

NCC, interfaith group call torture intolerable: U.S. "must take the lead in condemning torture"

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Whether antitorture provisions become a part of U.S. law or not, the National Council of Churches' General Assembly last month called any use of torture unacceptable and contrary to U.S. and international norms. "Torture, regardless of circumstance, humiliates and debases torturer and tortured alike," said a statement approved unanimously by the November 9-11 annual meeting of the NCC and Church World Service.

Assembly delegates commended an antitorture amendment added to the U.S. Senate's 2006 defense appropriations bill, and to another bill as well, under the leadership of Republican senator John McCain of Arizona, who suffered torture himself as a prisoner of war in Vietnam. The House did not have such provisions in its bills.

Earlier in the month a broad coalition of religious, legal and human rights organizations urged President Bush to condemn acts of torture amid published reports of mistreatment of war-on-terror prisoners held in U.S.-run prisons and other detention centers abroad.

"For more than a century United States policy prohibited torture," reads the coalition's November 3 letter to the president. "The prohibition served us well and must be restored in U.S. policy and practice. U.S. engagement and complicity in torture and inhumane treatment are grave legal and moral wrongs."

Religious signatories include organizations representing Muslims, Quakers, Catholics and Unitarian Universalists. They joined groups ranging from the American Humanist Association to Amnesty International USA to the National Immigrant Solidarity Network.

“In addition to inflicting pain, these acts have made both our country and the world less safe from terrorism,” said the letter, which also said U.S. policies have lowered the country’s standing among other nations.

When asked November 7 about reports that Vice President Dick Cheney had asked that the CIA be exempt from legislation to ban torture, President Bush responded by saying, “We do not torture.”

The next day White House press secretary Scott McClellan said in a press briefing that it is “flat-out false” to say that the administration is seeking such an exemption. “There are laws that are on the books that prohibit the use of torture,” McClellan said. “And we adhere to those laws.”

John W. Whitehead, president of the Rutherford Institute, a Charlottesville, Virginia, civil liberties organization that is a signatory to the coalition letter, said that the U.S. “must take the lead in condemning the use of torture as a grave legal and moral wrong.”