



# DROGAS EN MOVIMIENTO NUEVAS PERSPECTIVAS

*Un proyecto de Espolea A.C. [www.drogas-en-movimiento.org](http://www.drogas-en-movimiento.org)*

## **Torture as “Treatment” Hurts Us All**

**By: Denise Tomasini and Roxanne Saucier \***

It is jarringly fitting that the United Nations has declared June 26 the [International Day in Support of Victims of Torture](#), as well as the [International Day Against Drug Abuse and Illicit Trafficking](#). Why? Because attempts to deal with drug use and trafficking through the “war on drugs” has shockingly increased the number of victims of torture in Mexico and throughout Latin America.

Kidnappings, beatings, isolation, chaining, rape and experimental treatments are just some of the abuses employed in the name of “treatment” for people who use drugs. Though human rights groups have criticized these practices, and while evidence-based treatment for drug dependence is clear and includes an array of voluntary and community-based services, most of what passes for treatment in countries in Latin America is based on detention and abuse.

“We took him there with the hope of rehabilitation, and that he would stop using drugs,” [explained a woman in Mexico City](#) whose brother was interned in an abusive center. “We didn’t send him to get beaten up, that was never our aim.” Her brother died after four days in a supposed treatment center where he endured brutal beatings with a baseball bat. Others in Mexico report that those detained for drug treatment are forced to kneel on bottle caps, raped as a form of humiliation, and tied up for long periods of time.

This practice is widespread. In Guatemala [people are snatched out of their homes or off the streets by so-called hunting parties](#) and taken to centers where prayer is the only technique that passes for “treatment”. In Ecuador, there have been [widespread media reports](#) of abuses in centers to “cure” gays and lesbians as well as people who use drugs. In Brazil, some cities have made a practice of [rounding up street-based drug users](#) and forcing them into purported treatment as a way to prepare for the World Cup. We have received reports of abuse from Bolivia, Colombia, the Dominican Republic, and Puerto Rico. And in Peru, [dozens died](#) when fires broke out in a similar sham “treatment” center and those detained were unable to escape through locked doors and windows. “We almost always heard screams at night, but then they calm down,” [commented one neighbor](#) when explaining why screams on the night of the fire didn’t cause alarm.

These cases are no longer going unnoticed. The United Nations Special Rapporteur on Torture, Juan Mendez—himself a torture survivor—has spoken out against these practices, saying that abuses committed in the name of drug treatment constitute cruel, inhuman or degrading treatment and in some cases, rise to the level of torture. Concern over abusive practices in alleged health-care settings prompted him to draft a [thematic report](#) to the United Nations, as well as a separate [volume that explores the issue further](#) includes alternatives to the drug detention model. In it, he calls on countries to take steps to crack down on abusive centers by offering evidence-based voluntary drug treatment, establishing monitoring



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mechanisms, investigating rights abuses, and by sanctioning centers that are found to be abusive.

Similarly, the United Nations Committee Against Torture has begun focusing on torture in the name of drug treatment as part of their mandate, and has condemned abuses in drug treatment centers in [Cambodia](#). More recently they expressed concern about human rights violations in privately run centers in Guatemala, asking the Guatemalan government to investigate centers, punish ill-treatment, and survey existing centers to ensure proper practices. [According to research from the University of Toronto](#), in Guatemala, there is only one government official responsible for the oversight of all drug treatment centers in the country. When pressed about why his list of centers was strikingly incomplete, he said that he purposely keeps certain centers off his list because they are in dangerous neighborhoods.

While attention from United Nations torture experts has helped to highlight this issue, the problem shouldn't be relegated to occasional reports. Torture in the name of treatment matters to us all.

It matters because many of us know people who want drug treatment, and evidence-based options—options that work—should be made available for them. Too often, people who use drugs that are held in treatment centers against their will are put there by well-meaning family or friends who, like the woman in Mexico, have little knowledge about the conditions inside. They entrust their loved ones to the care of these centers because of a misguided belief that “tough love” is needed to “cure” their family member, or because there are simply no other options for treatment. This vacuum has created a profit-motive for people who have little knowledge of treatment to open and operate clandestine drug detention centers. It is the responsibility of governments to ensure that abusive centers can't prey upon people and their families in their most desperate moments.

Ending torture in the name of treatment also matters to us all because people who use drugs have human rights, just like everybody else. As countries in the region urge a more “health-based” approach to dealing with the issue of drug use it's important to be strict about the definition of treatment. Beatings, food deprivation, rape, isolation and humiliation are torture, not treatment. Prayer, while beneficial, has not been scientifically proven to be any more useful in treating addiction than in treating cancer or diabetes, other conditions that require specific evidence-based treatment. Let's move towards a real health-based approach and away from medieval practices that hurt drug users and their families, and delegitimize governments and health professionals. A progressive, evidence-based approach to drug use will benefit us all.

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