

International week of the disappeared: Statement from the Zimbabwe Peace Project

Please see: <http://www.zimpeaceproject.com/?p=977>

To many people enforced disappearance is not a clear concept. Often, persons subjected to enforced disappearance are being mistaken for missing persons even though those are very different things. Enforced disappearance is composed of three constitutive elements being: the deprivation of liberty of a victim, perpetrated by agents of the State or by persons or groups that act with the tolerance, acquiescence or support of the State and refused acknowledgment or the concealment of the fate or whereabouts of the disappeared. An enforced disappearance implies the violation of a whole host of rights, be they civil or political (right to life, right to physical integrity, right to recognition as a person before the law, right to personal liberty and security) or economic, social or cultural (right to a family life, right to an adequate standard of living, right to education).

Enforced disappearances go against human dignity and the rule of law. Enforced disappearance is a crime against humanity when committed in a massive and systematic manner. The victims are often being tortured during the time of their disappearance and are aware that they have very little chance that someone will come to their rescue causing them and their families great despair. Even if the victims are finally released the trauma caused and the psychological and physical scars will follow them for the rest of their lives. Victims of enforced disappearance also include the families of the disappeared who remain without information about the fate and whereabouts of their loved ones for years, decades or even during their whole life. As a result, families cannot grieve and heal and remain without an answer. Enforced disappearances affect women and men in the in a different way, since many other issues have to be taken into consideration when women face enforced disappearances. Most detention centres, be they secret or public, lack adequate gender sensitive facilities to cater to women victims.

Contrary to some popular belief, enforced disappearance is not a crime from the past but a crime still widespread across the world today and not restricted to any specific region of the world. If it was at first mainly used by military dictatorships, they are now being committed in various situations of internal conflicts. The main motive behind it is still to spread terror within the society and repress any form of opposition. People of all ages and gender can be victims but young people and human rights defenders are specifically targeted. Moreover, even if cases occurred several years ago, for as long as the fate and whereabouts of the victims remain unknown, enforced disappearance is a continuing crime.

The Latin American Federation of Associations first conceptualized the International Week of the Disappeared for Relatives of Disappeared Detainees (FEDEFAM) during its first Congress in San Jose, Costa Rica in 1981. As Latin American families of the disappeared consistently commemorate this every year, it has been adopted and consistently commemorated by families of victims from across the globe.

During this International Week of the Disappeared, the ICAED would like to remind the world of the importance of using the tools available to fight against enforced disappearance and particularly the International Convention for the Protection of All Persons from Enforced Disappearance. This instrument, which came into force on 23 December 2010, has been ratified by 56 States and signed by 96 – a situation which is still far from universal ratification and implementation. The ICAED calls upon all States to accelerate the process of ratification of this Convention to ensure the fight against impunity and the reparation of victims and their families in the context of enforced disappearance. It is also important to remember the need to provide support to the families of the disappeared and to send them the message that they are not alone in their fight.