

Two refugee suicides follow Trump's "zero-tolerance" order

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US government officials have confirmed the first suicide by a refugee father who was forcibly separated from his wife and son under the new "zero tolerance" order issued by President Donald Trump last month.

Trump issued the order May 7, requiring US immigration authorities to hold for criminal prosecution every immigrant detained at the border, regardless of whether they had filed claims to be granted refugee status. This order meant the forcible separation of all families, including asylum seekers, with the parents jailed as criminals while the children were placed in federal facilities or foster homes.

In a statement issued Saturday, Customs and Border Protection (CBP) identified the suicide as Marco Antonio Muñoz, who was detained at the Weslaco, Texas border crossing May 11. Muñoz, his wife and three-year-old son were not trying to enter the country illegally but presented themselves at a border post and asked for asylum.

The three were transferred to the Rio Grande Valley processing station, where Muñoz was separated from his wife and three-year-old son. At that point, according to the CBP statement, Muñoz "became disruptive and combative." A Border Patrol agent who spoke to the *Washington Post* said that Muñoz "lost it" after he was told his family was being split up. "They had to use physical force to take the child out of his hands," the agent said.

The Honduran man was transferred to the Starr County jail. During the 40-mile ride in a police van, "He yelled and kicked at the windows on the ride to the jail," the CBP agent told the *Post*. Even though shackled and handcuffed, Muñoz attempted to escape again upon arrival, and he was placed in a padded isolation cell. It is not clear that Muñoz was ever given an explanation for the separation from his wife and son, and it is certain that he never was allowed to speak with an attorney or advocate.

Muñoz, age 39, was found in his cell "unresponsive" and without a pulse about 10 a.m. on May 13. According to a sheriff's department report obtained by the *Post*, Muñoz "was found on the floor of his cell May 13 in a pool of blood with an item of clothing twisted around his neck." The deputies recorded it as a "suicide in custody."

After his body was found, Muñoz's wife and child were released from custody.

The bulk of the refugees applying for asylum at the US-Mexico border are fleeing violence and repression in three Central American countries, Honduras, El Salvador and Guatemala.

Press reports suggested that Trump ordered the immediate change in policy after becoming enraged by figures showing a sudden increase in the number of immigrants and refugees coming across the US-Mexico border in March, April and May. More than 50,000 have been detained each month, many of them families from Central America fleeing US-backed right-wing and military regimes.

The Trump administration has added to the crisis in Honduras, in particular, by ending temporary protected status for 57,000 Honduran immigrants in the United States last month. These long-term US residents, most with US citizen children, will be forced to leave the United States over the next year.

Honduras has been wracked by violence since the 2009 military coup backed by the Obama administration and Secretary of State Hillary Clinton, which overthrew the elected government of President Manuel Zelaya. The Democratic Party paved the way for the ultra-right policy of the Republicans and Trump towards immigrants, as Obama deported more undocumented immigrants than any previous US administration and sent the National Guard to the US-Mexico border.

A second suicide stemming from Trump's vicious attacks on refugees and immigrants was reported Saturday

by Immigration and Customs Enforcement. ICE detained Zeresenay Ermiyas Testfatsion, an Eritrean national, denied his asylum claim and sent him back to his homeland on a plane flight with a stopover in Cairo, Egypt.

Testfatsion, 34, was found dead June 6 in a shower area at Cairo International Airport. He had apparently hanged himself rather than face torture or other abusive treatment in Eritrea, which is ruled by a one-party right-wing dictatorship. He had been transferred by ICE to the custody of Egyptian security officials, who were to turn him over to the Eritrean authorities in Asmara.

Testfatsion had been in US custody for 16 months, since he was arrested at the Hidalgo, Texas port of entry trying to enter the country illegally, according to an ICE statement. He repeatedly expressed “fear of returning to his country” as the reason for seeking asylum. His asylum claim was denied in October 2017. He was held at ICE facilities in Pompano Beach, Florida and Youngstown, Ohio in the course of his detention.

The case of Marco Antonio Muñoz can be multiplied by hundreds. According to federal public defenders, in the McAllen, Texas district alone, where Muñoz died, 415 children have been taken from their parents over a two-week period, May 21 through June 5.

Each business day in federal court, dozens of immigrants clad in orange prison jumpsuits plead guilty to charges of illegally entering the country. They plead guilty under the threat that if they fight the charges and force a trial, they will be separated from their children for months. Most are sentenced to time served and then released, reunited with their children and then immediately deported, unless they are able to meet the nearly impossible hurdles to filing a claim for refugee status.

In an additional legal Catch-22, refugee status may be denied because of a previous criminal conviction—and that could include the conviction for illegal entry.

The Justice Department’s South District of Texas told the *Washington Post* that it could not say how many parents had been separated from their children under the new policy, because the children were not the targets of prosecution, while parental status was “not relevant when prosecuting a case.”

The number is enormous, however, and federal courtrooms are the scene of mass sentencings twice every day, in the morning and afternoon.

In another legal nightmare cited in the *Post* report, a federal public defender asked a judge to order the

government to hand over lists of children separated from their parents so that attorneys could ensure they were reunited. The judge replied that “children are not within the jurisdiction of this court. These people are here because they have a criminal case here.” He said he doubted he had the authority to order the government to provide such a list.

Besides the well-publicized effort by Trump to issue a blanket ban on refugees for 120 days—ultimately upheld by the US Supreme Court—the administration has waged guerrilla warfare against the entry of new refugees by demanding increased screening overseas while cutting the staff available to conduct interviews, and classifying more refugees as “high risk,” and thus requiring additional screening.

In the first eight months of the fiscal year that began October 1, 2017, the United States had admitted only 13,051 refugees, far below the ceiling of 45,000 originally set by Trump. It is likely that the number of refugees admitted during the current fiscal year will be the lowest since the passage of the Refugee Act in 1980, well below the previous low set in 2002, in the wake of the 9/11 attacks, when the Bush administration admitted only 27,131 refugees.

Meanwhile Trump has nominated a vicious enemy of immigrants and refugees to head the State Department agency that oversees refugee and immigration issues. Ronald W. Mortensen is a longtime fellow of the Center for Immigration Studies, an organization listed as a hate group by the Southern Poverty Law Center. The mission statement of the State Department bureau that Mortensen would head is to “provide protection, ease suffering, and resolve the plight of persecuted and uprooted people around the world.”

Mortensen is on record claiming that nearly all undocumented immigrants, including DACA recipients, are “criminal illegal aliens” who have committed “multiple felonies to get jobs” and should be required to pay reparations for identity theft and using false Social Security numbers.



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