

“I am 5 years old. I want go home”: Children’s letters expose nine months of torture at Texas immigrant concentration camp

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For more than nine months, five children from the El Gamal family have been imprisoned at a “family detention” center in Dilley, Texas, despite none of them being accused of committing a crime.

The family, including five children now aged 5, 5, 9, 16 and 18, has been held since June 3, 2025. Their continued detention is based solely on their relation to a family member accused of committing a violent act. In sworn testimony submitted to the US Senate Judiciary Committee, the children and their mother state that they had no knowledge of or involvement in the alleged crime.

The treatment of the El Gamal family revives the Nazi policy of Sippenhaft, under which authorities inflicted punishment on relatives of accused individuals in order to intimidate the broader population.

In a letter accompanying the children’s testimony, attorneys Eric Lee, Chris Godshall-Bennett and Niels Frenzen condemned the detention regime imposed on the family.

“When an adult confines a child, denies them medical care, bars their access to education, and feeds them meals that contain dirt, worms and fingernails, the law rightly brands such person a criminal and strips them of custodial rights,” the attorneys wrote.

“How can it be, then, that when the United States government systematically inflicts these same outrages upon hundreds of children in its custody as a matter of official policy, the executive branch claims it is administering justice and enforcing acts of Congress?”

The lawyers noted that the letters submitted by the children constitute a devastating record of abuse.

“The El Gamal children’s letters establish that the United States government is engaged in an effort to crush children’s spirits and spoil their innocence,” they wrote, adding that the family’s treatment is not the result of bureaucratic oversight but the “intended result of official White House policy to punish this family.”

The letters themselves document the brutal reality of life inside the Dilley concentration camp.

Hayam El Gamal, the children’s mother, described the trauma of being imprisoned with her children despite their innocence.

“The worst feeling on earth is to be oppressed and tormented while watching your children suffer from endless injustice right before your eyes, all while being completely powerless against this oppression,” she wrote.

Hayam recounted the events that led to the family’s detention. After discovering her husband’s alleged actions, she said she was devastated and condemned the violence.

“Any use of violence is condemned by me, religiously and morally,” she wrote. “Violence is never acceptable.”

Despite their lack of involvement, federal agents detained the family and transferred them to the Dilley facility. Conditions inside the camp, she wrote, are abusive and degrading. Children are served repetitive processed food, often contaminated, while access to medical care is routinely denied.

“Medical treatment is probably the biggest issue in this place,” she wrote. “The medical administrator and most providers are among the meanest, unkindest and rudest people you could ever meet.”

Her 16-year-old son suffered appendicitis while detained, she explained. A nurse refused treatment.

“He was crying and screaming in pain, yet the nurse looked at him coldly and said, ‘I can’t help you now; come back in three days if the pain persists,’” Hayam wrote.

Only after he collapsed vomiting on the floor was he transferred to an emergency room.

Hayam also described the devastating psychological impact on the younger children.

Her five-year-old son, who had been potty-trained for years, now wets the bed nightly, while his twin sister wakes up screaming from nightmares.

“My nine-year-old daughter,” she wrote, “the one who loved math and school and was loved by everyone, now says, ‘I hate my life.’”

The family’s eldest child, 18-year-old Habiba El Gamal, described the despair produced by their indefinite imprisonment.

“Every morning we wake up wondering how much more of this we can take,” she wrote. “Nine months in detention has felt like an eternity.”

“We are being held not for something we did, but simply because we are related to someone who committed an awful and unforgivable act—an act we had absolutely no part in and one we fully condemn.”

Habiba described how agents deceived the family when taking them into custody.

Officials claimed they were being moved to another hotel “for safety,” she wrote. Instead, the family was driven to a remote detention facility.

“We drove into a garage and watched it close behind us,” she wrote. “We felt trapped. We thought we got kidnapped.”

Habiba, who hopes to attend Harvard Medical School and become a doctor, wrote that the experience has shattered the life she had worked to build.

“I would have never expected to go from a girl who was doing everything to achieve her dream, to a girl that had her life destroyed just because of her father,” she wrote.

The family’s 16-year-old child described similarly brutal conditions inside the facility, including contaminated food, constant fluorescent lighting and the denial of medical care.

“I haven’t slept like a human being in nine months,” the teenager wrote.

“This prolonged detention has and continues to destroy our lives. It is slowly killing us on the inside.”

Some of the most heartbreaking testimony comes from the younger children.

In a handwritten letter, the family’s nine-year-old child pleads for release:

“We have been here for nine months. ... When will we get out of here?”

“All of my friends left. I miss all of them.”

“Why can’t we be released like them?”

“Please get us out of here.”

The child ends the letter with the words: “I hate CoreCivic. :(”

Alongside the letters, the children submitted drawings depicting their family and their longing to return home and attend school.

One drawing by the nine-year-old shows the family standing together under a bright sun beside the question: “When we will go home?”

Two drawings by a five-year-old express a similar plea. One depicts the CoreCivic detention facility and the child with a sad face beside the words: “I am 5 years old. I want go home.”

Another shows a school and children alongside the words: “I want go school. I miss my bear.”

The Dilley detention facility has long been the target of protests over the conditions imposed on migrant families. Last year, hundreds of detained children protested inside the facility, while community members rallied outside demanding their release.

The camp has also been the site of repeated disease outbreaks, including multiple measles cases reported earlier this year.

The continued imprisonment of the El Gamal family exposes the real character of the US immigration detention regime. A government that claims to defend democracy abroad is imprisoning children for months because of the alleged actions of a relative.

If the state can detain this family indefinitely despite their

innocence, the precedent is clear. The same methods can be used against workers, students and political opponents.

At the same time that the US government is bombing school children, hospitals and residential homes in the name of “security,” it is inflicting profound psychological trauma on children inside detention camps within the United States.

The demand must be the immediate release of the El Gamal family.

But the issue goes far beyond a single case. The existence of family detention camps themselves—where children are imprisoned, denied medical care and subjected to indefinite detention—must be dismantled.

The Socialist Equality Party reiterates its call for the creation and expansion of neighborhood and workplace defense committees, united with workers in the US and globally through the International Workers Alliance of Rank-and-File Committees (IWA-RFC). This network of committees, organized independently of the corporate-controlled union bureaucracies and the entire political establishment, must advance the following demands:

- All immigrant detention centers, including Dilley, must be closed immediately, with those released free to live and work where they please.
- A massive public health program must be launched to test everyone at Dilley, in the surrounding community, and wherever measles is currently spreading in the US, with patients safely isolated and treated.
- Vast resources must be provided to vaccinate all those eligible for the measles, mumps and rubella (MMR), COVID-19, influenza and other vaccines essential for public health, both in the US and internationally.
- All ICE operations, detentions, deportations and the criminalization of migration must end now.



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