

**Congresswoman Betty McCollum
Center for Victims of Torture
United Nation's International Day in Support of Victims of Torture
June 26, 2006**

Thank you, Ellie, for that kind introduction.

Ellie, your commitment and the commitment of the Center for Victims of Torture's board members, staff members and volunteers are truly a labor of love and inspiring – thank you for all you do.

The Center for Victims of Torture is a Minnesota treasure and the work you do makes us very proud.

Allow me to also mention a very special man, a man who is an internationally recognized champion for human rights and human dignity – Doug Johnson. Doug, thank you for your tremendous leadership.

It is an honor to be here with you all and I am pleased to join people around the world today – and everyday – in supporting our brothers and sisters who are victims of torture.

Hearing the powerful words of Adolph and Tesfa – I am moved by their courage, their hope and their spirit. They are our brothers and I am honored to be here with them. Today is a day to honor Adolph and Tesfa and all torture survivors while recommitting ourselves to stand with them as they seek healing and hope.

Today is a day for us all to bow our heads and say a quiet prayer asking for God's grace and love for those who continue to face the darkness of torture. And, today is a day for us to say to the world that torture of persons in detention – anywhere and everywhere – must stop.

Torture is a weapon of pain and fear used to destroy lives and silence communities. The effects and memory of torture do not just disappear. Survivors of torture feel them for years. We know that perpetrators of torture often target leaders with the intent of breaking their bodies, their spirits and at the same time inflicting a terrifying sense of fear on their families and communities.

State sponsored torture leaves societies with a profound lack of trust in public institutions, such as the military, the police and courts. In countries where torture is used as a systemic weapon to destroy lives and instill fear and control, human dignity is denied, freedom is stunted and democracy is retarded.

Torture, like terrorism, is a tactic that must be rejected by all civilized nations of the world – including the United States. And, like terrorism, any government or regime

willing to use torture to destroy bodies and spirits must be held accountable for this abhorrent crime against humanity.

For all our brothers and sisters who have endured and who have survived – we stand with you. As human beings, our bodies, our minds, our spirits can heal, but only with support, love and prayer. It is a slow process, but healing the wounds of torture is essential if torture is to be defeated.

In Congress, I have been proud to work as a member of the House International Relations Committee to pass the Torture Victims Relief Act. This legislation provides essential funds for treatment programs in the U.S. and centers around the world.

Whether it is supporting United Nations treatment programs, centers funded through the U.S. Agency for International Development, or domestic centers, like the CVT, survivors have the opportunity to start the process of overcoming depression, nightmares, isolation and fear. Survivors can start to regain control over their lives. When a survivor of torture – a leader – regains his or her life – it is a victory for freedom, for dignity and for mankind.

The generosity of the American people and the wisdom of policy makers to invest in healing victims of torture should be acknowledged and celebrated. But as Americans, we must also confront the tragic reality that our nation's moral authority in the international community has been corrupted – and it is up to all of us as citizens to demand that American leadership for human rights in the world be restored.

Guantanamo Bay, Abu Ghraib prison, Bagram Airbase in Afghanistan – these are names now infamous around the world for sites in which detainees in U.S. custody were victims of torture, abuse and cruel treatment – some detainees have died as a result of torture.

Secret prisons and extraordinary rendition, water boarding and induced hypothermia, mock executions and forced nakedness – these practices and policies are antithetical to our belief in human rights...and violate our nation's obligations under international treaties. U.S. policies that have allowed torture and inhuman treatment of detainees by the U.S. must be condemned, banned, and those persons in leadership positions – military and civilian – responsible for allowing or sanctioning these vile practices must be held accountable.

Last year, an amendment offered by Sen. John McCain prohibited torture and provided clear guidelines for our men and women in uniform. The McCain Amendment is now law. I'm proud that all of my Minnesota colleagues in the House and Senate joined me in voting in favor of the amendment.

By passing this amendment, it was crystal clear that Congress intended to ban torture.

Unfortunately, President Bush decided to muddy the waters by adding a presidential signing statement saying would interpret the torture ban “in a manner consistent with the constitutional authority of the president.”

Sorry, Mr. President, there are no special occasions when torture is acceptable. There are no exceptions, torture must be abolished.

The United States is at war. We must confront our enemies in battle, but we must never allow our service men and women to lose their honor, their dignity, their humanity by being permitted or ordered to commit acts of torture or inhumane treatment. Where ever the U.S. flag flies, torture must be prohibited and America’s reputation as a champion of human rights must never be allowed to be tarnished again.

Today, we are here to support the victims of torture – those who have suffered. Our first obligation to supporting victims is to end the suffering. It is up to each of us as citizens to tell our elected officials that we want to keep America strong and leading the free world. And to maintain strong American leadership there are three things our government must do:

First, the ban on torture must be enforced – no excuses, no exceptions.

Second, the secret CIA prisons, wherever they exist, must be closed and extraordinary rendition must be permanently ended.

Finally, we must hear the world community’s calls and close Guantanamo Bay immediately. Its existence is a source of international shame.

As a free people, it is our belief in human rights and dignity that distinguishes us from our enemies, those who commit acts of terror and torture. Around the world, people look to our nation – the United States – for hope, for freedom, for leadership.

It is up to us, the American people to demand the highest standard of global leadership from our own government, leadership that will never again abandon our cherished belief in human dignity.

To those who have been the victims of torture, The American people support you and stand with you – today, tomorrow, and every day.

Thank you.