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World Publics Reject Torture

But a Substantial Number Make Exception for Terrorists

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College Park, MD: A WorldPublicOpinion.org poll of 19 nations finds that in 14 of them most people favor an unequivocal rule against torture, even in the case of terrorists who have information that could save innocent lives. Four nations lean toward favoring an exception in the case of terrorists.

However, large majorities in all 19 nations favor a general prohibition against torture. In all nations polled, the number saying that the government should generally be able to use torture is less than one in five.

On average across all nations polled, 57 percent opt for unequivocal rules against torture. Thirty-five percent favor an exception when innocent lives are at risk. Just 9 percent favor the government being able to use torture in general.

The four publics that favor an exception for terrorists when innocent lives are at risk include majorities in India (59%), Nigeria (54%), and Turkey (51%), and a plurality in Thailand (44%).

Support for the unequivocal position was highest in Spain (82%), Great Britain (82%) and France (82%), followed by Mexico (73%), China (66%), the Palestinian territories (66%), Poland (62%), Indonesia (61%), and the Ukraine (59%). In five countries either modest majorities or pluralities support a ban on all torture: Azerbaijan (54%), Egypt (54%), the United States (53%), Russia (49%), and Iran (43%). South Koreans are divided.

Amnesty International's 2007 State of the World Report documents numerous cases of torture by governments around the world, including cases where governments actively use torture as well as cases where governments have failed to take action against police or other officials who have used torture.

"The idea that torture by governments is basically wrong is widely shared in all corners of the world. Even the scenario one hears of terrorists holding information that could save innocent lives is rejected as a justification for torture in most countries," comments Steven Kull, director of WorldPublicOpinion.org.

"Further," Kull adds, "since such a scenario is exceedingly rare, this poll suggests that virtually all torture used by governments is at odds with the will of the people."

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WorldPublicOpinion.org is releasing this poll in advance of International Victims of Torture Day (June 26), a date recognized by the United Nations and observed around the world. This year also marks the 60th anniversary of the UN General Assembly's adoption of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, which states, "No one shall be subjected to torture."

WorldPublicOpinion.org is a collaborative project involving a worldwide network of research centers under the management of the Program on International Policy Attitudes (PIPA) at the University of Maryland.

The poll of 19,063 respondents was conducted in 19 nations, including most of the largest countries—China, India, the United States, Indonesia, Nigeria, and Russia—as well as Mexico, Britain, France, Poland, Spain, Azerbaijan, Ukraine, Egypt, the Palestinian territories, Iran, Turkey, Thailand and South Korea. The nations included represent 60 percent of the world population. The survey was fielded between January 10 and May 6. Margins of error range from +/-2 to 4 percent. The primary funder of this project is the Oak Foundation.

All of the countries polled are signatories to the Universal Declaration of Human Rights and parties to the Geneva Conventions forbidding torture and other forms of abuse. All but three have also ratified the 1987 UN Convention against Torture. India has signed but not ratified the convention, while Iran has not signed it. The Palestinian territories are not eligible to be a party to the agreement.

The survey presented respondents with an argument in favor of allowing the torture of potential terrorists who threaten civilians: "Terrorists pose such an extreme threat that governments should now be allowed to use some degree of torture if it may gain information that would save innocent lives." In fourteen nations, a majority or plurality rejected this argument in favor of the unequivocal view: "Clear rules against torture should be maintained because any use of torture is immoral and will weaken international human rights standards against torture."

Those who favored an exception for terrorists were also asked whether government should generally be allowed to use torture. On average across all nations polled, just 9 percent say there should be no rules against torture. China and Turkey have the largest percentages (18% in both) who believe governments should generally be allowed to torture while France and Great Britain (4% in both) have the lowest.

For more information, visit: www.WorldPublicOpinion.org.

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