

Immigrant mothers stage hunger strike in Pennsylvania

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Twenty-two mothers have entered into a second week of a hunger strike, protesting an inordinately long detention and the harmful impact upon themselves and children. The Obama administration claims that it detains families claiming refugee status no longer than 20 days, but by the end of this month, some families will have been in custody for nearly a year.

The hunger strike began on August 8 at Berks County Residential Center in Pennsylvania, according to a poignant letter the mothers had sent to Secretary of Homeland Security Jeh Johnson:

“We are 22 mothers who have been imprisoned at the Berks Family Residential Center for 270 to 365 days. We have relatives and friends who would be responsible for us and who wait for us with open arms, but the Department of Homeland Security has denied our release. The reason for this letter is to inform you that since Monday, August 8, we have begun a hunger strike to protest our indefinite detention, and to request that you end this practice of detaining mothers and children and allow our immediate release.”

These families had fled to the United States from Central American countries such as El Salvador and Honduras to escape gang violence, poverty, and death. The American government has been responsible for much of the violence and destruction in these countries by arming and supporting right-wing militias and coups. While Hillary Clinton was Obama’s Secretary of State, Washington backed the 2009 military coup in Honduras.

A mother named Margarita, only 22, whose real name has been changed for fear of reprisal, left El Salvador with her son, presented herself to immigration agents on the US-Mexico border and sought asylum. Immigration officials, however, in accordance with the rules set by the Obama Administration, sent her to a

detention facility in Texas, from which she was transferred to the family detention center in Berks County, where she and her son have spent more than 300 days.

Being locked up for this long is a form of cruel and unusual punishment, with horrendous ramifications for the psychological well-being of the mothers and particular the young children. According to Olga Byrne, of Human Rights First, an advocacy group for immigrants, “The Obama Administration’s detention of families has had severely traumatizing effects on both children and their mothers. Even a few days in detention can be harmful to the health of children.”

The mothers’ open letter vividly describes these traumatizing effects on kids: “The teenagers say that being here, life makes no sense. One of our children said he wanted to break the window to jump out and end this nightmare. On many occasions, our children ask us if we have the courage to escape. They grab the cord that holds their ID cards and tighten it around their necks, saying they want to die if they don’t get out. And the smallest children, who are only two years old, cry during the night because they cannot express what they feel. For some time, our children have not eaten well, and they have lost weight.”

The detention center itself is actually operating without a license, making it unlawful to even hold these children. In October 2015, the state Department of Human Services declared that it would not renew a license, which expired on February 21, 2016, for the Berks County Residential Center as a child residential facility, because it was de facto confining immigrant families, including adults.

A ruling from the Ninth Circuit Court of Appeals in July of this year upheld a lower court’s ruling, stipulating that children cannot be detained in

unlicensed detention centers. This concurs with a 2015 ruling by the US District Court for the Central District of California that the government's detention policy violates the 1997 Flores settlement under which principles had been set for holding minors in detention facilities.

The detention center, which is owned by Berks County but staffed with both federal and county employees, is leased to and operated by Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE), a unit of the federal DHS. It was in the news earlier this year when an employee was sentenced to jail time for sexually assaulting a 19-year-old mother who had fled from Honduras.

The gross human rights violations at the Berks facility are symptomatic of those widespread and at other detention facilities in the US. A 2010 Humans Rights Watch report, for instance, details extensive sexual abuse and harassment. A more recent report by Human Rights First, titled "Lifeline on Lockdown: Increased U.S. Detention of Asylum Seekers," describes the failure of the Obama administration and the Department of Homeland Security and Department of Justice to provide "existing parole guidance for asylum seekers and reasonable bond levels for indigent individuals held in immigration detention." Thousands of immigrants are detained for extraordinarily long periods of time or simply denied release.

President Obama has deported more immigrants than any other president in US history, earning him the title of deporter-in-chief from immigrant rights groups.

The mothers end their letter by saying: "We are desperate, and we have decided that we will get out dead or alive."



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