

Interfaith coalition asks Obama to ban torture: Coalition supports "golden rule" approach

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A multifaith coalition of more than 200 religious organizations is calling on President-elect Barack Obama to sign an executive order banning torture as one of his first acts in office.

"This is an opportunity where one individual could with one stroke of the pen really change U.S. history," Linda Gustitus, president of the National Religious Campaign Against Torture, told reporters in a conference call November 12. She said an executive order by Obama "could turn the page on a very, very dark chapter and end U.S.-sponsored torture."

Nearly 60 delegations in 27 states and the District of Columbia contacted about 70 lawmaker offices in a "National Day of Witness" on torture. They asked Congress members to support a statement declaring the use of torture and cruel, inhuman or degrading treatment against prisoners as "immoral, unwise, and un-American."

"The use of torture by the United States in recent years and our refusal to renounce its use has diminished us as a nation—not only in the eyes of our own citizens, but certainly in the eyes of the world," said John Thomas, general minister and president of the United Church of Christ.

Added Thomas: "We have squandered the international goodwill that was bestowed upon us after 9/11, and we have in many ways forfeited our role as a moral leader in the community of nations."

The coalition, formed in 2006, supports a "golden rule" approach to torture, whereby the U.S. does not authorize or use any methods of interrogation that Americans would find unacceptable if used against U.S. soldiers or civilians. It also calls for one national standard about torture inasmuch as the CIA is not bound to limitations set

by the U.S. Army Field Manual.

The coalition opposes holding terrorism suspects in secret prisons or transferring them to countries that use torture and calls on the government to hold accountable U.S. officials who authorize, implement or fail to prevent torture, regardless of their rank or position.

Representative Rush Holt (D., N.J.) issued the first statement by a member of Congress in support of the effort. "Torture tarnishes our nation's values and damages our credibility," Holt said.

"While an executive order will not remove the need for legislation on the issue, it is a way for President-elect Obama to put an immediate halt to our government's use of torture during interrogations and to put an end to the practice of secret detentions," Holt added. -*Associated Baptist Press*