

United Nations Special Rapporteur on Torture Calls on American Psychological Association to Withdraw Psychologists from Guantánamo Detention Camp

Coalition for an Ethical Psychology demands APA comply with international law, medical ethics and its own policy prohibiting participation in human rights violations

Contacts:

Stephen Soldz ssoldz@bgsp.edu

Steven Reisner SReisner@psychoanalysis.net

August 8, 2009, Toronto -- In a letter to the American Psychological Association, the United Nations Special Rapporteur on Torture, Manfred Nowak, warns that psychologists' continued presence at Guantánamo Bay and similar detention settings violates international law, medical ethics, and APA's own policy on psychologists and human rights. Dr. Nowak's letter, issued during the association's annual convention in Toronto, calls for both the removal of psychologists from those settings and for changes in the APA ethics code, which currently allows psychologists to follow military orders even if these conflict with medical ethics or human rights.

In 2008 the APA membership overwhelmingly approved a referendum prohibiting psychologists from working at sites that violate international law, specifically referencing the standards of the United Nations. In the wake of the letter from the UN Rapporteur, the Coalition for an Ethical Psychology echoed Dr. Nowak's call for APA leadership to immediately implement the member-ratified policy.

"Given the crisis arising from Nowak's findings, the APA leadership must act immediately to implement the members' wishes as expressed in the referendum and call for the removal of psychologists from Guantánamo and other settings which remain outside of international law. Otherwise the APA and the profession of psychology risk further damage," stated Stephen Soldz, co-founder of the Coalition for an Ethical Psychology and President-elect of Psychologists for Social Responsibility.

In his letter, Nowak states clearly that, by UN standards, "the overall conditions of detention at Guantanamo Bay continue to be outside of international law." He goes on to state, "it is incumbent upon the APA to ensure that its standards comport with international law as well as the UN Principles of Medical Ethics [which] require an absolute ethical prohibition of psychologists' presence or involvement in these operations." As an accredited non-governmental organization at the United Nations, the APA is mandated to uphold United Nations standards; otherwise that status may be jeopardized.

Nowak's letter comes in response to APA's continued failure to prohibit psychologists' participation in detainee interrogations and conditions, even after recently released Justice Department memos, Senate and Defense Department reports have confirmed that psychologists played crucial roles in helping to design, implement, and provide training for the Bush administration program of detainee abuse and torture.

"Even today, long after the end of the Bush administration, detainees continue to be held in abusive conditions and psychologists continue to lend their expertise to legitimize these abuses," said Steven Reisner, advisor on Psychological Ethics for Physicians for Human Rights and a co-founder of the Coalition for an Ethical Psychology. *"It is time to investigate and hold to account both the psychologists who devised and implemented the Bush administration programs of abuse and torture, and the APA for continued support of these psychologists, even after their essential role in the torture program was exposed."*

The Coalition further calls upon the APA to inform psychologists serving at Guantanamo and Bagram Air Base that they are serving in violation of APA policy.

As Nowak stated in his letter:

"Every day that you delay the referendum is another day where psychologists are, by their presence and participation in these operations, acquiescing in human rights violations. Following the APA's own policy, on the other hand, would send a message that the health professionals maintain the highest ethical standards, refuse to participate in such violations, and do their part, with the support of their professional leadership, to bring these abuses and violations to an end."

The Coalition for an Ethical Psychology is an organization committed to putting psychology on firm ethical foundation. It has been at the forefront of the efforts to change APA's policies regarding detainee abuse.