

Epstein: We must speak up for the victims of organ transplants

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December 16,
2019



Falun Gong demonstration outside the European Parliament in Brussels in 2016. (Wikimedia Commons photo)

If someone were to tell you that the egregious crimes of Dr. Mengele and his cohorts were being repeated by transplant surgeons in China, and orchestrated by a government dedicated to the arbitrary incarceration of prisoners of conscience, their brutal torture and murder, would you believe it? You might reflexively reply: incredulous, absurd!

And yet, on June 17, 2019, after 150 submissions and over 50 witnesses, the China Tribunal, an independent tribunal investigating allegations of forced organ harvesting from prisoners of conscience in China, confirmed that this heinous crime "has occurred and is still occurring." Each year 60,000 to 100,000 transplants in China come from innocent victims executed for their healthy organs, which are then sold. It is a multi-billion-dollar industry.

The exponential growth of transplants in China began in 2000, about the same time as thousands of members of the Falun Gong – who practise a Buddhist philosophy and self-improvement which encompasses meditation and slow moving exercise – were rounded up in detention labour camps. Given the Falun Gong's increasing popularity, with 70 million adherents in China as of the 1990s, the Chinese government perceived the group as a political threat. They were blood and tissue typed, and underwent focused physical exams – despite being subjected to unmitigating torture unless they agreed to recant their belief system. Other targeted populations include Tibetans, House Christians and Uyghurs, a Muslim minority in northern China who practise a moderate form of Islam.

Unlike other jurisdictions, the People's Republic of China has never established a transparent system of potential organ donors. Initially Chinese officials fraudulently claimed the organs came from death row prisoners. However, executions of criminals in China has diminished significantly in the last 20 years, barely exceeding 2,000 in any one year. Besides, hardened criminals are unlikely donors, given that many are addicted to drugs and/or carry blood borne diseases such as HIV and hepatitis.

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Many whistleblowers have sought to raise awareness of this travesty, including Dr. Enver Tohti, a Chinese surgeon who sought refuge in the U.K. He has described how victims had their organs harvested while still alive. The evidence is extensive.

However, the most compelling evidence comes from the official websites of Chinese hospitals, which advertise matched organs within one-to-two weeks – and in some instances within 72 hours. This should be an impossible feat, given that no one knows in advance of a healthy organ for transplant until a sudden death of a healthy donor occurs, and only within a few hours. This could only be possible if there was a reservoir of healthy living donors, which, again, China does not have. By comparison, elsewhere in the world in places like the United States, the U.K., and Canada, a potential recipient has to wait on average three to four years to find the right match.

Dr. Jacob Lavee, an Israeli cardiac surgeon, was one of the first transplant surgeons to recognize China's nefarious practice. In 2005, one of his patients told him he was traveling to China to receive a heart transplant in two weeks. Lavee was flabbergasted and has been outspoken on the issue ever since. (In fact, in 2008, Israel became the first country to make organ tourism abroad illegal. Other countries that have adopted similar legislation include Taiwan, Spain, Chile and Norway. Canada was on the verge of enacting a similar law before the 2019 federal election prevented a third and final reading in the Senate.)

Does this qualify as genocide? The UN Convention on the Prevention and Punishment of the Crime of Genocide defines genocide as "any acts committed with the intent to destroy, in whole or in part, a nation, an ethnicity, racial or religious group."

Genocide scholars have termed the situation in China a “cold” genocide, denoting a more subtle kind of action compared to other genocides where the violence is flagrant. The violence against the Falun Gong, in particular, is multi-dimensional – physical, psychological, social and spiritual – hidden from view and normalized in Chinese society. The Chinese government has developed campaigns of dehumanization in their media and schools. Where the Jews were “rats” in the Holocaust, the Falun Gong are labelled an “evil cult,” by China. They are considered unworthy of living.

How can we make this despicable crime, which regrettably often flies under the public radar, soar into the public consciousness? Given China’s immense economic power, what would it take to induce decent, human rights respecting countries to hold China accountable? Politicians and citizens alike should be asking themselves how the moral imperative can transcend economic expedience.

Given the painful Jewish legacy of persecution and genocide, we should join forces with other like-minded groups and speak up for these voiceless victims. Otherwise, pure, unadulterated evil will continue to triumph as good people do nothing.

As always, the answer lies within.