

Torture survivors find help, healing

by Michael Stetz - CNS

What Majur Malou endured was ghastly, worse than can be imagined.

He was beaten.

He was made to stand for hours with his arms straight up, like a referee signaling a touchdown. If he dropped his arms - or even let them sag - look out.

A punch to the side.

Then a punch to the face.

For two months Malou, a college student leader from Sudan, was tortured for speaking out against his government and its fundamentalist Islamic policies. Even now, 10 years later and free in America, he's not completely free.

"These memories do not go away."

In San Diego, there is a place where people like Malou go for understanding and help. It's called Survivors of Torture, International, and it celebrates its 10th anniversary this year.

Business, unfortunately, is good. Torture remains a well-used tool. Even the United States has been accused of abusing and torturing detainees in Iraq and from the war on terror.

Malou credits the nonprofit - which offers a host of services, such as legal and medical assistance - with helping him get through the trauma he suffered.

"I wouldn't be in the stage that I'm at," said Malou, who serves as director of St. Luke's Refugee Network in San Diego.

Through the agency, he learned coping techniques. He met other survivors. Many have no other support system. They are new to the United States. They are alone.

For them, isolation can be particularly cruel. It's when memories come roaring back.

"It's like an engine," Malou said. "Once it's ignited, it takes off."

TORTURE'S LONG REACH

Malou's story is not atypical, said Kathi Anderson, executive director of Survivors of Torture, International.

Torture has been practiced since the dawn of civilization. Today, in as many as 70 nations, it is the normal course of business.

HELPING THE VICTIMS - Majur Malou was tortured in his native Sudan. He said San Diego-based Survivors of Torture, International helped him recover. CNS Photo by Nancee E. Lewis. Even though the United States outlaws the use of torture, it still finds itself accused of acting heinously by Amnesty International and other organizations.

Detainee abuse at Abu Ghraib prison in Iraq caused international outrage. So has the manner in which the United States has treated terrorism suspects held at Guantanamo Bay. The administration of President Bush maintains that the United States does not use torture.

The issue has been so murky that presidential hopeful John McCain, the Arizona senator who survived torture when he was a prisoner of war in North Vietnam, pushed through legislation in 2005 that prohibits "cruel, inhuman or degrading" treatment regardless of where a detainee is held.

That has hardly sealed the matter, though. A number of top Republican presidential candidates caught flak when, during a recent debate, they condoned the use of near-torture techniques to thwart a hypothetical terror attack.

Anderson said the detainee abuse has hurt U.S. credibility. She attended an anti-torture conference recently in Europe and a person said to her, "Oh, you're from that country that tortures."

For her, there is no debate concerning this subject.

"There's no gray area," Anderson said. "Torture is always wrong."

She has seen what it can do. Survivors of Torture, International has served more than 650 victims from as many as 55 nations.

The clients are hardly the James Bonds of their worlds. For the most part, the victims may have done things we do every day with hardly a worry.

They might have spoken out about the political system they lived under, argued for the expansion of women's rights or simply complained about the lack of a decent school in their village.

"They're thorns in their governments' sides," Anderson said.

'PEOPLE DIE'

Malou shows scars on his arms, a bump on his forehead, a missing tooth.

All from the torture.

At the time, he figured he would face arrest for his activities, but he wasn't about to remain quiet.

"If people are quiet, people die," he said.

Malou is a Christian, and he knew he would be branded an enemy of the Sudanese government, which

wanted men to take Arab names. It also changed the language at universities from English to Arabic. Malou openly criticized those moves.

"I was aggressive. I believed in a secular, democratic state."

One day, as Malou was leaving school, four men jumped him, blindfolded him and tossed him into a truck. The torture began almost immediately. He was taken to a room in underground chambers - known as "ghost houses" - where six men pummeled him.

Instinct tells you to move away from the blows, Malou said. But that was impossible because they came from every direction. The only thing he could do was curl forward.

The men used rifle butts, too.

His hearing in one ear is still bad, he said.

Sometimes, to this day, he is jolted awake by nightmares.

They wanted a confession, Malou said, but he had nothing to confess; he was simply a college student angry at the government.

So they beat him some more, and then some more.

Finally, they let him go, figuring he was not part of any organized opposition. Not long after, he fled the country.

A NEED TO HELP

The office location of Survivors of Torture, International is kept quiet as a precaution. The people coming here are wary, scared, scarred.

Some fear they could be kidnapped and tortured again.

"The survivors have a hard time trusting anyone again," Anderson said.

She is the co-founder of the organization, which was based in her living room in the beginning. Anderson, a professional counselor, has a long history of helping refugees.

Today the organization has a staff of 10 and annual revenue of nearly \$700,000.

San Diego was in dire need of such an agency, Anderson said, because it is a major border city. Many of those who arrive here are fleeing terrible regimes and have been tortured.

An estimated 400,000 torture survivors live in the United States, according to the U.S. Department of Justice.

Many U.S. cities have similar agencies. The San Diego organization is careful not to duplicate services for refugees and immigrants. Torture victims have rare needs.

For example, they may require extensive dental work - tooth extraction is a common torture technique - so local dentists are part of the network.

The clients are strong, tough, smart people, Anderson said. Many are well-educated and passionate about their beliefs. It's often why they were targeted in the first place, she said.

As many as 70 percent seek political asylum, but that can be difficult to obtain. Some languish for years in detention centers, prisons and jails, waiting for their case to be heard by an immigration court.

Most of the clients - 307 - have come from African nations. About 200 are from the Middle East. Still others come from Asia, the Americas and Eastern Europe.

Despite what they've been through, it's amazing how they can rebound, Anderson said. They are extraordinary people, she said. "Quite simply, they're survivors."

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