

Religious leaders praise Obama orders to ban torture, close Guantánamo: Second day in office

News in the [February 24, 2009](#) issue

A broad range of religious leaders and human rights advocates have applauded President Obama's executive order that essentially ends torture of detainees held by the U.S. government.

On his second full day in office, January 22, the president signed an executive order on "ensuring lawful interrogations" to "promote the safe, lawful and humane treatment of individuals in United States custody."

Fulfilling a campaign promise, Obama also signed an order stating that the U.S. detention facility at Guantánamo Bay, Cuba, should be closed within a year. Another order was issued to shut permanently the CIA's network of secret prisons overseas.

"We can abide by a rule that says we don't torture," Obama said, "and still effectively obtain the intelligence that we need."

The multifaith National Religious Campaign Against Torture, which asked Obama to ban torture on the first day of his administration, praised the new policy in a statement declaring that Obama's order "allowed the United States to again find its moral bearing."

NRCAT president Linda Gustitus, a Unitarian and an attorney, added that the order establishing a task force to study whether the CIA should be able to use other interrogation techniques beyond those approved in the Army Field Manual "is cause for concern."

She said the president should publicly affirm that any other methods used to pry information from detainees should comply with a golden rule—namely, "that they would be both moral and legal if used upon a captured American."

Gustitus nevertheless expressed gratitude for “this important step.” She noted that the coalition of 240 religious organizations—founded in January 2006 by Presbyterian George Hunsinger, professor of theology at Princeton Theological Seminary—“has labored faithfully for three years to end U.S.-sponsored torture.”

David Gushee, president of Evangelicals for Human Rights, said the order demonstrates Obama’s concerns about just foreign policy: “The president has implicitly but clearly recognized today that the aberrant detainee and interrogation policies of the last seven years in fact damaged our national security, harmed our foreign policy interests and violated core principles of justice.”

Bishop Howard J. Hubbard, chair of the U.S. Catholic bishops’ international justice and peace committee, called the order a step to preserve human dignity that improves America’s standing in the world. “A ban on torture says much about us—who we are, what we believe about human life and dignity, and how we act as a nation,” he said.

Regarding the Guantánamo detention camp, the White House order acknowledged that some of the 245 detainees held there may be too dangerous to be released. Still unresolved was which detainees could be sent to other countries and which should be tried in federal courts or military courts-martial.

Nihad Awad, executive director of the Council on American-Islamic Relations, which has sought the camp’s closure for years, applauded Obama for ending “shameful practices.” Rabbi David Saperstein, director of the Religious Actions Center of Reform Judaism, said the order “gives us hope that we are on a path to restoring principles of justice that have been set aside for far too long.” *-Religion News Service*