

Introduction by the IRCT President, Dr Bhogendra Sharma

The IRCT welcomes the extension of the mandate for the Special Rapporteur on Torture, which was agreed upon at the 60th Session of the UN Commission on Human Rights. At the same time, the IRCT finds it highly regrettable that several governments expressed strong criticisms and threats against the Special Rapporteur and at the UN Special Procedures, and that these attacks were not publicly condemned by other governments. The IRCT believes that the Procedures are vital for the fight against torture, and will continue to work for a strengthening of the mandate of the Rapporteur. This view is also expressed by the Coalition of International NGOs Against Torture (CINAT), and as a member of CINAT, the IRCT has co-signed a statement defending the Rapporteur and the Procedures.

During the Commission, the IRCT held a parallel meeting on "the Role of Rehabilitation Centres in the Prevention of Torture" where the participants discussed the importance of documentation and rehabilitation. The IRCT also presented and distributed the new Global Directory of Rehabilitation Centres and Programmes, which received a lot of attention.

In two statements, the IRCT urged governments to sign and ratify the Optional Protocol to the Convention against Torture and to increase donations to the Voluntary Fund. The IRCT also called for better protection of human rights defenders and highlighted some of the worst recent cases of harassment against rehabilitation centres.

The IRCT is grateful for the good co-operation with partners and NGOs during the Commission, and is committed to following up on the results.

Harassment of pro-democracy demonstrators in Nepal

On April 9, 2004 the Nepalese Government banned demonstrations, and since then hundreds of peaceful demonstrators in Kathmandu have been arrested and subjected to illegal and incommunicado detentions, ill-treatment and violent attacks. Despite the 25-point "commitment paper" on human rights issued by the Nepalese Prime Minister, Surya Bahadur Thapa, on March 26 2004, the events which have taken place during the last month clearly show that freedom of expression is not respected, and that the commitments are not adhered to.

Five leading opposition parties are behind the demonstrations, and several hundred thousand people have called for a return to multi-party democracy and for the reinstatement of an elected government after the King of Nepal dissolved the Nepalese Parliament on October 4, 2003.

During April 2004, several thousand demonstrators have been arrested by armed police, including the President of the Nepalese Congress, Girija Prasad Koirala and the IRCT President, Dr Bhogendra Sharma, who was arrested together with nine staff and executive committee members of the Centre for Victims of Torture, Nepal (CVICT). They were observing a pro-democracy demonstration where hundreds of demonstrators and more than 500 journalists were also arrested, including the president, vice president and general secretary of the Federation of Nepalese Journalists. Many of them were released later the same day, but many people were detained for several days without being able to make contact to their families or to a lawyer. Several people are still unaccounted for, giving cause to fears that they may have suffered ill-treatment or even

torture, or that they may have been subjected to forced disappearances. According to Nepalese law, no person may be detained for more than 24 hours without being put before a judicial authority, and this law is clearly being violated.

In recent days, the Maoists have abducted over 1,000 people and the leaders of five political parties have been arrested by the authorities.

There is general international concern about the human rights situation in Nepal, and the IRCT condemns the arrest of all innocent people, including the IRCT President and CVICT staff and board members. Furthermore, the IRCT calls for the release of all detainees in illegal and incommunicado detention in order to avoid that any of them are subjected to torture – something which unfortunately is commonplace in Nepal.

Further consolidation of the European Network

The European Network of Treatment and Rehabilitation Centres for Victims of Torture and Human Rights Violations met for the third time in April 2004, in Sinaia, Romania, hosted by the ICAR Foundation.

The Network, which now comprises more than 60 centres from the whole Council of Europe region, was initiated in 2002 and has since its creation remained informal, relying on personal motivations rather than on formal structures. The reason behind this mode of functioning is the fact that most centres participating in the Network are already members of other professional and more institutionalised networks.

Instead, a Steering Group was established to coordinate the activities of the Network and organise the meetings. Except for the IRCT and the International Society for Health and Human Rights (ISHHR),

which each have a permanent observer seat in the Steering group, the members of the Steering group participate in their personal capacity.

To produce concrete results in relevant fields, the Network has established a number of working groups which are active also between meetings. The working groups have been the following: (1) Assessment and Documentation, (2) Treatment, (divided into three sub-groups: research, therapy and secondary prevention), (3) Fundraising, and (4) Legal issues and Advocacy. In Sinaia, a new working group was initiated, focusing on children. Moreover, as a side activity, the IRCT suggested a workshop on strategic planning in order for the IRCT strategic planning process to get input from the European Network.

Ennio Boati from the United Nations Voluntary Fund for

Victims of Torture was invited as keynote speaker and made a very comprehensive presentation of the current situation of the Fund and the changes likely to take place in the near future. The participants were pleased to hear that despite the current review of the Fund, it seems clear that the independence of the Fund and its Board of Trustees will be maintained and that increased flexibility is under consideration in the grant-making process.

Funding the Network activities remains a challenge and it has been difficult for a number of centres to join the meetings since participants have to cover their own expenses. It was therefore decided that the autumn meeting in 2004 would only gather the Steering Group and the working group coordinators, while the next full Network meeting will take place in Geneva in the spring of 2005.