

ENDING TORTURE: WRONG AGENCY, MR. PRESIDENT

Today marks the anniversary of the Convention Against Torture. In support of the anniversary, our President wrote the following:

Today, on the United Nations International Day in Support of Victims of Torture, the United States declares its strong solidarity with torture victims across the world. Torture anywhere is an affront to human dignity everywhere. We are committed to building a world where human rights are respected and protected by the rule of law.

Freedom from torture is an inalienable human right. The Convention Against Torture and Other Cruel, Inhuman or Degrading Treatment, ratified by the United States and more than 130 other countries since 1984, forbids governments from deliberately inflicting severe physical or mental pain or suffering on those within their custody or control. Yet torture continues to be practiced around the world by rogue regimes whose cruel methods match their determination to crush the human spirit.

[snip]

The United States is committed to the world-wide elimination of torture and we are leading this fight by example. **I call on all governments to join with the United States and the community of law-abiding nations in prohibiting, investigating, and prosecuting all acts of torture** and in undertaking to prevent other cruel and unusual punishment. I call on all nations to speak out against torture in all its forms and to make ending torture an essential part of

their diplomacy. I further urge governments to join America and others in supporting torture victims' treatment centers, contributing to the UN Fund for the Victims of Torture, and supporting the efforts of non-governmental organizations to end torture and assist its victims.

No people, no matter where they reside, should have to live in fear of their own government. Nowhere should the midnight knock foreshadow a nightmare of state-commissioned crime. The suffering of torture victims must end, and the United States calls on all governments to assume this great mission. [my emphasis]

Those bold words—that promise to prosecute all acts of torture—came not from President Obama. The promise came from George W Bush, just weeks before he signed the first written policy approval for our own torture program.

As scandalous as that fact is, take a look at what our current President had to say today.

Twenty-five years ago, the United Nations General Assembly adopted the Convention Against Torture, and twenty-two years ago this very day, the Convention entered into force. The United States' leading role in the negotiation of the Convention and its subsequent ratification and implementation enjoyed strong bipartisan support. Today, we join the international community in reaffirming unequivocally the principles behind that Convention, including the core principle that torture is never justified.

Torture violates United States and international law as well as human dignity. Torture is contrary to the founding documents of our country, and the fundamental values of our people. It

diminishes the security of those who carry it out, and surrenders the moral authority that must form the basis for just leadership. That is why the United States must never engage in torture, and must stand against torture wherever it takes place.

My administration is committed to taking concrete actions against torture and to address the needs of its victims. On my third day in office, I issued an executive order that prohibits torture by the United States. My budget request for fiscal year 2010 includes continued support for international and domestic groups working to rehabilitate torture victims.

The United States will continue to cooperate with governments and civil society organizations throughout the international community in the fight to end torture. **To this end, I have requested today that the Department of State solicit information from all of our diplomatic missions around the world about effective policies and programs for stopping torture** and assisting its victims so that we and our civil society partners can learn from what others have done. I applaud the courage, compassion and commitment of the many people and organizations doing this vitally important work. [my emphasis]

With all due respect, why the hell does he think the Department of State is the agency that should be taking the lead on this? And why do no more than "solicit information ... about effective policies and programs for stopping torture"?

Mr. President, the agency that must take the lead in stopping torture is the Department of Justice. The effective policies for stopping torture you're looking for? They start with prosecuting torture.

We cannot, at this stage in our history, look to other countries to stop torture. We must start right here at home, by eradicating and punishing it.

George Bush's promises to prosecute all acts of torture were horribly empty words. But Obama's solution to look outward, to the Department of State rather than the Department of Justice, is even emptier.