Special Programs to Address the Needs of Survivors (SPANS)
Victims of Torture Program

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USAID’s Victim of Torture Program (VOT) is one of five Congressionally directed programs that comprise the Special Programs to Address the Needs of Survivors (SPANS):

- Displaced Children and Orphans Fund
- Leahy War Victims Fund
- Victims of Torture Program
- Wheelchair Fund
- Disability Fund

Each of these complimentary funds has its own purpose and strategy, but they share a focus on providing assistance to poor and vulnerable populations. Each emphasizes the value of family and community as the first resort in providing protection, care, and support to vulnerable children, civilian victims of war, torture survivors, and people with disabilities.

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The Torture Victims Relief Act of 1998 defines torture as deliberate mental and physical damage caused by governments to individuals to destroy individual personality and terrorize society. The effects of torture can last a lifetime, affecting survivors’ ability to perform tasks that are important to caring for themselves, their families, and their communities. Recovery from the effects of torture and political violence requires thoughtful psychological and medical attention. Treatment aims to restore the survivor’s position as a contributing and functioning member of the family and community. Families and communities are included in the recovery process to affirm the dignity of the survivor and restore his or her position as a functioning and contributing member of the respective group.

The United States Agency for International Development (USAID) works through its Victims of Torture Program (VOT) to assist the treatment and rehabilitation of individuals, families, and community members who suffer from the physical and psychological effects of torture. USAID’s VOT program works through nongovernmental organizations (NGOs) overseas that (1) provide direct services to survivors, their families, and communities; (2) strengthen the capacity of country-based institutions in their delivery of services to survivors; and (3) increase the level of knowledge and understanding about the needs of torture victims.

In FY 2010, VOT’s budget is $10 million. It currently supports programs in fifteen (15) countries.

Five principles guide USAID’s programming for torture survivors: 1) improving access to and quality of services available to torture-affected communities; 2) targeting individuals who suffer reduced function due to direct or indirect exposure to torture; 3) building on existing community networks and resources; 4) breaking the silence experienced by individuals and communities affected by torture; and 5) strengthening public response to torture in order to protect individuals against future incidents of torture.
Improving Access to and Quality of Services for Torture-Affected Communities

Since 2000, USAID's Victims of Torture Program has worked with the Center for Victims of Torture (CVT) through the International Capacity-Building project to support treatment centers for victims of torture. USAID funds strengthen these centers as organizations so they can deliver services to victims of torture and advocate for their rights. Centers are strategically positioned around the world to expand the resources and services available to survivors of torture and encourage new approaches to the prevention of torture and the restoration of civil society. USAID supports fourteen treatment centers in Bangladesh, Cambodia, Cameroon, Ethiopia, Guatemala, Kosovo, Namibia, Nepal, Pakistan, Peru, Romania, Rwanda, Sierra Leone, and Uganda.

Targeting Individuals Who Suffer Reduced Function

Historically, many projects designed to assist torture survivors have failed to assess the specific needs of survivors prior to providing treatment, or the impact of treatment after it is administered.

To this end, USAID provides funding to Johns Hopkins University's Improving Effectiveness of Treatment for Torture Survivors project to analyze existing treatment approaches and their impact on torture survivors, and develop new, more effective treatment methods to treat the psychosocial effects of torture on individual survivors and entire populations. Under previous contracts with USAID, JHU developed and implemented an approach for improving the design and implementation of projects that treat the psychosocial effects of torture on survivors, improving the means of identifying those in need, and consistently monitoring the progress and impact of treatment.

With USAID funding, JHU used this methodology to assist torture survivors in several locations including Indonesia, DROC, and Burundi. Now, JHU is using its methodology to address the psychosocial needs of torture survivors in Iraq and again in eastern Democratic Republic of Congo (DROC).

In Kurdistan, Iraq, mental health researchers from Johns Hopkins University’s Bloomberg School are assisting Iraqi professionals and trainees in providing mental health services to survivors of torture and genocide at the hands of Saddam Hussein’s regime. The project identified mood and anxiety disorders as major issues among Kurdish torture survivors and developed tools to monitor and evaluate those problems among survivors. The project is testing the effectiveness of two treatment methods—Behavioral Activation (BA) and Cognitive Processing Therapy (CPT)—by first training Ministry of Health community mental health workers (CMHWs) in the use of those two methods and then comparing their effectiveness with the counseling services already being provided. The project will then train the CMHWs throughout Iraq in the treatment method(s) found to be most effective and will continue to monitor progress.

In Eastern DROC, the project works with the International Rescue Committee (IRC) to assist women who are survivors of gender-based violence. The project has developed tools to monitor and evaluate important emotional and mental health issues in those women, and IRC staff train counsellors working for the local NGOs in the use of these tools. As a result, those tools have become part of the process by which NGOs evaluate the needs of female survivors of torture and enlist those women into their programs. They have been used to gauge the progress of more than 350 women after they have finished the assistance programs.

Building on Existing Community Networks and Resources

Since 2003, USAID has supported another project in DROC that focused on ensuring the care of men, women, and children who had been subjected to sexual violence and/or torture. Since 2006, USAID’s efforts have been directed toward preventing gender-based violence. USAID works in selected towns in Province Orientale and Province Maniema, encouraging citizens to take measures to prevent incidences of sexual and gender-based violence, ensuring that survivors of such violence receive necessary treatment, and assisting those individuals in reintegrating into their families and communities.

The project’s approach is holistic, multi-sectoral, and community based. It addresses the physical, psychological, and social needs of survivors, providing medical, psychosocial, socio-economic, and legal aid to individuals. A key partner for this project is CIP, the Centre d’Intervention Psychosocial, a national NGO comprising psychologists who assist survivors of violence or natural disaster in reintegrating into society. The project also works with public institutions, human rights and legal organizations, community leaders, and community based organizations—primarily women’s groups that promote women’s empowerment and gender equality within communities.
Breaking the Silence Surrounding Torture

USAID provides comprehensive treatment services to torture survivors who have fled Tibetan areas of the People's Republic of China to seek asylum in India. The project provides medical treatment and rehabilitation services aimed at helping survivors adjust to their new circumstances. Treatment includes traditional and modern medicine, psychotherapy, physiotherapy, and counseling. The project also works to create awareness among the general public about torture and its consequences. A public awareness campaign has raised awareness of the issues and treatment available in the refugee community in which survivors live.

Strengthening Public Response To Torture in Order to Protect Individuals against Future Incidents of Torture

In Sri Lanka, USAID works to improve the quality of and access to services for torture survivors, but also to raise the public’s awareness of the impact of torture on families and communities and of the need to respond to incidences of torture.

In the Jaffna district, the Shanthiham Association for Health and Counselling, worked with members of selected “vulnerable” communities to establish sustainable systems of care that emphasized community follow-up. The association provided counselling, medical care, and/or yoga and relaxation therapy to sixty-six (66) clients in three villages and camps for internally displaced persons.

The project initiated four academic research projects to identify effective and culturally appropriate psychosocial treatment strategies for torture survivors in Sri Lanka. Additional research into the functioning of the Sri Lankan justice system during torture cases focused on legal and/or procedural gaps in torture prevention. The project will apply that data to a campaign to change specific mechanisms of accountability with an aim to prevent new incidences of torture.

The project also produced street dramas on torture-related themes that were performed in forty-two (42) villages. Productions emphasized the impact of torture, justice, and community responsibility.

Additional information on SPANS programs for victims of torture can be found on the USAID website at http://www.usaid.gov/our_work/humanitarian_assistance/the_funds