Immigrants in US subjected to nasal force-feeding at ICE detention center

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The US Immigration and Customs Enforcement is force-feeding immigrants held in a detention center in Texas, using brutal torture against at least ten men engaged in a hunger strike against their prolonged confinement and mistreatment. The men, mainly Sikhs from the Punjab region of India, are being force-fed either through plastic nasal tubes or intravenous lines, inserted several times a day. At least 30 men are participating in the hunger strike, include some from Cuba as well as the majority from India.

Force-feeding through nasal tubes is a method of torture, used at the Guantanamo Bay detention camp and other CIA-run secret prisons overseas, which has been condemned by international human rights groups. The American Medical Association bars its members from participating in such mistreatment. So long as the hunger striker is making a conscious and reasoned decision to refuse food, the AMA guidelines say, a medical doctor should respect their right to do so.

Democratic Party politicians who are making a show of opposition to Trump's demands for a wall on the US-Mexico border have nothing to say about the brutal treatment of immigrants and asylum seekers in ICE detention centers that has provoked the hunger strikes and other protests. On the contrary: the legislation now being discussed in a House-Senate conference committee would provide billions more for ICE to expand the American gulag.

The detainees, held at the ICE El Paso Service Processing Center in the west Texas city, have asked immigration advocates visiting them in detention to make their struggle known to the public. The hunger strike was first reported Thursday morning by the Associated Press. A lawyer for one of the detainees and a volunteer immigration advocate both spoke to the *World Socialist Web Site* about the conditions the men face.

Ruby Kaur is a Michigan-based immigration attorney who speaks Punjabi, the first language of many of the prisoners, who are Sikhs from the north Indian state of Punjab. She represents one of the hunger strikers and said her client had been put on an IV and then force-fed after more than three weeks without eating or drinking water. "They've been held for at least six months," she said. "They are distinguishing them for treatment primarily on the basis of race."

Kaur said that her client and the other strikers were protesting mistreatment and physical abuse in detention, and the response of ICE to the hunger strike was even greater mistreatment. "Physical abuse to me is when they're being force fed," she said.

She said that the lawyers for the hunger strikers were still gathering information about the physical condition of their clients. "We are not sure about that yet, because we are still in the process of meeting individuals," she explained.

"I'm very passionate about immigrants' rights," Kaur said, adding that some of the hunger strikers had been placed in solitary confinement, which is also classified as a form of torture by international human rights groups.

She told the Associated Press, "They go on hunger strike, and they are put into solitary confinement and then the ICE officers kind of psychologically torture them, telling the asylum seekers they will send them back to Punjab."

Margaret Brown Vega from Advocate Visitors with Immigrants in Detention, an immigrant support group based in New Mexico, gave additional details about the conditions at the El Paso ICE facility. She is a volunteer for a group that organizes visits to people in detention, to try to minimize their isolation and despair.

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"We became aware of the hunger strike," she told the WSWS. "Three of us volunteers went and visited with four of the men to talk to them about their situation. El Paso Service Processing Center, the ICE facility, it's a prison. If you look at the standards they operate under, and how they refer to the detainees, it is a prison. They are very much treated like prisoners.

"It's very hard to get information about them. I spoke to one individual. Another volunteer spoke to two individuals. A third volunteer spoke to the fourth individual.

"Force-feeding is very troubling. They're very weak. They walk very slowly, shuffling their feet. Their eyes are very tired looking. The man I saw showed me his arms. He's been getting three or four IVs a day and he said he thought he would be put on a feeding tube through the side of the nose. I believe this is on an ICE protocol."

The detainees are required to present themselves for their own torture, she explained: "They've complained about having to walk to the medical area instead of being brought in a wheelchair."

Vega added, "What's difficult for people to understand is that the conditions in immigration facilities are such they bring people to this point. It's psychologically very challenging. Sometimes it's physically challenging.

"I think people underestimate how bad it is to be held indefinitely in a place where you don't get enough food, where you're constantly berated, where people place obstacles in your way and play games with you. And the worst thing is never knowing when it's going to end. It's pretty bad, when it's day in and day out."

Vega said that there had not really been much of a change from the Obama administration to the Trump administration, in terms of conditions inside the detention facilities. "I would say that many people feel this is not new," she continued. "In these facilities, going back ten years, people have noticed these conditions. Even though there are supposedly standards that guide how these places are run.

"I have encountered people in detention who went to a port of entry and applied for asylum. I met one individual who was detained and never given parole. In the El Paso area we're seeing 100 percent denial rates on parole. We encounter asylum seekers who are not a flight risk, who are not a threat to the community, but they're not released."

Both Ruby Kaur and Margaret Brown Vega made it clear that the prisoners had taken the initiative in seeking to have their hunger strike become public, known to a far wider audience than the ICE agents who run the El Paso center.

"Our first priority was to make this situation known," Vega said. "It's a matter of First Amendment rights. We feel like it's our responsibility to help them amplify their voices. It's very difficult to go even a couple of days without eating. They're putting their bodies at risk."

A federal judge has authorized the force-feeding, according to a spokeswoman for ICE, who did not address the charges of physical and psychological abuse by ICE agents. The El Paso facility is directly operated by ICE, not through a subcontractor as at many other detention centers.

When a hunger strike passes the one-month mark, as is the case with the immigrant detainees, there is mounting danger of irreversible physiological damage.

The Associated Press report quoted Amrit Singh, the uncle of two men participating in the hunger strike. "They are not well. Their bodies are really weak, they can't talk and they have been hospitalized, back and forth," Singh told AP. "They want to know why they are still in the jail and want to get their rights and wake up the government immigration system."

There have been repeated hunger strikes by immigration detainees over the last several years, but in most cases the strikers agreed to take food and water under threat of court-ordered force-feeding. It is the continued worsening of conditions, as well as the prospect of indefinite confinement, that has driven some prisoners to take this latest desperate step and defy the threat of torture.

The Freedom for Immigrants organization, the umbrella group to which AVID is affiliated, has documented nearly 1,400 people on hunger strike at 18 detention facilities since May 2015.

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