

May 12, 2009

This morning more than 50 people responded to a call made by World Can't Wait-Hawai'i to demand the prosecution of Jay Bybee, the signatory to the now-notorious 2002 torture memo authorizing waterboarding, walling, sleep deprivation and other horrific forms of torture. The crowd was diverse. Lawyers and long-time activists. Pacifists and revolutionaries. Office workers and retirees. Some stayed for the morning. Some could only escape from their offices for an hour.

Signs reading "Torture is a War Crime! Prosecute!," "Stop Torture," "Prosecute Bybee," "Bye-Bye Bybee," "Impeach the Torture Judge" lined Bishop Street in the heart of downtown Honolulu where Bybee was hearing Hawai'i cases being appealed to the U.S. Court of Appeals for the 9th Circuit. Some banners and signs were brilliant orange; some had been hastily scrawled on banker's box covers or pieces of cardboard. Pedestrians asked, "Who's Bybee?" and the conversations began.

A homeless man muttered: "The big guys always get away with it." An office clerk who came down from offices above to check out the hullabaloo read the leaflet and commented: "In this building? How can that be? That's terrible!" She carefully folded up the leaflet and said she'd post it on the office bulletin board. A protester who entered a nearby business noticed the Bybee leaflet on the refrigerator. A security guard argued that waterboarding wasn't torture and a mainstream journalist interviewing activists turned and asked him: "You want me to waterboard YOU?" Many simply thanked us, but not all. A student from a downtown university specializing in military studies ran out a feeble argument claiming that memos weren't laws. A military officer sneered "You people are insane. You don't even know what torture is."

By 9:00 am protesters moved from the sidewalk to the front doors of the marble downtown office building where the hearing was being held to hold a press conference. Claiming the building was private property, security called for back-up from the Honolulu Police Department. A phalanx of police immediately appeared but quickly backed down when it was suggested that they speak with an ACLU attorney who was present. An impromptu press conference was held. Some made a legal argument against torture; others spoke to the immorality of torture. Statements were spontaneous and heartfelt.

Media representatives from TV stations, print media, and public radio interviewed passers-by and protesters throughout the morning. At the end of an interview a journalist teared up, put his mic away and said: "Thanks for doing this. You're doing it for all of us." The interviewee responded, "But all of you have to join the movement to prosecute the torturers. Your humanity demands it!"

At the end of the press conference a call went out to everyone to begin building for May 28th. It's too early to know how the protest was covered on the news, or how broadly word got out about the protest, but at the end of the morning it was clear that this is just the beginning, and that we're now a part of a national movement to hound and prosecute the war criminals. We're depending on others living in cities where 9th Circuit cases are heard to continue to hound him wherever he goes.