ICE uses torture to pressure African asylum seekers to agree to deportation

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Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE) officials in a privately run detention center in Mississippi have been accused of torturing asylum seekers from Africa in an effort to get them to sign their own deportation papers. This latest saga in the on-going grotesque war on immigrants carried out by the Trump administration was revealed last week by the *Guardian*, which followed up on an October 8 complaint filed by groups including the Southern Poverty Law Center (SPLC) and Freedom for Immigrants (FFI) on behalf of eight asylum seekers.

The report details a horrific situation in which ICE officials have engaged in an "brutal scramble" to get the asylum seekers out of the country before the presidential election on November 3. Detainees spoke of being choked, beaten, pepper sprayed, and threatened with even further violence unless they consented to being placed on charter flights back to their home countries.

The asylum seekers from various African countries—particularly the Democratic Republic of Congo and Cameroon—have been unwilling to sign off on their own deportations, which is not surprising since the very reason for their coming to the US is to escape persecution in their own countries. Many of them in fact have asylum hearings pending. However, ICE has shrugged away even the pretense of respect for basic human rights and due process.

The disgraceful treatment of African asylum seekers was brought to light this past year in part because of organized protests, including hunger strikes, by 40 Cameroonians detained in ICE's Pine Prairie Facility in Louisiana.

The detainees have spoken up about the appalling conditions in the detention center, the lack of protection against COVID-19, and the bullying and frankly illegal behavior of various immigration officials including a systematic attempt to dismiss identification documents or evidence and pressure asylum seekers to give up on their cases even before an appeal is heard. It is also now known that ICE has retaliated against the detainees for protesting by using force and subjecting them to long stretches of solitary confinement.

The latest revelations are even more horrifying. One of the detainees, identified as DF in the complaint, said that on being asked by an ICE agent to sign his deportation order on September 28: "I refused... He pressed my neck into the floor. I said, 'Please, I can't breathe.' I lost my blood circulation. Then they took me inside with my hands at my back where there were no cameras."

The place that DF was taken to is a punitive wing known as "Zulu" in the Adams county center, where reports indicate torture is carried out regularly without any restraints. Describing his experience in Zulu, DF stated: "They put me on my knees where they were torturing me and they said they were going to kill me. They took my arm and twisted it. They were putting their feet on my neck. While in Zulu, they did get my fingerprint on my deportation document and took my picture."

Another detainee, CA, said he was forced to the ground, sat on, handcuffed and pepper sprayed. "I was crying, 'I can't breathe,' because they were forcefully on top of me pressing their body weight on top of me. My eyes were so hot ... I was dragged across the ground...The officers told me to open my eyes. I couldn't. My legs and hands were handcuffed. They forcefully opened my palm. Some of my fingers were broken. They forced my fingerprint on to the paper."

On October 13, approximately 100 asylum seekers were put on a charter flight that took off from Fort

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Worth Alliance Airport in Texas. There was no flight plan filed, but the immigration rights group Witness at the Border, which tracked the flight said it stopped in Senegal, Cameroon, the Democratic Republic of Congo and then Kenya before flying back to Texas. DF was one of the people on the flight. His fate is unknown. CA, who was supposed to be on the flight, was pulled out at the last minute because of the intervention of human rights advocates. However, ICE officials have assured him and others that have remained that this was merely a temporary reprieve from certain deportation.

Reports of gratuitous cruelty and general inhumanity of the Trump administration's attitude towards immigrants, refugees and asylum-seekers have been a nearly daily occurrence. But this latest exposure merits a special place in the annals of criminal behavior.

The US Senate recently passed a resolution that acknowledged the Cameroonian government's human rights abuses including torture, imprisonment and extra-judicial killings directed particularly at the Anglophone community, to which most of the asylum seekers belong. Even the Trump administration—not known for its respect for common decency—revoked Cameroon's trade privileges because of its abuses.

It is a grim irony that those who fled their country to escape torture are now being tortured by US state officials in order to force them to return. What makes this particularly ugly is the fact that the illegal torture is being carried out to give this process the gloss of legality—as in, the asylum seekers voluntarily signed off on their deportation, which in many cases is the same as claiming that they willingly signed their own death sentences.

In response to the complaints, Sarah Lociano, an ICE spokeswoman declared: "ICE is firmly committed to the safety and welfare of all those in its custody. ICE provides safe, humane, and appropriate conditions of confinement for individuals detained in its custody." Lociano's claims mirror those of Trump, who callously declared during the last Presidential debate that the 545 immigrant children who are yet to be reunited with their parents are "in facilities that are so clean, they're so well taken care of." This will no doubt come as a surprise to those who have experienced the dubious hospitality of the various ICE-run detention camps and the children who have been torn from their parents.

It should be noted that two of the women who had given testimony about forced sterilizations at the Irwin detention center in Georgia were put on the October 13 deportation flight to Africa. This suggests that the flights were not just part of a desperate effort to remove asylum seekers, but also get rid of any possible witnesses who might provide evidence of the rampant criminality of the current administration's anti-immigrant policies.

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