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Inside Hanoi's Torture Chambers

A new report shows the abuse is systematic.

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Talk about impeccable timing. No sooner has Vietnam taken its place as a new member of the United Nations Human Rights Council this month than a major report documents Hanoi's widespread use of torture on political and religious prisoners. Cynicism about the U.N. shouldn't dim outrage over the contrast.

Many details in the report by the Campaign to Abolish Torture in Vietnam are too gruesome to reprint in a family newspaper. Democracy activists, members of unapproved religious groups and other political prisoners describe being confined in small spaces, shackled to their beds, beaten with truncheons or electric prods, deprived of sleep, drugged or sexually humiliated by their captors. Sometimes detainees are beaten to death in custody.

Abuse can begin before arrest, as with protesters who report being beaten in the streets before they're put in the paddywagon, and can continue for months or years. Torture is most likely to occur before a suspect is tried. After conviction, he or she often disappears into the maw of Vietnam's re-education-through-labor camps, or into prisons where the prisoner is denied sufficient food and medical care.

Vietnam has never been known as a paragon of human rights. But the report released last week in Washington is the most comprehensive recent compilation of data on Hanoi's use of torture. Its detailed interviews with 60 former detainees from across the country and from a variety of backgrounds—bloggers, lawyers, students, Buddhists, Christians, ethnic minorities—lift the veil on exactly how widespread and systematized is Hanoi's reliance on torture. These are not the acts of rogue officials.

Against that backdrop, it's little comfort that Hanoi in November signed the U.N. Convention Against Torture. Other signatories include China, Russia and Cuba, serial abusers of prisoners that also happen to join Vietnam as new members of the Human Rights Council.

When change comes to Vietnam, it's fair to say it won't come via the U.N. Rather it will be the work of people like the 60 whose mistreatment is catalogued in last week's report. Those dissidents understand the risks of challenging their inhumane, authoritarian government but are willing to suffer the consequences for a better Vietnam. They deserve support from the rest of the world.