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FROM THE UN

ANJALI SHARMA

More people now say terrorism justifies torture

New data released by WorldPublicOpinion.org shows that while most people the world over reject the use of torture, a substantial number of people make an exception when terrorists were involved. Mr Steven Kull of the Program on International Policy Attitudes, University of Maryland, and director of WorldPublicOpinion.org, Ms Yvonne Terlingen of Amnesty International and Mr Craig Mokhiber of the Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights focused attention on torture at a recent press conference.

The survey from WorldPublicOpinion.org, a consortium of 22 research centres, polled 19,000 people in 19 nations on the use of torture and its prevalence worldwide. Those polled were presented with two alternatives. The first said the threat posed by terrorists was so great that countries should be allowed to use some torture to gain information that saved lives. The second said that clear rules against torture should be formulated because torture was immoral and would weaken the international human rights movement. In 14 of the 19 nations polled, most people favoured an unequivocal prohibition of torture. On average, across all nations polled, 57 per cent of opted for unequivocal rules. Four nations - India, Nigeria and Turkey with clear majorities and Thailand with a plurality - favoured an exception for terrorists if innocent lives were at risk. The data showed terrorism's undeniable salience in the question of torture, Mr Kull said.

When terrorism was taken out of the picture, public acceptance of torture dropped. On average, only 9 per cent of these countries' populations supported the general use of torture to get information. In no country did more than 20 per cent of the population express support for the general use of torture, Mr Kull said. WorldPublicOpinion.org compared its most recent results to a survey it had conducted in a BBC poll two years ago. In July 2006, only India had had a plurality supporting the terrorist exception. Since then, many countries had seen significant increases of the pro-torture vote, inclu-

ding Nigeria, South Korea, Turkey, Egypt and the US. The group added that a number of other countries had seen increases in the percentage of their populations who supported categorical prohibitions against torture, including the UK, Spain, Mexico, China, Indonesia and Russia. "What we found was that the countries that were going up had recently had terrorist attacks," Mr Kull said.

In contrast, in many countries where higher numbers were supporting prohibitions against torture, a terrorist attack had occurred before the July 2006 poll, but not since. On balance, there was only a modest change favouring an exception for torture when terrorism was involved, he said. The question was whether government policy was changing because the public was accepting torture, or whether it was the opposite. While there was no real standard for how much countries used torture, the countries that showed a higher level of public acceptance of torture were roughly those in which it was more frequent. Although it was hard to determine which came first, the public seemed to be led by government, Mr Kull said. "When governments are perceived as departing from the norm (of prohibiting torture), the norm weakens and that carries over into the public," he said. "If anything, the public is a force that tends to exert an inhibiting effect on the state."

Ms Terlingen said the policies of the US and the rhetoric of the war on terror had had a great effect on the public acceptance of torture. "The role played by the US in undermining the universal prohibition against torture cannot be underestimated," she said. Russia, China, Egypt, Malaysia, Saudi Arabia, Uzbekistan, Algeria and Yemen had used the rhetoric of the war on terror to justify or intensify already existing patterns of repression. Countries worldwide had asked fact-finding missions by the Special Rapporteur on Torture why they were being criticised when the US practised torture.

The Human Rights Council in Geneva has recently adopted a consensus resolution reaffirming the absolute prohibition of torture -

145 of 192 countries are party to the Torture Convention. But, "against the background of that strong international framework, it's really shocking to see that only half of all those interviewed in the poll in 19 countries that is, 57 per cent agree that all torture should be prohibited", Ms Terlingen said. She noted the contrast between India and China, in which 66 and 61 per cent of people opposed torture totally, and the US, where only 53 per cent did. At 31 per cent, the US also had a high number of people who accept torture for terrorists to save lives.

Amnesty International's recent study - "State of denial: Europe's role in rendition and secret detention" - showed that European countries refused to admit or investigate violations carried out by their nationals in their territory. There was growing evidence of Europe's partnership in the US's extraordinary rendition programme. "Their populations must not be complicit in accepting measures that facilitate torture and other ill-treatment," Ms Terlingen said. She called on everyone to push their governments to condemn all torture, end complicity and hold those responsible to account.

A number of findings from previous surveys conducted by WorldPublicOpinion.org that addressed public perceptions of other tenets of the Human Rights Declaration were also introduced. Information that emerged included: strong global support for racial equality; very strong global support for the media and freedom of expression; and little tolerance for limits on freedoms related to the Internet. The strongest consensus globally was for women's equality. There was also strong support for action by governments and the UN in each instance. "(This) very clearly affirms what we've been arguing for 60 years, which is the universality of human rights," Mr Mokhiber said.

The surveys revealed strong values cutting across region, religion and geography, and "any of the tired old notions that come up that this is somehow a concept limited to one part of the world has been discounted and this survey helps to affirm that", Mr Mokhiber added.