

# Torture in the World Today

**“No one shall be subjected to torture or to cruel, inhuman or degrading treatment or punishment.”**  
(Article 5, Universal Declaration of Human Rights).

Since the adoption of the United Nations Universal Declaration of Human Rights just over fifty years ago on December 10th, 1948, torture in all its forms, and in all contexts, has been universally prohibited. It cannot be justified by any circumstances whatsoever. Every subsequent human rights treaty has included this absolute prohibition. Yet, State sanctioned atrocities which cause severe mental or physical suffering have been documented by human rights organizations in more than 81 countries worldwide in 2007. The persistence of this abhorrent practice into the 21st century is a terrifying testimony to the disregard which its perpetrators hold for even the most solemn of international treaties.

## Prisoners at Detention Centres

The shocking abuse of detainees at the Abu Ghraib prison in Iraq and likewise, at the Guantanamo Bay detention facility, are well known examples documented by the international media of the continuing practice of torture today.

## What is Torture?

Torture is defined in Article 1(1) of the United Nations Convention Against Torture and Other Cruel Inhuman or Degrading Treatment or Punishment (UNCAT) as:

**“Any act by which severe pain or suffering, whether physical or mental, is intentionally inflicted on a person for such purposes as obtaining from him or a third person information or a confession, punishing him for an act he or a third person has committed or is suspected of having committed, or intimidating or coercing him or a third person, or for any reason based on discrimination of any kind, when such pain or suffering is inflicted by or at the instigation of or with the consent or acquiescence of a public official or other person acting in an official capacity. It does not include pain or suffering arising only from, inherent in or incidental to lawful sanctions”.**



This definition was incorporated into Irish Law through the Criminal Justice (United Nations Convention Against Torture) Act 2000 and ratified on April 11th, 2002. The photo above reminds us that many people who have faced serious human rights abuse do not survive to tell their story. Apart from forensic investigations, one of the most powerful tools is testimony of those who have survived that allow us to understand the lingering consequences of torture.

## **SPIRASI – Spiritan Asylum Services Initiative**

2019 marks the 160th Anniversary of the arrival of the Spiritans in Ireland while Spirasi (Spiritan Asylum Services Initiative), the most recent NGO established by the Spiritans in this country, also celebrates its 20th anniversary during 2019. Spirasi provides both short and long-term rehabilitation services to survivors of torture and their families. These services include the provision of medical assessments, Medico Legal Reports, therapy and psychosocial supports. The vast majority of victims of torture in Ireland today are asylum seekers and refugees. In addition to the work with survivors of torture, Spirasi also offers health information to newly arrived asylum seekers in Baleskin Reception Centre in Finglas as well as outreach psychosocial support in Mosney. Additionally, there is an integration programme for immigrants including integrated modules on English language, information technology, cultural orientation and life skills training. Most recently Spirasi has begun a Befriending Programme that links vulnerable clients with volunteers who can reduce isolation and loneliness and provide support with integration into Irish society. Spirasi has provided services to just over 5000 refugee and asylum seekers since opening its doors back in 1999.

### **Who is an Asylum Seeker?**

An asylum seeker is a person seeking to be granted protection as a refugee outside their country of origin and is awaiting the determination of his/her status. If granted

this status, the person is recognised as a refugee and is no longer an asylum seeker. In Ireland, the asylum process is a legal system which decides who qualifies as a refugee and is then entitled to remain in Ireland and under its protection. Those judged not to be refugees can be deported back to their home countries. Others may be granted leave to remain or subsidiary protection. All asylum seekers are legally entitled to ask for refugee status.

### **Who is a Refugee?**

A refugee is someone who has had to leave their country of origin because of “a well-founded fear of persecution because of reasons including their race, religion, nationality, membership of a particular social group or political opinion. Ireland is a signatory to the “1951 United Nations Convention Relating to the Status of Refugees”, which obliges us to provide protection to people fleeing their country for the reasons above. At the end of 2006, the population of recognised refugees in Ireland was 8,500. Refugees are entitled to apply for ‘family reunification’ to bring their immediate family members (within certain criteria) to Ireland.

### **Who is a Migrant Worker?**

A migrant worker is a person who is working in a state of which s/he is not a national. A migrant worker can be documented or undocumented.

### **Which services does SPIRASI offer?**

SPIRASI provides a comprehensive range of services for survivors of torture, including:

- Holistic Assessments
- Cross-cultural Counselling / Psychotherapy
- Psychosocial and Outreach Support
- Group Psychotherapy
- Integration Training
- Medico-legal Reports
- Support Groups
- Interpreting
- Complementary Therapies
- Public Awareness
- Professional Training Drama
- Befriending Programme





## How do Torture Survivors Access our Services?

The majority of the beneficiaries of the services offered by Spirasi are referred to by General Practitioners, Area Medical Officers and Psychiatrists and other healthcare professionals. All referrals are made formally and each case is carefully assessed by a panel of experts to determine if the case falls under the UNCAT definition of torture and if Spirasi can make a worthwhile intervention. Each beneficiary is then given a medical and therapeutic assessment to determine an appropriate care plan. This care plan also involves utilisation of locally available statutory and non-statutory services. Spirasi also accept referrals from the Refugee Legal Services and private solicitors for the purpose of producing medico-legal reports in the context of the asylum determination process in compliance with internationally accepted standards.

## Where do Torture Survivors Come From?

Torture survivors, unfortunately, come from every corner of the world. Wherever there is war or conflict survivors are likely to follow. Since its inception in 1999 Spirasi has received victims of torture from over 100 different countries. The most recent influx of torture victims has been from South Sudan where a vicious civil war rages.

## Where do Torture Survivors Live in Ireland?

While awaiting a decision on their asylum application, torture survivors are housed in approximately 35 Direct Provision (DP) Centres throughout the country run under the auspices of the Reception and Integration Agency (RIA). Because of the current housing crisis and the unwillingness of some communities to house asylum seekers in their localities newly arrived asylum seekers are forced to live in hotels and other unsuitable places for the needs of this vulnerable population.

At the moment there are just under 5,000 people in DP including children. Children can attend school up until the age of 18 but once the Leaving Certificate is completed many drop out as they cannot afford third level fees. In mid-2018 Asylum Seekers were allowed to work for the first time which has provided much needed extra income and a way of more meaningfully engaging in the community. This latter in particular has brought huge mental health benefits to this population.

Resources overall continue to be limited and it can take an asylum seeker from 3-5 years to get a final decision on their status. Spirasi and other NGOs lobby consistently for better living conditions and more resources to move asylum seekers quickly, fairly and efficiently through the protection process.

