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VICTIMS of
TORTURE

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A Survivor at the Southern Border Grapples with Isolation



Illustration by Amanda Scheid

It was her first day volunteering at the El Paso Processing Center. Andrea Cárcamo-Cavazos, immigration attorney and CVT senior policy counsel, spent a week this past summer assisting asylum seekers detained at the southern border. As she walked through the processing center, she was struck by how much it felt like a prison. The room where she waited to meet with a detainee didn't even have handles on the door. "I panicked," she said, "failing then to understand how much worse it must feel for a detainee whose stay is indefinite. Suddenly, a man in a blue jumpsuit walked in."

Andrea told the man that she and the colleague who accompanied her had come to help him with his credible fear interview, a pre-screening that determines whether an individual is qualified to apply for asylum. They launched into a series of questions, starting with why the man had fled Honduras. "Instead of starting by telling us

that he'd been persecuted," Andrea recalled, "he told us the story of how his parents met. He said he was the product of their love for each other."

The man continued, recounting memories of being bullied as a child, mainly for playing with girls and his lack of machismo. The teasing persisted, in fact worsened, as he got older. The man dropped out of school. Going to the police wasn't an option; they shamed him for similar reasons. Later, his own family tried to kill him. They knew he was gay.

The man said to Andrea, "I did not choose to be born this way," and pulled at his jumpsuit. It seemed to her that he was trying to tear something away from his body. "Silently," she said, "I wondered how the United States could justify keeping this man, and others in similar circumstances, behind bars."

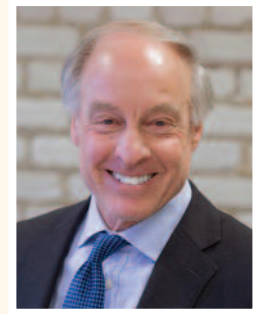
Andrea consulted with Las Americas, the nonprofit that hosted
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Restoring
the Dignity of
the Human Spirit

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Letter from the Executive Director



Curt Goering

Dear Friend,

President Trump and certain officials in his administration have been steadily working to increase harm upon already-traumatized individuals and families seeking safety in the United States. Asylum seekers at our southern border are facing egregious human rights violations on a daily basis—violations that continue to worsen with this administration’s policies.

It issued a new rule attempting to bar asylum seekers principally from Central America. The rule would require that they establish they were denied asylum in a third country en route to the United States. A significant number are survivors of torture and other types of severe trauma, and for many this rule is a death sentence. Like other despicable and deliberately cruel Trump policies, the rule violates both U.S. and international law.

In partnership with more than a dozen refugee and human rights organizations, CVT has endorsed a plan that offers real solutions to the humanitarian crisis at our southern border, protecting refugees and restoring order from the chaos President Trump has created.

This comprehensive plan recommends strategies involving diplomacy and aid, public-private initiatives, alternatives to detention, and reinstating timely and fair adjudications, to alleviate the crisis. Four key areas must be addressed:

1. Taking on what is driving families and children to flee from Honduras, Guatemala and El Salvador—including deadly violence, torture and other human rights abuses, climate displacement, and wretched poverty.
2. Expanding the capacity of countries in the region to host refugees seeking asylum so that more families and children will be able to find protection in those countries.
3. Managing the arrival of people seeking asylum in the United States effectively, and with a genuine humanitarian response that upholds U.S. law and restores order.
4. Fixing the asylum and immigration court systems to provide fair and timely decisions and reverse Trump administration policies that rig the system against asylum seekers.

Our voices have never been more vital as human rights defenders and advocates for torture survivors and terrified asylum seekers and refugees. I am more grateful than I can express to have you at our side as we strive to create a better future for the world’s most vulnerable and hurting people.

With my thanks,


Curt Goering

“I can open up my shell ...”

*A story of hope as told by a survivor**

Every time I hear their steps, I feel my breath run away from me. The jailers pull us out of that tiny, stinking cell, naked, into an arena. We are forced to stand on our naked feet in the middle of February for more than half a day. A harsh, random beating is delivered to any whose feet betray them, allowing them to fall.

“Look at this daring man, how he stares at me. I will teach you a lesson you will remember for the rest of your life!” the interrogator said. Those were the last words I heard before I lost everything and closed my shell tightly on myself. The shell that I still wear. The shell that I doubt will ever open again.

Did Thomas Edison know when he invented electricity that it would be applied with vengeance on people like me? What an absurd thought, as I sit on this electric chair, a cap strapped to my head, about to burn me beyond reason. With every new scream of current, I felt each cell of my body cursing its fate that it belonged to this

body. I was screaming and begging, but to whom?

In that tiny room, my knees were closer to me than ever. One meter long, one meter high. They forced me into a tightly bound position, closing myself on myself. And when they took me out, I could not convince my knees to hold me. The result was an unexpected beating, and the jailer forced my knees into position although I was not able to stand.

Two years have passed since I left that prison. I am far removed from the people around me, 100 light-years of thoughts and emotions between me and everyone in the world. My mind flounders from thought to thought, with no connection. Even my body flounders. My steps are clumsy and unsure. My balance, inside and out, has evaporated.

The sound of a door slamming freezes me. I can't get my breath. It seems like I haven't breathed in a lifetime. My life since that time has been like waking into a body that does not belong to me. How can I understand what has happened? How can I go through these menial tasks of daily life? I have lost everything, even myself. How can a person mourn the loss of itself?

It was around this time that I walked through the doors of CVT. The journey I would take in this place began from the first welcome at the reception and continued through the long process of therapy. I learned that trauma is not about



Farah Al-Dweik, senior physiotherapist, CVT Jordan, describing a client's experience.

the event itself, but rather its effect on my brain and my nerves. My body, mind, and spirit. And even on my capacity to have relationships.

CVT creates a space where the safety begins at first contact. Yes, I reached the bottom of myself through my journey in the jail before I started to trust myself again. Little by little, I have begun to feel safe in my body. At CVT, I discovered that, despite the horror and the loss, I am resilient. It's my innermost self that will support me through this process; and gradually, slowly, I find I can open up my shell to the external world.

**Some details have been changed for security and confidentiality.*

How can I understand what has happened?

I have lost everything, even myself. How can a person mourn the loss of itself?

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(from page 1)

her, about how to appease the man's anxiety. He said he feared discrimination from the other detainees. She learned quickly that he was right to feel this way. If ICE officers discovered that the man was gay, it could result in him being thrown in solitary confinement.

According to a Department of Homeland Security whistleblower, ICE subjects immigrant detainees to indefinite stretches of isolation for reasons other than misconduct, like when a detainee openly identifies as gay. "At CVT, we know that solitary confinement is often a front for torture," Andrea said. "Isolation denies a detainee contact with other human beings, a form of sensory deprivation that can have profound and long-lasting psychological consequences, including severe anxiety and hallucinations."

Survivors at CVT face a similar kind of anguish, and even risk being re-traumatized, as they wait for a decision on their asylum cases. Fear for his life forced Jon, a young man in his 40s, to make the excruciating decision to leave his wife and four children behind in central Africa. He found his way to the United States. However, as the years have slowly passed while he waits for asylum, Jon has seen a worsening of his depression.

The extensive delays and separation from loved ones make complete recovery difficult. He describes leading a life "not fully alive," with little expression of joy as he has no options but to remain far from loved ones. The isolation is sometimes too much to bear.

For the man in El Paso, solitary confinement would only compound the isolation he's grappled with his entire life. "It's also one of many

unacceptable immigration detention practices the U.S. allows, such as paying detainees one dollar for a full day's work," notes Andrea. "Instead of fixing or calling attention to these practices, many of our lawmakers continue to support funding ICE while maintaining little oversight. Individuals running away from harm are detained as criminals, and Americans are paying for it."

Fortunately, at Andrea's suggestion, the man met with a social worker and confided in her about his predicament. He was therefore able to avoid solitary confinement. However, Andrea is well aware that other detainees—specifically those who are in the midst of coping with severe depression and loneliness—might not be so lucky.

By Sabrina Crews, marketing and communications specialist

Ways to Support Healing and Hope for Survivors

Charitable Contributions—To help survivors heal and advocate for an end to torture worldwide, CVT relies on the generosity of our supporters. Your gifts restore the dignity of the human spirit and we thank you for also considering the many ways you can further support CVT.

Circle of Hope, CVT's Monthly Giving Program—By providing a reliable, continuous source of funding, members of our Circle of Hope sustain all of CVT's healing care and advocacy. Monthly giving is hassle-free and decreases administrative costs so that more of your generous support helps survivors directly as they rebuild their lives.

Workplace Giving and Corporate Matching Gifts—Designating CVT as the recipient of employer-matched charitable giving is an easy way to leverage your generosity. You may be able to arrange a simple payroll deduction and

some companies will match your donations, doubling or even tripling your impact in healing survivors and working for an end to torture.

Planning Your Legacy—You don't have to be wealthy to leave a legacy of hope for survivors with a bequest in your will or another planned gift. There are many ways you can extend your support of CVT where you can benefit as well and spare your loved ones complex probate procedures and costly taxes. For more information on making a planned gift to the Center for Victims of Torture, please contact Anna Zaros at 612.436.4859 or giving@cvt.org.

Donate online at www.cvt.org, send a check to 2356 University Avenue W, Suite 430, St. Paul, MN 55114 or call 612.436.4808 for other ways to give. Thank you for your ongoing commitment to healing the wounds of torture.



The
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