

Detention is a lasting trauma

Detention is a harrowing experience. But many people think that once bars have been removed, life resumes normally.

DETENTION, INTERROGATION and torture are traumatic. When a detainee walks out of the prison gates, they often don't feel quite like the same person that went in. What they have lived through behind the closed prison doors leaves wounds in detainees' memories, which can take a while to heal.

Many people in detention allege they have suffered fear, humiliation, degradation and extreme pain. Their sleep, eating and exercise routines are upset. They are denied normal contact with other people. They are kept in a constant state of discomfort. Even their ability to breathe can no longer be taken for granted, for some say they have been suffocated with dampened cloths and bags.

Detainees have no control over the most basic functions and needs in their lives. This loss of control, plus pain, discomfort, and fear often has bad psychological effects on the detainee. These after-effects can last years after the detention if the detainee and his or her friends do not take action to overcome the problems.

Under extreme pressures, people can completely lose touch with reality; other people become withdrawn, depressed, feel hopeless about themselves and may even become suicidal.

The most common problem amongst these detainees once they leave prison is called post-traumatic stress disorder. The most common symptom of this is that people remember the traumatic events which happened during detention over and over again.

The ex-detainee feels again the fear and dread they felt at the time. These feelings are so real that they may suddenly start trembling, crying, or become very anxious.

Normal daily events like hearing a car door slam, someone shouting, or waiting in a queue can jolt these memories back. Some people worry that these vivid memories might make them break down crying in a social situation, and they withdraw from other people.

They may also start to hide their emotions from their family and friends for fear of showing their anxieties to others. They may also get irritable with people they are close to.

Many detainees lose their ability to trust others, especially if they



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have been deceived into believing that their friends have given information about them, or if they have been betrayed.

Often misinformation given in a sophisticated way can confuse people about what really happened in detention, and who has said what. These issues can be difficult to clarify.

Sometimes, informers are put in the cells with other detainees. Interrogators may play psychological games, and may be very understanding one minute and very aggressive the next.

All of this, coupled with long isolation, can break down a detainee's trust and confidence in building up honest relationships with other people.

Their ability to concentrate on work, reading or specific tasks can also be affected by these fears and by their long isolation. Loud noises, unfamiliar people in familiar places, sudden shadows or bright lights can give them a bad fright.

They often sleep badly because of nightmares. The sleep problem can be very serious, and can make it more difficult to concentrate because of tiredness.

Sometimes the fear and worry may be so bad that people feel unreal, as if they have lost direct touch with their bodies and their surroundings, and feel cut off from the world, as if in a bubble.

These symptoms make it difficult to function normally and efficiently in jobs, or with family and friends.

The severity of these problems depends mostly on the severity of the interrogation or torture.

When people do develop these symptoms, it means that they were subjected to cruel and vicious pressures. It has been reported that wherever oppressive governments detain and torture people, in Latin America, Indo-China, Asia, Europe as well as South Africa, these problems are common. Sometimes as many as 70 percent of all detainees show these symptoms.

No medicine or pills can take away these problems. The best treatment is talking thoroughly about the experience, about the fears and the memories. This is best done with a trained psychotherapist, either alone or with others who are suffering from similar problems.

The psychotherapist has been trained through studying the effects of detention in many societies to understand how best to end the problems.

But for people who will not have access to these therapists, talking to trusted friends or family members, or talking to other ex-detainees about the experience is important.

The reason the fears return is that the experience can leave such a huge and horrifying impact on people's minds. One of the most important things for ex-detainees to realise is that their symptoms are a completely normal response to barbaric and inhuman cruelties.

The most important way for family and friends to give support to an ex-detainee is to encourage them to talk about their experiences and their symptoms, and to listen.

The breakdown of trust that happens in detention has to be slowly rebuilt, even with people who are close, and so it is important that they can talk about their experiences, feelings and fears without fearing that this might be repeated to other people.

Detention can be humiliating and degrading, and detainees might have lost a lot of confidence, and fear being made fun of or thought to be weak for their fears by their friends.

But the symptoms of post-traumatic stress are usually worst for those who have had the worst experiences, and it is no sign of weakness when these symptoms emerge afterwards. These symptoms are often the way in which people come to terms with their experience once the pressure is off, after showing great strength when the pressure was on.

So ex-detainees need to know that their friends and family understand this, and do not lose respect for them. The community must recognise that these are normal responses to a high level of stress.

Ex-detainees often feel very tense. To learn to relax, it can help to tighten all your muscles, and then relax them, and to do deep breathing slowly in and out. It can also help to do regular exercise, and this can help with problems sleeping too, if it is done in the mornings rather than at night.

Cutting down on coffee, tea and smoking in the evening also helps people to sleep better.

The Organisation for Appropriate Social Services in SA (OASSSA) consisting of progressive psychologists, psychiatrists and social workers and the Detainees Counselling Service (DSC) can be contacted for help. Phone Descom in Johannesburg at 011-23 6664.

open purse- Angolan rebel movement leader returns from US tour.

posedly to encourage reform.

The US opposed calls for sanctions against SA. It was the only major Western power which did not condemn SA's raid into southern Angola in August 1981. And all along, the US worked hard to secure loans for the SA government.

But, constructive engagement is not directed only at SA, but at the entire subcontinent: the US is lining up with Botha to impose a 'more stable order' in Southern Africa.

Two months ago, the Assistant Secretary of State for African Affairs, Chester Crocker, toured the subcontinent in a last-ditch attempt to break the deadlock over the issue of Cuban withdrawal from

Angola, which could set the stage for the implementation of UN Resolution 435, which provides for free-and-fair elections in Namibia.

Now, with the massive injection of new foreign funding into Unita, the 30 000 Cuban troops are unlikely to withdraw.

It is against this background that PW Botha is offering to consider moving towards Namibian independence from August 1.

For some time now there has been a stalemate in Angola, and linked to this, Namibia's independence.

SA's linkage of a Cuban withdrawal from Angola has nothing to do with SA ending its illegitimate hold over Namibia.

Pretoria insists it does so long as there are 'communist forces' operating just across Namibia's border, Pretoria says it does, so long as there are 'communist forces' operating just across Namibia's border, Pretoria says it can't withdraw from Namibia.

The irony is that the Cubans are in Angola to defend the government from attacks and destabilisation from Unita, which SA is backing.

So why then has PW Botha announced that independence moves in Namibia will finally begin in August?

One reason is that it looks good. Foreign attention will be diverted from the crises within SA, and it

will appear as if Botha is taking seriously international demands for SA to end its illegal occupation.

Another reason is that SA cannot afford to hold onto Namibia indefinitely. At present, running the puppet government in Windhoek and maintaining SADF troops in the territory is costing SA more than a million rand a day, and in the present economic crises, more useful political gains can be made by spending that money elsewhere.

But it's more probable that it's a shrewd tactical move by Botha the new injection of foreign finance into Unita will strengthen the rebel movement, and make it more difficult for MPLA to withdraw the

Cuban forces safely.

The MPLA has said in the past the Cubans can't be removed until Unita stops destabilising the country, which makes it even less likely that it will happen now.

So Botha will score a tactical victory his offer to grant Namibian independence will be seen as a generous and reasonable gesture.

But, because it will remain linked to the question of a Cuban withdrawal, and because the MPLA will be even more reluctant to ask the Cubans to leave now that Unita has been injected with new American finance, Botha will be able to shrug his shoulders smugly and say, 'But we tried...'