

Mothers on hunger strike at Texas immigrant detention center

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Women detainees at a south Texas immigrant detention center began a hunger and work strike on March 31. The day before, 78 women signed and released a handwritten letter stating that they would refuse food and work until they are released and allowed to go before a judge to have their asylum pleas heard.

Most of the women and their children came to the United States to flee police and gang threats and violence in Honduras, El Salvador and Guatemala. Some of them have been held in the center for over ten months.

The women have attended so-called “credible fear interviews” with Immigration Control and Enforcement (ICE) officials to determine if they are eligible to stay in the US. However, those whose cases have been ruled “positive” (i.e., qualify for a hearing before a judge) lack the wherewithal to pay the bond to gain their release, forcing them to languish in the center. Others, who have lost their cases and appeals, face abuse, harm and possibly death if they are deported back to the environment they fled.

The letter, which was written in Spanish, says, “We have come to this country, with our children, seeking refugee status and we are being treated like delinquents. We are not delinquents nor do we pose any threat to this country.”

It denounces the prohibitive bond for those who “passed” their interviews as well as the refusal of asylum for other women who did not, and who are forced to sign deportation papers. “We believe that this is unjust because they have come to this country asking for asylum because they are in danger in their country. And now they are being deported back to the place where they could even lose their life.”

It also states, “The conditions, in which our children find themselves, are not good. Our children are not eating well and every day they are losing weight. Their health is deteriorating. We know that any mother would do what

we are doing for their children.

“We deserve to be treated with some dignity and that our rights, to the immigration process, be respected.”

The Karnes County Residential Center is a for-profit detention center run by the GEO Group, which describes itself as “the world’s leading provider of correctional, detention, and community reentry services with 106 facilities, approximately 85,500 beds, and 19,000 employees around the globe.” GEO, formerly known as Wackenhut, has facilities in the United States, United Kingdom, Australia, and South Africa.

Although GEO claims to “offer our clients high-quality, cost-effective services with state-of-the-art designs, innovative programs and ground-breaking treatment approaches,” its facilities have been hit by repeated scandals, investigations, legal complaints and lawsuits.

For example, in 2011, the Southern Poverty Law Center and the ACLU filed a class-action lawsuit on behalf of 13 inmates against GEO’s Walnut Grove Youth Correctional Facility in Mississippi, charging “rampant contraband brought in by guards, sex between female guards and male inmates, inadequate medical care, prisoners held inhumanely in isolation, guards brutalizing inmates and inmate-on-inmate violence that was so brutal it led to brain damage,” according to an NPR report.

Detainees at the Karnes facility, which was opened in 2012 to process undocumented refugees, have voiced a number of complaints, according to *colorlines.com*: their children have been questioned without their parents or attorneys being present; children have been denied adequate medical treatment; detainees work at the laundry facility for just \$3 a day; since the center is near fracking operations, detainees have complained of contaminated water, though bottled water is available ... for \$3 a bottle; harassment and sexual assaults on detainees—at times in front of the children—by guards.

ICE investigated the last accusation in February and

found no evidence of sexual assaults. “But,” as the report notes, “that conclusion is based on interviews with guards and current detainees, including those who fear deportation if they report abuse to authorities.”

A paralegal, Victoria Rossi, reported on conditions at Karnes in February. She has since been barred from the facility, as have other legal aid workers.

GEO denied the allegations, issuing a statement claiming that the Karnes center “provides high quality care in a safe, clean, and family friendly environment, and onsite U.S. Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE) personnel provide direct oversight to ensure compliance with ICE’s Family Residential Standards. Our company has consistently, strongly denied allegations to the contrary.”

An ICE spokeswoman dismissed the strike, saying, “ICE is not aware that any of the residents have actually agreed to participate in a hunger strike,” and claimed to be “investigating claims from residents at the Karnes facility who allege that a visiting member of a non-profit group encouraged residents to stop eating at the facility to protest their detention. ICE is closely monitoring the situation and has taken all necessary precautions to ensure the safety and well being of the residents.”

Cristina Parker, immigration projects coordinator at advocacy group Grassroots Project who has visited the center several times, told the *Guardian* that the complaints have been ongoing for months, indeed, “almost since it opened,” and that the women have talked of a hunger strike since at least September 2014. “I don’t believe at all that they were coached into doing this.” Parker also said that Internet access and telephone calls have been withdrawn.

Meanwhile, three of the women have been placed in isolation. A group called, “We Belong Together” has launched a petition campaign to ask the prison officials to release the women and their children.



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