

Ten days of Torture

Hidden deep in the bush outside Masvingo, Mugabe's secret police have a dirty little secret: a torture camp complete with shackles, chains, torture chamber, electrical prods, and other delights that only the cruellest minds could conceive. Most ZANU-PF victims never escape. But one man, Abel*, persevered against all odds and lived to tell the story. (* not his real name)

By Martine Stemerick

Once a successful businessman, Abel fell out with the regime when he refused to allow his children to attend so-called 're-education workshops,' the infamous youth militia camps. 'I confronted them,' Abel said. 'Absolutely, I will not have that. I want my children to be moulded in the family traditions. We are Christians. I will not have them attending the re-education camps or going to the bases.'

Few confront the regime and get away with it. Abel was soon on the run for his life. He hid in the back of garden sheds or outlying farm buildings. After several months, Abel's luck ran out. Picked up at 4:00 in the morning, he was blindfolded, handcuffed, and put into leg irons. After 30 minutes of questioning at the police station, Abel was thrown in the back of a truck and driven for an hour on dusty back roads to a secret torture camp.

When the truck stopped, Abel was hauled down steep stairs to



an underground cell. It was very cold. Then they removed the blindfold and left Abel shackled in the dark. 'You know, when you have been blindfolded for a long time, and you are in the dark, you don't know if there are other people in there. And suddenly, there were these very bright lights. Very strange people were there and they started assaulting me. But this was just a prelude of what was to come.'

On day two, the torment began by beating the soles of Abel's feet and armpits. They used a plant with protruding inch-long thorns 'that burrowed just under your skin.' Next, his bleeding, shackled feet were forced into a bucket of vinegar. Two years later, Abel cannot wear shoes on his badly infected feet.

Each day the torture was stepped up. On day three, Abel's capturers bashed his head against the wall and submerged his face in a bucket of water. Worse yet was a blanket immersed in a foul-smelling oil and then wrapped tightly around the victim's head. He could not breathe. Gagging and choking, Abel thought he was going to die.

On day four, Dr. Mengele, Hitler's evil genius, may have inspired Mugabe's men. Hot wires were positioned in Abel's armpits by an expert and then pierced through the

skin of arm and armpit. Excruciating pain caused permanent nerve damage. For one year, Abel was unable to lift his arm or use his hand. His medical torture reports detail the extensive damage.

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Unwilling to believe he had nothing to tell them, the regime stepped up the torture once more. For two days, Abel writhed in pain as they injected hallucinogenic drugs into his helpless body. Through an added haze, he remembered extended periods of questioning and ever-stronger doses of psychotropic drugs. 'I never thought my brain would recover.'

'I had nothing to offer them. If I had anything to give them, they would have killed me afterwards.' Apart from the injections, they also gave him electrical shocks to his genitals and between his toes. It took months before he could sit properly, relieve himself without agony, or urinate. 'I spent more than four months with plenty of blood in my stool - thick blood coming out.'

The electrical shocks to his genitals went on for two days. 'Eventually they gave me a very big injection at the base of my penis. I don't know what kind of stuff it was. I struggled with the pain of an erection that lasted for two days. I was screaming in pain while they were laughing at me.'

On the seventh day, Abel was taken to a re-education camp where war veterans were holding an indoctrination for the youth militia. Abel was strung up next to a fire; his wounds were bathed in chilli and hot peppers; the youth were invited to lash him. When the youth had feasted and drunk and drugged to a point of insensibility, the militia gang raped Abel for hours on end. He passed out. Hours later, he found himself soaking wet, doused awake by buckets of icy water, and back at the torture chamber.

Thrown into a pit of crocodiles prevented from eating him only by a wire mesh, Abel was made to dig his own grave. Miraculously, he escaped just hours before his execution when his guard became so drunk that Abel could bash him over the head with the man's own gin bottle. Four months later, he staggered into Central Methodist Church, where Bishop Paul Verryn provided months of pastoral

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counselling, medical care, and legal assistance.

Monday June 26 marked International Day in Support of Victims of Torture. Abel was refused political asylum in South Africa, despite overwhelming evidence of torture and sworn statements by medical and legal experts. His subsequent appeals have been turned down. Abel is once more at risk of incarceration and torture either by Mugabe's CIO or by South Africa's immigration authorities, who deport 2000 Zimbabweans each week.

Abel tells his own story on www.swradioafrica.com (Archive - June 26 2006.)