

Asylum seekers testify of brutality by jail guards

Jerry White
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Immigrant asylum seekers gave testimony this week detailing the brutal treatment they received from New Jersey correctional officers at the Union County Jail in June 1995. The group of immigrants was transferred to the jail after an uprising by hundreds of detainees against abusive and inhumane conditions at the nearby Immigration and Naturalization Service Detention Center in Elizabeth, New Jersey.

Testifying at the trial of the first three guards to face prosecution, Simion Fiat, a 32-year-old Romanian, said the officers formed a gauntlet to punch and kick the immigrants as their van arrived from the detention center. Some immigrants were forced to crawl between the officers' legs. By the end of the night, Fiat said, he had blood streaming down his face from the beatings and kicks.

Speaking through an interpreter, Amitindar Pal Singh, who was 18 years old at the time, stated that the guards used a pair of metal pliers to pinch the skin on his genitals and squeeze his tongue.

Prosecutors said at least two dozen officers participated in the beatings that lasted four hours. They said guards forced a line of men to kneel naked on the jail floor and chant, "America is number 1." The guards also broke one detainee's collarbone and shoved the heads of others into toilets.

The three corrections officers, the first of twelve indicted for official misconduct, face penalties of 5 to 10 years in prison, prosecutors said.

Many of the two dozen immigrants—from Romania, Albania, Pakistan, India and Ghana—had traveled to the United States to escape persecution from repressive governments. Many are still awaiting rulings on their asylum claims, while others have already been deported.

More than 315 immigrants were incarcerated at the

INS center in Elizabeth. Most had already waited months for their immigration hearings. On June 18, 1995—after repeated complaints about poor food, abusive guards, insect-infested beds and the lack of exercise and privacy went unanswered—detainees rioted and destroyed the center. One hundred policemen, using batons and stun grenades, put down the disturbance. Amid the wreckage of the guards' observation post, one detainee had painted the word "Freedom" in foot-high letters.

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The detention center, which was housed in a converted warehouse in an industrial area and run by a private incarceration company, Esmor Correction Services, had gained a reputation among immigrants and their advocates as one of the worst in the nation. The INS removed Esmor and closed the facility following a determination that the disturbance was caused by bad management and poorly trained and abusive guards. It has since reopened the center and contracted its management out to another private prison company.

The abusive treatment meted out to immigrant workers in Elizabeth is typical in the United States. Referring to the beatings at the Union County Jail, a representative of the American Civil Liberties Union said, "I don't doubt that the things we saw happen there go on all over the country. But I don't think there are many prosecutors who pursue them in the same way. My concern is that this is a widespread problem and that the norm is that this thing goes on and there is no accountability for it."



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