

Immigrant family detention centers scrutinized at US Congressional forum

Dorota Niemitz
31 July 2015

Just a few days after the Federal District Court of California ruled against the Obama administration's policy of detaining immigrant children, former detainees and immigrant advocates testified before a congressional forum on the human rights violations at the US family detention centers.

The event was a forum rather than a formal congressional hearing, because House and Senate Republicans, who control all congressional committees, are in complete support of the brutal treatment of immigrant detainees. Like the Obama administration, the congressional Republicans view such methods as a necessary deterrent against border-crossing.

The Democratic congressional groups organized the event to gather favorable publicity for themselves, although they continue to support the Obama administration, whose policies are responsible for the hardships and mistreatment detailed at the hearing. The organizers included the Congressional Progressive Caucus and Democratic members of the House Judiciary Committee.

The witnesses included two former detainees, a former social worker at one of the detention facilities and two experts. Speakers drew attention to deplorable conditions and heavy abuses experienced by women and children jailed in three for-profit immigrant family detention centers in Leesport, Pennsylvania, and Dilley and Karnes City in Texas.

Whistleblower Olivia López, a former employee at the Karnes County Residential Center, submitted a 19-page declaration about the inhumane and unethical practices at the facility, including insufficient mental and medical care. López, who holds a PhD in social science, reported widespread abuses at Karnes, describing ICE officers using the medical negative pressure rooms for behavioral modification purposes in

case of minor offences committed by detainees as well as the medical observation rooms being used to isolate children from mothers who were placed on suicide watch.

She said she was compelled to resign in April, after being repeatedly asked to lie to federal officials about the conditions at Karnes and to withhold information from immigrant mothers about their right to grievance. "What is happening there is tantamount to torture," López said.

Sonia Hernández, a 33-year old woman from El Salvador, who was detained with her three children at Karnes for ten months, testified to witnessing miscarriages and suicide attempts among women and children, allegations disputed earlier by the immigration officials. Hernández also reported on frequent pressure put on her by the immigration officers to sign deportation documents without the presence of her attorney. "The immigration officers would come to our cells and say, 'Just sign this; your case is lost. Just sign this and go back to your country,'" she said.

Gladys Checas, a 21-year old from Honduras, detained for 11 months at Berks County residential center in Leesport, Pennsylvania, told how she was refused a medical treatment for her 3-year-old daughter when the toddler started vomiting blood. The woman was told that the child should "drink lots of water," and only after the little girl continued to throw up blood for four days was she finally taken to the hospital.

Experts raised their concerns about the effects of imprisonment on the psychological development of children placed in detention. Being forced to remain on the grounds of the center at all times is a traumatizing experience for children. The mental suffering of children manifests itself in severe depression, which in some cases leads to mental illness and autism, suicidal

thoughts among children, weight loss, regression to breastfeeding, and wearing diapers by children as old as five.

Rep. Zoe Lofgren (D-Calif.), who helped organize the forum and who visited Karnes and Dilley detention centers earlier this year, called them “internment camps,” worse than the camps for Syrian refugees she had visited in Jordan.

Lofgren was among 136 members of the U.S. Congress House of Representatives who wrote to the secretary of the U.S. Department of Home Security (DHS) Jeh Johnson on May 27, demanding to end the practice of detaining children as it was “not reflective of our values as a Nation.” She also said she was calling on the Obama administration not to appeal the ruling last week by Judge Dolly M. Gee, ordering minors to be released into the custody of a family member or a legal guardian instead of being held in “family units” at detention centers.

About 1,700 women and children are currently incarcerated in three family detention centers in Texas and Pennsylvania, a “no-release” policy imposed by the DHS in response to last summer’s surge in border crossings by some 52,000 unaccompanied children fleeing war and poverty in Central America. The facilities are managed by two private prison companies: the Corrections Corporation of America (CCA) in Nashville, Tennessee, and the GEO Group of Boca Raton, Florida.

Both the CCA and the GEO have a track record of human rights violations at their facilities, where children were forced to wear prison uniforms and were under constant threat of separation from their parents. In 2009, the CCA-run T. Don Hutto family detention center near Austin, Texas, was closed as a result of a lawsuit and, in 2014, the government-run Artesia facility in New Mexico met with a similar fate.

Human rights groups and attorneys have been documenting jail-like conditions at the detention facilities, including widespread problems such as lack of proper access to medical care, spoiled food, dirty water, lack of legal counsel, solitary confinement, rape and abuse by prison guards, as well as the covering up of detainees’ deaths, and physical abuse by ICE officers.

The newly opened Dilley facility in Texas is the largest family detention center in the U.S., able to

accommodate 2,400 refugees. Although Congress rejected last year’s request by the Obama administration for an \$879 million emergency appropriation to fund 6,300 new family detention beds, the request signaled an expansion of the policy of mass incarceration of individuals including children. “It’ll now be more likely that you’ll be detained and sent back,” announced DHS Secretary Jeh Johnson last December at the opening ceremony for Dilley facility, whose officials estimate the cost of each detainee at \$296 a day.

The United States controls the largest immigration detention infrastructure in the world, comprised of over 250 government-run jails and for-profit detention centers able to accommodate over 34,000 detainees each day. As of October 31, 2014, the Obama administration had filed deportation cases against 63,721 foreign children.



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