

America the Barbaric

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Rapes, murders, beatings, stabbings, mutilations and arson are rampant. Pleas for help, scrawled in blood, stain the walls from prisoners held in solitary confinement. Fifteen suicides have been recorded in the last 15 months.

This is not the description of a torture chamber in el-Sisi's Egypt or Bin Salman's Saudi Arabia. Nor is it about the abuse of detainees at the notorious Abu Ghraib prison in Iraq, the prison camp at Guantanamo Bay or a CIA black site.

These are the nightmare conditions in the Alabama state-run prison system, described in a Justice Department report released this week. They constitute a gross violation of the US Constitution's Eighth Amendment ban on cruel and unusual punishment.

More than 2,000 photos of abuse in one Alabama prison given to the media by the Southern Poverty Law Center in advance of the report's release depict the gruesome reality of the conditions detailed in hundreds of interviews with prisoners and their families conducted by federal investigators over more than two years.

While particularly horrific, such conditions are by no means unique. They are repeated in different forms in the prisons of every state, county and city across the United States. More than 2.3 million people are packed like cattle into America's overflowing system of state and federal prisons, local jails and immigration detention camps. Including those on probation or parole, nearly seven million Americans are caught up in what is absurdly called the "criminal justice system."

The US accounts for more than one-quarter of the world's incarcerated population. For every 100,000 residents, there are 698 people in detention. More than 540,000 of those held in jail on any given day have not been convicted of any crime. Many are kept in detention simply because they are too poor pay to pay the median bail of \$10,000. Another half a million, one in five inmates, are serving long prison sentences for nonviolent drug convictions.

Researchers estimate that 61,000 prisoners are held in solitary confinement on any given day, a form of

incarceration that the UN has declared to be tantamount to torture. At least 4,000 of those held in complete isolation from the outside world suffer from severe mental illness. Confinement to these living coffins is known to drive prisoners to suicide.

While debtors' prisons are officially outlawed, poor workers are routinely held for their debts. A mother in Indiana was detained for three days in February in a squalid jail alongside convicts because of an unpaid ambulance bill, which she had never received in the mail. Such stories are common.

Under the Trump administration, extending the policies developed by Obama, the federal government is waging a war on immigrants, holding thousands of men, women and children in degrading conditions. Some 77,000 people were detained in February for seeking to cross the southern border. Immigrant workers are being hunted down and arrested in their homes and at their work places.

The cruelty of the American government was on full display this week when 280 undocumented workers were detained by federal agents in Allen, Texas. It was the largest such raid in more than a decade.

Then there is the unending wave of police killings, with more than 1,000 people shot, tased or beaten to death every year on the streets of American cities. Criminal charges for police killings are rare and convictions almost unheard of. Cops are given a green light to kill, maim and brutalize with impunity.

With boundless hypocrisy, Democrats and Republicans proclaim their outrage over alleged human rights violations in whatever country the American ruling class is targeting for regime change or invasion. They proclaim one of the most cruel and unequal societies in the world, where the three richest Americans control more wealth than the bottom half of the population, to be a beacon of democracy to the world.

If the conditions that exist in US prisons were exposed in Russia or China, there would be a hue and cry in the press and the halls of Congress for economic sanctions and "humanitarian" military intervention that would

resound in the media.

Fifty years ago, a report such as that exposing the conditions in Alabama prisons would have been met, even within sections of the political and media establishment, with shock and demands for action, but today it passes with barely a murmur.

The Democratic Party is silent because it is complicit in the vast retrogression in conditions in US prisons. President Bill Clinton signed the legislation that paved the way for a historic increase in the prison population. The Democrats oversee a prison system in California that was found by the Supreme Court in 2011 to be “cruel and unusual” and in violation of the Constitution.

The upper-middle class, self-obsessed layers in and around the Democratic Party are disinterested. The promoters of the #MeToo campaign in the media and academia have nothing to say about sexual violence in American prisons, nor about the violence inflicted on immigrants fleeing to the United States.

The media has made as little as possible of the report, with no coverage on the major nightly news programs. As with the photos of abuse at Abu Ghraib and the Senate report on CIA torture, there has been an effort to suppress information of what is happening in Alabama. The *New York Times* and other media outlets have chosen not to publish most of the photos documenting abuse and death.

In the end, this is *their state*. The conditions of American prisons, and the overall apparatus of violence, is a noxious expression of the reality of American “democracy.” The state apparatus will be utilized in the suppression of social and political opposition to the demands of finance capital. It is the real face of American capitalism.



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