

Photo exhibit aims to inspire stronger U.S. action in Syria

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WASHINGTON (RNS) A sign at the entrance to the exhibit warns of the shocking nature of the images beyond—photos smuggled out of Syria that show emaciated and grotesquely mutilated victims of dictator Bashar Assad’s prisons and torture chambers.

The curators of this collection hope the difficult photos will inspire compassion, but also jolt Americans into demanding more for casualties of the now four-year-old civil war in Syria.

“I keep a couple of these pictures on my desk so every single day when I come to my office I can be reminded of the horrific crimes that have been committed and are being committed, as we speak, against innocent civilian men, women and children,” said Sen. John McCain (R., Ariz.), who attended the one-day exhibit of the disturbing photos alongside human rights activists at the U.S. Capitol’s visitor center Wednesday (July 15).

Syria’s civil war, which began in 2011 in an uprising against Assad, has claimed more than 200,000 lives and displaced about 11 million people—half the country’s population.

The U.S. has pledged to stand up for victims of mass murder and torture, said McCain—a torture survivor himself. “We promised: Never again. My friends, today it is happening in Syria.”

The photos have found a semipermanent home at the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum, where visitors can see them.

Wednesday’s program also featured Republican and Democratic leaders of the House and Senate committees that deal with foreign affairs, a 25-year-old survivor

of Assad's torture cells and a 93-year-old Holocaust survivor.

All expressed hope that the photos, taken by an anonymous Syrian army officer who defected with his gruesome work by hiding thumb drives in his shoes, will spur outrage. The images show bodies burned and starved beyond recognition. Eyes have been gouged out. Genitals are missing. In one, blood pours from a child's mouth.

The photos were presented to the U.S. House Foreign Affairs Committee last summer by the man now known as "Caesar," who had been charged by the Assad regime to document the victims of its torture apparatus.

Though the Syrian government has called the photos fakes, international experts have authenticated the 55,000 photos depicting 11,000 people, according to the Holocaust Museum.

Damascus native Qutaiba Y. Idbli brought his own story from Assad's prisons to the Capitol. Most people are too polite to ask what torture at the hands of the Assad regime was like, he said. But he thought it important to explain. After his arrest, his captors sent a doctor to his cell "to measure my body mass to decide which level of torture they should start with."

The first beating, at a regime air force facility, involved seven men and lasted five hours. He teared up describing not his own ordeal, but that of his friend, 20-year-old Mahmoud, who was arrested in 2013. After two weeks of torture, Mahmoud died in captivity, Idbli said.

"My entire country is still waiting for justice," he said, expressing disappointment in the U.S. response to the crisis.

Presented with few palatable options given Americans' wariness about further involvement in Mideast conflicts and the extremist nature of some rebel groups working to topple Assad, Congress and the Obama administration have limited U.S. involvement to low-profile actions.

Margit Meissner, who escaped from occupied France in 1940 and introduced Idbli at Wednesday's event, said the Holocaust in Europe was a secret. The world did not know about it and the few authentic reports smuggled out to the West were discounted because the gassing of millions sounded too improbable.

“The humanitarian crisis in Syria,” she said, “is not a secret.”