

African immigrants report grave abuses at West Texas detention center

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Approximately 80 immigrant men from Kenya, Somalia and Sudan held at the West Texas Detention Center in Sierra Blanca, Texas have been subjected to horrific physical abuses, alleged hate crimes, and sexual abuse, according to a report recently cited by the *Intercept*.

Within one week of their arrival in late February at the immigration jail near the US-Mexico border in Sierra Blanca, Texas, many of the men were beaten, pepper-sprayed, taunted with racial slurs and sexually abused.

The chilling report released last week by Texas A&M University School of Law Immigrant Rights Clinic, the University of Texas School of Law Immigration Clinic, and RAICES, a Texas-based advocacy group, outlines multiple violations of federal law, human rights abuses, and alleged hate crimes.

The report was based on interviews with 30 Somali men, ranging in age from their 20s to their 50s, who were held at the West Texas facility from February 23 to March 2 this year. Some were recent arrivals, while others were married to US citizens or have children who are citizens.

LaSalle Corrections privately operates the West Texas Detention Facility along with another 17 other prisons in Texas, Louisiana and Georgia, with a total inmate population of 13,000.

While the backgrounds of the detainees varied, the report noted that all the men abused at West Texas “were in ICE custody for the sole purpose of effectuating deportation after receiving final orders of removal...Some came to the U.S. as refugees when they were children. Others entered recently with visas or without status.”

It is worth noting that all the detainees are from a region of Africa that has been torn apart by wars and

conflicts facilitated by US imperialism. Somalia in particular has become site of increasingly intense American military operations and drone strikes in recent months. It is not surprising that many of the detainees are trying to escape the war zones by seeking asylum.

One detainee, Dalmar, explained that the warden struck him four times in the face while he was in the nurse’s office. Dalmar attempted to appeal to the medical staff, saying, “Are you going to let this happen?” The staff member allegedly responded, “We didn’t see anything.”

Dalmar told legal advocates he was then “placed in solitary confinement, where I was forced to lie face down on the floor with my hands handcuffed behind my back while I was kicked repeatedly in the ribs by the warden....When I told him, ‘I’ll get a lawyer to sue you,’ the warden responded, ‘We’ve got enough money.’”

In other instances, the men either witnessed or were subjected to physical force such as officers throwing detainees to the floor or slamming a man’s head against the concrete “even though he did not resist.”

All detainees were pepper-sprayed at least once and many on multiple occasions, which led to cases of difficulty breathing and coughing up blood. Some were placed in solitary confinement or “administrative segregation” as a form of punishment, including after being pepper-sprayed. There were also many complaints of racial abuse. “They called them ‘niggers.’ They called them ‘boy.’ They’ve said things like, ‘We’re sending you boys back to the jungle,’” Lisa Lehner an attorney for the group, told the *Intercept*.

The report also notes sexual abuse, stating, “One of the detainees, Sharmaarke, alleged that LaSalle

corrections officers sexually assaulted him by fondling his penis and groin area over his clothes while he was pushed against the wall.”

Advocates for the men have filed complaints with local authorities and the Departments of Justice and Homeland Security, which have been forwarded by the US attorney’s office to the FBI.

Conditions in the West Texas Detention Facility have come under scrutiny numerous times over the years. In 2016, the ICE Office of Detention Oversight found that the facility had numerous problems with the maintenance of standards, including the fact that staff did not “consistently receive required training on the use of non-lethal equipment.” In addition, the report noted major gaps in required medical services in the facility, leading to numerous problems such as long delays in intake screenings and the absence of “timely receipt of sick call requests or completion of sick calls.”

In the same year, Fronteras Magazine published an article detailing the inhumane conditions in the detention center, this time caused by the lack of running water supply. The article quoted Efrain Chavez, a detainee held for six months while he awaited news on his petition for US asylum: “The toilets were all full of human waste...You can’t imagine the smell. It was awful.” In a closed-door meeting held in the El Paso courthouse with the US Marshall Service, Chavez described the horrifying spectacle that ensued once the toilets became unusable and the guards told the detainees to use plastic bags instead.

Public defenders who had gathered at the 2016 courthouse hearing told reporters that the situation in the West Texas facility had been deteriorating for over a year, and that in addition to being threatened and kept in inhumane conditions, the detainees were also being deprived of other constitutional rights. Maureen Franco, head of the federal public defender’s office in El Paso, pointed out that “Attorneys were having a very difficult time seeing their clients...They were given arbitrary rules as to when they could show up and if they showed up late then the visit was cancelled.”

In 2017, Martín Méndez Pineda, the Mexican journalist who had been seeking asylum in the United States, wrote a blistering exposé in the *Washington Post* of the conditions in the facility, where he had been detained by ICE agents.

Méndez Pineda found that the West Texas detention center, known to detainees as “el gallinero” (“the henhouse”), was “small, with metal bunks, worn-out rubber mattresses, wooden floors, bathrooms with the walls covered in green and yellow mold, weeds everywhere, and snakes and rats that come in the night.”

Originally built to house 60 people, at the time of Méndez Pineda’s incarceration it held more than 100 detainees, who were “exposed to all kinds of diseases and don’t have access to adequate medical attention.” The guard’s treatment of the detainees was brutal, and at best dismissive. It was, Méndez Pineda stated “the worst days of my life...Honestly, it is hell.” In fact, the experience so traumatized him that Méndez Pineda asked to be deported back to Mexico, despite knowing that his life would be in danger.

Responding to the latest allegations, ICE officials told the *Intercept*, “ICE maintains a strict zero tolerance policy for any kind of abusive behavior and requires all staff working with the agency to adhere to this policy. All allegations are independently reviewed by ICE’s Office of Professional Responsibility. ICE has not been made aware of any allegations prior to this initial reporting from RAICES.”

In 2009 Obama oversaw the implementation of the Detention Bed Quota, which was a congressional mandate that 34,000 detention center beds must be filled at all times, in a handout to for-profit prison companies such as LaSalle. The Trump administration is seeking to increase this mandate to 51,000.

Emboldened by the administration’s vile anti-immigrant chauvinism in addition to racist remarks by the president referring to Africa as a continent of “shithole countries,” fascistic elements within the state apparatus and ICE are increasingly at ease acting with violent impunity towards immigrants.



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