

Protest erupts as immigrant families demand “Let us go” at DHS South Texas detention facility

Kevin Reed
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On Saturday, immigrant families imprisoned inside the South Texas Family Residential Center in Dilley, Texas staged a protest, denouncing their indefinite detention and demanding freedom for their children.

Their chants, “Let us out!” and “Liberty for the kids!” echoed across the razor-wire compound and were captured on video by immigration attorney Eric Lee.

Lee reported that dozens of mothers, fathers and children gathered inside the fenced-in yards of the Dilley facility on Saturday, many wearing jackets against the winter cold and holding hand-lettered signs. Up to 80 percent of the detainees at the facility engaged in the protest action. The facility holds 1,200 detainees, a third of whom are children.

Aerial photographs showed children pressed against the interior perimeter, some raising posters reading “Libertad para los niños” (“Liberty for the kids”), while others joined their parents in chants of “Libertad!” and “Let us go!” that could be clearly heard from outside the complex.

In videos Lee posted to X, detainees’ voices are heard shouting and clapping in unison while a staff member demands that he stop recording and documenting what he called a “major demonstration by detainees at Dilley Family.”

Lee says in one video, “We were all asked to leave, there’s a drone flying ahead, it’s an extremely bizarre situation. You can hear them shouting ‘Let us out! Let us out!’ There appears to be hundreds of people through the crack that I can see.”

In another post, Lee describes the protest as an appeal “to the country and the world’s population to come to their support and free them all from this place.”

The short clips and written updates were shared and reposted thousands of times within hours, propelling the Dilley protest into a widely reported example of resistance to the Trump administration’s regime of terror against immigrants and their families.

One detained mother, Maria Alejandra Montoya Sanchez,

31, who has been imprisoned at Dilley with her nine-year-old daughter since October, summed up the sentiments of those protesting: “We’re immigrants, with children, not criminals,” she told an Associated Press reporter by phone from inside. “The message we want to send is for them to treat us with dignity and according to the law.”

Lee was present at Dilley representing Hayam El-Gamal and her five children, who are among those being held indefinitely in violation of basic constitutional and international protections. The family has been detained there for seven months.

El-Gamal and her children have been targeted for punishment by the Trump administration because of their relation to Mohamed Soliman, the man accused of firebombing a Colorado protest demanding the release of Israeli hostages in Gaza.

While Soliman faces charges in the criminal courts, his wife El-Gamal and the children were swept up by the Department of Homeland Security (DHS) and locked in immigration detention, despite having committed no crime. Lee and others have denounced this as collective punishment and an ongoing illegal detention of a mother and children whose only “offense” is their family connection to a man alleged to have carried out an attack.

On June 3, 2025, after law enforcement searched their home, ICE agents told El-Gamal that the hotel where she and the children were temporarily staying was “unsafe” and that they needed to move, then took them into custody, transported them first to an immigration holding facility in Florence, Colorado, and that evening flew them to San Antonio and drove them to Dilley.

A federal judge later acknowledged that El-Gamal’s lawyers filed an emergency petition to stop the transfer about 45 minutes before the family arrived at Dilley but ruled that the case had to be heard in Texas because they were already across state lines when the filing reached the

court. In a lawsuit and public statement, El?Gamal and Eric Lee argue that she and the children are being punished in violation of the Fifth Amendment. Hayam El?Gamal’s five children are ages 18, 15, 7 and 5?year?old twins.

Lee’s viral posts expose that the prison camp in Dilley is being used as a political holding pen for families whom the Trump administration wishes to punish and isolate. Lee linked the protest to a broader wave of repression against immigrants and pro?Palestinian demonstrators, explaining that some detainees saw their own detention as part of the same national campaign that has targeted protesters and sanctuary cities.

Saturday’s protest also coincided with the transfer to Dilley of five?year?old Liam Conejo Ramos and his father, Adrian Alexander Conejo Arias, who were seized by federal agents outside their home in the Minneapolis area earlier in the week. School officials and the family’s attorney have described how ICE agents detained Adrian in the driveway, as another adult family member outside the home pleaded with the officers to let them take care of the child, but was refused.

According to Columbia Heights Public Schools Superintendent Zena Stenvik, an agent then removed Liam from the still?running vehicle, walked him to the front door, and instructed him to knock so officers could see if anyone was inside, “essentially using a 5?year?old as bait.” The boy was then flown with his father to Texas, hundreds of miles away from his mother.

The family, originally from Ecuador, entered the US in December 2024 to seek asylum and followed the legal procedure for those fleeing danger. Their attorney, Marc Prokosch, stressed that “they have done everything correctly. The family is seeking asylum, which is lawful.” DHS officials, seeking to justify the removal of a five?year?old from his home, claimed the boy was taken only after his father requested that he remain with him and alleged that the mother refused to come forward to take custody, assertions the family vehemently disputes.

Lee said his clients told him the protest began as families gathered in solidarity with Liam and in opposition to the broader pattern of raids and detentions directed at immigrant communities and anti?ICE protesters.

Neha Desai of the National Center for Youth Law, noted in response to the events, “The current conditions at Dilley are fundamentally unsafe for anyone, let alone young children... hundreds of families—including babies and toddlers—have been subjected to substandard medical care, degrading and harsh treatment and extremely prolonged times in custody.”

The South Texas Family Residential Center, located near the small town of Dilley and operated under federal contract

by a private prison corporation, is the largest family detention center in the United States. Built on a 50?acre site at an estimated cost of \$260 million per year, it was originally promoted as a “residential” alternative for women and children who had fled violence in Central America and sought asylum in the US.

The facility functions as a high-security concentration camp with a surrounding fence, cameras, controlled entry through metal detectors and security guards called “residential supervisors.” Reports for the past decade have described overcrowded conditions, constant head counts and bed checks, and a climate of fear that expose as lies the DHS claims that Dilley is not a prison.

The facility has the capacity to hold roughly 2,400 people. Its central purpose has been to warehouse families who are waiting for immigration hearings or appealing removal orders, often in direct violation of the 1997 Flores settlement, which requires that children in immigration custody be placed in the least restrictive setting and released “without undue delay” to relatives or licensed programs.

Under Trump’s revived family?detention policy, Dilley has become a key part of a nationwide system of camps, jails and “residential centers” used to detain asylum?seekers and mixed?status families. Texas state officials have deepened their collaboration with DHS, including the Texas Department of Public Safety and local sheriffs helping to arrest thousands of undocumented immigrants and funnel them into ICE and DHS custody.

The Dilley protest also exposes the criminal character of DHS in the year since Donald Trump returned to the White House. After declaring a national emergency and “invasion” at the southern border, Trump has unleashed federal immigration agents as an American Gestapo to carry out pre?dawn home raids, arrests at schools and workplaces, indefinite detention and illegal deportation.

During 2025 at least 31 people have died in ICE custody, the highest annual toll in roughly two decades. In the first days of 2026, ICE has reported four additional deaths in its facilities, all men between 42 and 68, bringing the total since the crackdown began to some 34 or 35 known deaths in ICE custody.



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