

the storycloth

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Fear, Anxiety, Guilt and Hope

Refugees and Asylum Seekers Wait Long Years to See their Families

It took two years, but Mohammed* was finally reunited with his family. He was tortured in his home country in East Africa before he fled, fearing for his life. He had to leave his wife and children behind.

He made his way to the United States and went through the long legal process of applying for political asylum. As an asylee, he could apply to bring his immediate family to the United States – out of the dangerous situation at home.

He provided birth certificates and his marriage certificate, school and medical records. But the Immigration and Naturalization Service wanted more evidence. They wanted him to prove that he had an emotional relationship with his daughter. So he brought them letters that she had written him and receipts for money that he had wired her.

That was finally enough. Two years after he began the paperwork, Mohammed was reunited with his family.

The overwhelming majority of torture survivors who come to CVT, like Mohammed, are separated from a spouse or at least one

**Names of clients and identifying details have been changed.*



CVT file photo

child. Nearly all are separated from other close family members - from parents, siblings, grandparents, aunts or uncles.

This separation only adds – psychologically and emotionally – to the considerable stress of building a new life in a new country. While refugees and asylees can apply to bring spouses and unmarried children under the age of 21 to the United States, this process can take years.

"If things go well, it could take a year or less," says Amy Smith, a social worker at CVT, "But I'd say one to three years is normal. Things are moving more slowly now. There's a backlog."

She says the whole process can be "an emotional roller coaster" for torture survivors: There's a peak, a high point when they finally make it to safety in the United States, then another peak when – and if – they successfully complete the arduous asylum process, then another long period of paperwork and waiting before they are reunited with their families.

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All this uncertainty can take an emotional toll on clients.

Some clients are so preoccupied with their families back home that it makes it difficult for them to cope with their lives here.

"They feel helpless and hopeless," says Linda Nielsen, a clinical social worker at CVT. "What we do is try to reassure them that they're doing all they can for their families, by seeking asylum and eventually applying for a work permit and securing employment. We encourage them to continue attending to their own healing and self-care because, as they feel healthier and stronger, they can better help their loved ones."

Often, clients suffer extreme anxiety, worrying about their family's safety and welfare. They may not be able to contact their families – either because of a lack of good telephone lines or because it would put their families at risk to make contact. It happens, too, that they will find out that their partners were targeted for arrest or torture after they left.

"Sometimes they can't even say good-bye when they leave because they don't want to endanger their families," Nielsen says. "Their families don't know if they're even alive and safe."

Guilt can also eat away at people who have had to leave families behind. Some clients have a hard time eating, knowing that their kids back home may not have enough. "We'll also ask clients what they can do to relax and enjoy themselves," Smith says. "They'll say, 'I know my family is having such a hard time, I can't even think of enjoying myself.'"

The long separation often causes tensions in a family. The asylum process is long and complicated and family member outside the United States may get anxious or impatient or give up hope.

Making the Best of Stock Losses

The slump on Wall Street has left quite a few people wondering what to do with the depreciated stocks in their portfolios. Some have decided to wait and ride out the market lows. Others have cut their losses and sold the stock. Still others have decided to make the best of a bad situation. Investors who donate the proceeds from sales of depreciated stock to a charitable organization often get to claim two deductions on their taxes: one for the long-term capital loss and one for the charitable donation.

Only your tax adviser can tell you what's best in your situation. If you want to learn more about making these types of donations to CVT, contact Mary Kelley at (612) 627-4245.

Some clients' marriages have even ended in divorce.

How CVT helps clients as they move through this process varies with the individual. All of the clinical staff are there to support them emotionally and help them maintain hope, while CVT's social workers can also serve as guides to the process.

"We're there to help shepherd them through," says Smith. "We have a lot of collective experience around asylum issues."

This may include helping clients brainstorm about how to get documents they need from home, helping them communicate their needs to their attorney, or helping to find legal help.

CVT is also there for clients who find that, once their families do arrive, another long process of adaptation has begun.

"They think, 'We'll be a family like we used to be back home.' But their families are going through this whole adjustment process, which can be difficult, confusing and lonely," says Smith.

But the joy at being reunited, the pride at being able to care for one's family once again, the feeling of security knowing one's loved ones are safe and sound - these are the hopes that must sustain so many torture survivors during the long years of waiting.

These hopes sustained Regina, a client from West Africa, who waited years to bring her family to the United States. Regina now has a job, owns a car and has her license. She takes great pride in tasks that many of us take for granted: driving her newly arrived husband and children to medical appointments, to school and to work.



PostScript Picture
(Masth1.eps)

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Our mission: To heal the wounds of torture on individuals, their families and their communities, and to stop torture worldwide.

Restoring the dignity of the human spirit

Measuring Pain and Healing

Preliminary Results in West Africa Research Project

CVT has been treating refugees in West Africa for about three years. Over that time we know that we have helped thousands of torture and war trauma survivors begin to rebuild their lives. Personal observations tell us that we are making a difference.

But how do we quantify that difference? How do we measure the trauma that the Sierra Leonean and Liberian refugees have suffered and how do we measure the steps they are making toward healing?

CVT's research team – Director Jon Hubbard and Associate Kristen Boelcke – have made important progress toward answering those questions. They have completed preliminary analysis of their Criteria of Competence and Characterization of War Problems interviews, conducted earlier this year in West Africa.

Both projects are based on the premise that if you want to understand how badly someone has been injured or how well

they are healing, you need to understand how their culture defines what it means to be functioning well in society. Hubbard and Boelcke used an interviewing methodology first used by anthropologists and developmental psychologists.

Interviewers in the camps asked 500 people to describe someone in their community – a child, adolescent or adult – who they thought was coping well with life. They were also asked to describe someone who had changed or developed problems because of the war.

These descriptions were sorted into age and gender categories and analyzed. The results were lists of factors that could be used to describe how well or how poorly someone in this particular community is functioning.

For example, a “competent” or well-functioning woman might be someone who takes good care of her children, is kind



Sierra Leonean family.

K. Boelcke

and generous and runs a business to take care of her family. A woman experiencing war problems might be someone who is in poor health, who is angry or has difficulty sleeping and is unable to support her children. Similar lists were developed for adult men, adolescent males, male children, adolescent females and female children.

The data from this study, which are still being analyzed, will be used to shape treatment practices in CVT's West Africa camps and to refine the measures we use to evaluate our progress.

CVT Briefs

Three Foreign Treatment Centers Selected for Capacity-Building Project

Three torture treatment centers – in Bangladesh, Kenya and Rwanda – have been selected to join CVT's International Capacity-Building Project.

The project, which already provides subgrants, training and support to 12 treatment centers around the world, has also been extended to 2004 thanks to an additional \$500,000 in funding from the U.S. Agency for International Development.

The centers were selected for their potential for regional leadership, their commitment to working with CVT, their level of organizational development and their geographic location. Scott

Charlesworth, who manages the ICB Project, spent time visiting both Kenya and Rwanda in October. CVT staff conducted thorough assessments of the three new programs – the Center for Rehabilitation of Torture Survivors in Bangladesh, Independent Medico-Legal Unit in Kenya and Forum des Activistes Contre la Torture in Rwanda – in November. The assessments, which cover both clinical methods and organizational structure, will be used to tailor CVT's support to each organization's needs.

CVT Brussels Board Holds Founding Meeting

In September CVT's Brussels office moved a step closer to reality when the board of directors held its founding meeting. CVT Brussels has already been established legally as an independent Belgian corporation charged with supporting the mission and program objectives of CVT through fundraising, lobbying and outreach. (The office will not see clients.) CVT has also interviewed candidates for director of the Brussels office.



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Take Action!

Refugee Resettlement in Limbo

More than 42,000 refugees who have been approved for admission to the U.S. are still waiting abroad – often in dangerous conditions. Yet President Bush has announced that the admissions ceiling will not be raised in 2003 to deal with this backlog.

Contact President Bush

Urge him to raise the ceiling for refugee admissions in 2003 from 70,000 to 100,000.

Contact your congresspersons

Remind them that families are waiting to be reunited and that productive lives are on hold.

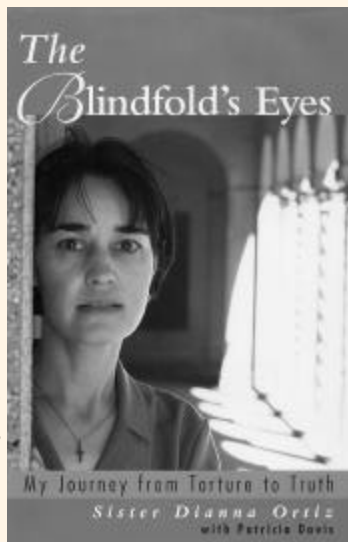
The Long Road from Torture to Healing

Eclipse Award Winner and Torture Survivor Publishes Memoir

“The damage torture does can never be undone. If I survived for any reason, it is to say that,” writes Sister Dianna Ortiz in her new memoir.

Sister Ortiz, an American Ursuline nun, was tortured in Guatemala in 1989. She is now the director of the Torture Abolition and Survivors Support Coalition (TASSC) in Washington, D.C. In 2001, CVT presented Sister Ortiz with the first Eclipse Award, honoring her work on behalf of torture survivors worldwide.

Her memoir, *The Blindfold's Eyes: My Journey from Torture to Truth*, was published in October by Orbis Books. In it, she recounts her ordeal – which involved rape, burning and witnessing the murder of others – as well as her path to recovery. Even today Sister Ortiz remembers little of her life before she was tortured, so deep was the pain she experienced.



A nun and teacher in rural Kentucky, Sister Ortiz went to Guatemala in 1987 to teach Mayan children to read and write. She was abducted by security forces in 1989 and released only after a mysterious figure interceded on her behalf. She is still battling to have the identities of her torturers and their leaders revealed.

Since her ordeal, Sister Ortiz has spoken out loudly against torture, believing that, “I have to let the people who were being tortured beside me know that I haven’t forgotten them.” She has filed lawsuits, given interviews, testified before government

agencies and held public vigils.

Sister Ortiz will read from her book Thursday, Nov. 7, at a CVT-sponsored event at the University of Minnesota Law School, and on Friday, Nov. 8 at St. Martin’s Table in Minneapolis.