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Amnesty International/Reprieve conference: Torture doesn't stop terror -- torture is terror

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Survivors of torture and other ill-treatment in Guantánamo Bay spoke today at a conference hosted by Amnesty International (AI) and Reprieve. For several, this was the first time they had seen each other since their release. For two of them, it was the first time they had met, even though they had been held in neighbouring cages.

Eight UK nationals told their stories of how they ended up in Guantánamo and the horrors they endured. In stark contrast to US President George Bush's assertion that the USA does not torture, Moazzam Begg, a UK national who was held in the US-run detention centre, said that "torture does happen, it continues to happen, and it destroys lives."

He and other former detainees spoke of being shackled in painful stress positions, their extreme fear and exhaustion, the lack of medical care, the beatings and broken bones. They highlighted how the rule of law was denied to those in Guantánamo. One reported that, on arrival, he was told by a US soldier "you have no rights to make a phone call, to see a lawyer, to do anything except what we tell you."

With torture thriving in secrecy and the US government blocking meaningful access to Guantánamo, Clive Stafford Smith, Legal Director of Reprieve, said, "if we open Guantánamo up, they will have to close it down."

A panel of experts looked at how to challenge the practice of "outsourcing" torture and the use of "evidence" obtained from torture abroad. Governments that want to ignore the ban on sending people to countries where they risk torture or other ill-treatment have sought "diplomatic assurances" that the person will not be ill-treated on arrival. These assurances were described as not worth the paper they are written on.

Elsewhere, delegates shared their campaigning and legal strategies to combat torture.

The day ended with several family members in tears, talking about their loved ones in Guantánamo Bay.

The conference continues with detainees, family members, lawyers and other activists not only sharing stories but, as Irene Khan, AI Secretary General, said, "harnessing the voices of all who know that torture doesn't stop terror. Torture is terror."