betrayed” the country by talking about what is happening in the DRC. They said that the government views anyone returning, either voluntarily or not, as a “high-level opponent”. They feared people would be treated “without mercy” on return and probably imprisoned.

“NEW FACES”

All the 30 survivors in our focus groups said that torture is rampant and is condoned and encouraged from the very highest echelons of government. They said they wanted justice for the torture that they and others had endured. For them, this meant prosecuting senior government officials. They appealed for support in their efforts to bring democracy, justice and accountability to the country.

Freedom from Torture will continue to work with these groups to develop advocacy activities that call for greater recognition of torture patterns in the DRC and for those responsible to be held to account.

“We just want a fair deal.”

Congolese torture survivor

“We need your help because us Congolese we are doing our part. Every time we try, we get killed.”

Congolese torture survivor

SURVIVOR RECOMMENDATIONS

The following recommendations summarise what survivors have told Freedom from Torture what they believe needs to be done to prevent torture.

TO THE INTERNATIONAL COMMUNITY:

- Increase pressure on the Government of the DRC to stop torture.
- Increase pressure on the Government of the DRC to ensure the elections scheduled for December 2018 are fair, transparent and free from violence.
- Support international and domestic processes that seek accountability for human rights violations, including torture.
- Ensure that any financial support to the Government of the DRC for security sector reform is compliant with human rights standards and is properly audited.

TO THE UNITED NATIONS:

- Be more transparent and accountable about the UN's role in the DRC and communicate this effectively to the citizens of the DRC.
- Ensure that UN mechanisms and fact-finding missions continue to focus on human rights violations across the whole of the DRC, including outside conflict areas.

TO INTERNATIONAL MEDIA:

- Be more active in exposing the continuing violations and atrocities in the DRC.

TO THE GOVERNMENT OF THE DEMOCRATIC REPUBLIC OF CONGO:

- Ensure people in prisons and detention sites have access to lawyers and medical treatment.
- Improve conditions in prisons and detention centres.
- Bring to justice the perpetrators of rape and torture, and hold to account those in senior positions who are ultimately responsible.
- Ensure the police and military receive training about how to treat people professionally and are clear about their role.
- Introduce a system of rehabilitation and healing in the light of so many years of war and oppression; people need to be helped to stop the cycle of violence.
- Ensure electoral processes are transparent and reflect the demands of electoral candidates, political parties and civil society so that the election is seen as credible. Elections should also be free from violence.

“We need torture to be stopped. We need human rights to be in place. We need good life. And peace. Thank you.”

Congolese torture survivor

FREEDOM

WHEN I WAS STILL CONFINED THERE,
I WAS WEIGHED DOWN WITH HOPELESS DESIRE.

I WAS A MAN WHO HAD LOST BOTH HIS FREEDOM AND
HIS IDENTITY.

MY LIFE STUNTED BY THE SPACE THAT BOXED ME IN.

SO WHAT DID THEY DO? THEY CONVINCED ME I WAS
FINISHED.

THEY MADE ME FEEL INFERIOR, LESS THAN MYSELF. NOT
AS OTHER PEOPLE ARE.

BUT NOW I AM HERE, WHERE MILK AND HONEY FLOW.
AND HOW DOES IT FEEL?

I FEEL INFERIOR, LESS THAN MYSELF.
NOT AS OTHER PEOPLE ARE.

HERE TOO I AM STUNTED.

I HAVE NO SPACE TO GROW INTO FREEDOM.
NO FREEDOM TO MOVE FORWARD INTO LIFE.

TIM MALMO



Freedom from Torture

A TOOL TO SILENCE:

TORTURE TO CRUSH DISSENT IN
THE DEMOCRATIC REPUBLIC OF CONGO

FREEDOM FROM TORTURE

Freedom from Torture is the only UK-based human rights organisation dedicated to the treatment and rehabilitation of torture survivors. We offer services across England and Scotland to around 1,000 torture survivors a year, including psychological and physical therapies, forensic documentation of torture, legal and welfare advice and creative projects.

We are one of the world's largest treatment centres, and since our establishment in 1985, more than 60,000 survivors of torture have been referred to us. Medico-legal reports prepared by our expert clinicians are used as evidence in torture survivors' claims for international protection, and form the basis of research reports such as this, aimed at holding torturing states to account.

Through our Torture Accountability Programme, we work to expose torture in support of efforts to strengthen prevention, secure justice and ensure international protection for survivors of torture. Survivor voices and expertise are at the heart of this work.

We are the only human rights organisation that systematically uses evidence from our in-house expert clinicians, and the torture survivors with whom we work, to work towards a world free from torture.

SURVIVORS SPEAK OUT NETWORK

Survivors Speak OUT (SSO) is the UK's only torture survivor-led activist network and is actively engaged in speaking out against torture and about its impacts. Set up by and for survivors of torture, SSO uses first-hand experience to speak with authority for the rights of torture survivors. The network is supported and facilitated by Freedom from Torture and all network members are former Freedom from Torture clients.

To find out more about Freedom from Torture and Survivors Speak OUT network please visit www.freedomfromtorture.org

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Or join us on Facebook <https://www.facebook.com/FreedomfromTorture>

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