



The
CENTER for
VICTIMS of
TORTURE



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Thousands of Torture Survivors Seeking Asylum Held in U.S. Immigration Detention Facilities
Immigration Detention Experience Retraumatizing and May Lead Survivors to Relive Torture

St. Paul, MN & Washington, DC – As policymakers consider returning to comprehensive immigration reform, a new report released today by the Center for Victims of Torture (CVT) and the Torture Abolition and Survivors Support Coalition International (TASSC) estimates the U.S. government, from October 2010 to February 2013, detained approximately 6,000 survivors of torture as they were seeking asylum protection.

According to *Tortured & Detained: Survivor Stories of U.S. Immigration Detention*, for survivors whose torture may have occurred while in a confinement setting, the immigration detention experience is often retraumatizing and may lead survivors to relive their torture and suffer further psychological damage. Moreover, the indefinite nature of immigration detention may trigger a profound sense of powerlessness and loss of control, contributing to additional severe, chronic emotional distress.

“As a general matter, survivors of torture should not be detained but, when they are, they should be treated with dignity, have access to basic information and legal counsel, and be released—safely and with adequate supports—as quickly as possible,” said Annie Sovcik, Director of CVT’s Washington Office and the report’s lead researcher and author.

“The Torture Abolition and Survivors Support Coalition is greatly concerned by the detention of asylum seekers and the resulting retraumatization of torture survivors in various detention facilities,” said Gizachew Emiru, Executive Director of TASSC International. “The overall conditions of the detention facilities are deplorable, and almost 84 percent of the detainees have no access to any kind of legal assistance. Survivors and other asylum seekers are forced to represent themselves and often lose their legal battle only to be deported to the country where they were once tortured or persecuted.”

Asylum in the United States can be a lifeline for torture survivors, yet for many survivors detained upon arrival in the United States, the conditions under which they are held—both in short-term holding cells managed by the U.S. Customs and Border Protection and in detention

centers used by U.S. Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE)—are particularly detrimental. Many already are struggling with the long-term psychological effects of torture in their home countries, such as severe anxiety, depression, and post-traumatic stress disorder.

“Asylum seekers arriving in the United States in search of protection regularly express shock at the way they are treated and at the conditions in which they are held,” explained Sovcik. “They believe they have reached a place of safety and protection, then find themselves arrested and shackled, with very little information about what is happening to them or what to expect.”

To illustrate the personal and psychological impact of the detention experience, CVT and TASSC conducted interviews with asylum seekers and torture survivors who have been held in immigration detention facilities in the United States. Their profiles contained in the report are firsthand accounts of what asylum seekers and torture survivors are seeing, thinking, feeling, and enduring as they arrive in the United States and are arrested, shackled, and confined.

The report also offers several recommendations to Congress, the Department of Homeland Security, and the Department of Justice needed to mitigate the harmful impact of detention on torture survivors and to improve the immigration detention system overall. Among the recommendations:

- **The Department of Homeland Security** should promulgate regulations establishing basic minimum standards of care at all U.S. Customs and Border Protection facilities;
- **The Department of Homeland Security** should cease using actual jails and prisons for immigration detention purposes and more effectively invest in Community Based Alternative to Detention Programs;
- **The Department of Justice** should expand the Legal Orientation Program to serve all detention facilities used by ICE and guarantee that all immigrants in detention receive a legal orientation presentation as soon as possible;
- **Congress** should eliminate mandatory detention and cease mandating that ICE detain a set number of individuals on a daily basis so that detention decisions can be made on a case-by-case basis; and
- **Congress** should provide adequate funding to allow the Department of Justice to expand LOP nationwide and to the Department of Homeland Security specifically to support the expansion of Community Based Alternative to Detention Programs.

“TASSC International once again urges that the United States live up to its ideals and overhaul its flawed and unfair immigration policy and repeal those provisions of the Illegal Immigration Reform and Immigrant Responsibility Act that mandate detention of asylum seekers,” added Emiru.

Tortured & Detained: Survivor Stories of U.S. Immigration Detention is made possible by the support from the Unitarian Universalist Service Committee.

The Center for Victims of Torture

CVT is an international nonprofit organization dedicated to healing survivors of torture and war atrocities and to working for a world without torture. CVT provides direct rehabilitation services at its healing sites in Minnesota, the Middle East, and Africa, and trains or supports partners in the United States and abroad who are working to prevent and treat torture. CVT advocates for human rights and an end to torture through CVT's New Tactics in Human Rights program and through its policy work in Washington, DC. Visit <http://www.cvt.org>.

Torture Abolition and Survivors Support Coalition, International

TASSC is the only organization in the United States founded by and for survivors of torture. TASSC operates independently of any political ideology, economic interest, governmental influence, or religion. TASSC members represent countries and ethnic groups from all parts of the world and advocate to abolish the practice of torture wherever it occurs. Visit <http://www.tassc.org>.

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