CVT at the Southern Border

“I feel privileged that these courageous men and women are open to share their experiences with me,” says Andrea Cárcamo-Cavazos, CVT senior policy counsel, about her trip to a U.S. government detention center in El Paso, TX, where she volunteered, providing legal assistance to asylum seekers. Here is her story...

By Andrea Cárcamo-Cavazos, CVT senior policy counsel

In mid-May, I had the opportunity to travel to El Paso, Texas, to meet with asylum seekers in detention. The following is a summary of my five-day visit.

Day One: I arrived and met with other visiting attorneys. I was briefed on the circumstances facing individuals at the detention center where I’d be working.

Day Two: I visited the El Paso Processing Center, which houses both men and women. It was just like a prison. The detainees wear jumpsuits and have headcount three times a day. I could only speak to them on a phone through glass windows, or in a little room with no handles on the door. I had to knock for the guard to let me out. A woman I met told me she only receives $1 a day in wages for her kitchen work at the center. I also helped detainees prepare for their credible fear interview (CFI), which an individual can’t apply for asylum without passing. I was supposed to prepare over 10 detainees for their CFI, but the majority had already been transferred to other states. That’s probably good, since El Paso has one of the worse asylum grant rates in the nation.

Day Three: Back to the El Paso Processing Center. I began to notice that the detainees wore different colored jumpsuits. When I asked why, a guard informed me that the colors correspond to the offenses committed by the wearers. I saw one man in a red jumpsuit, and after speaking with him, learned he had committed a felony. A man from Honduras told me he had not been returned to Mexico because of the risk he faced for being gay. Even though he had been spared, he told me he feared discrimination by other detainees here. He kept repeating, “I didn’t ask to be born this way.”

Day Four: Another day at the El Paso Processing Center, helping an asylum seeker work on representing himself before an immigration judge. In El Paso, it’s extremely difficult to win an asylum case, even with an immigration attorney. There’s so much need and so little representation that many organizations can help individuals to prepare for their cases—like I did in this instance with another attorney—but are unable to provide full representation.

Visit to Ciudad Juarez: I crossed the border to Ciudad Juarez with other volunteer attorneys. Taylor Levy, an immigration attorney (see page 3)
Dear Friend,

What the Trump administration is doing to further harm already-traumatized individuals and families seeking safety in the United States is beyond cruel.

The administration wants increased funding to jail more asylum seekers and expand the use of indefinite detention. A shocking percentage of asylum seekers are torture survivors and prolonged jail time with no end in sight has profound psychological consequences for them.

Asylum seekers, many of whom are unaccompanied minors and torture survivors, are among the most vulnerable people at our border; denying them their rights is not just immoral, it’s cruel.

President Trump is also seeking to expand capacity at the infamous family detention center in Dilley, Texas that has been described as a prison by many who have visited it. The American Academy of Pediatrics has made clear that “even brief detention can cause psychological trauma and induce long-term mental health risks for children.” The Center for Victims of Torture’s clinicians treating adolescent refugee and asylum-seeking torture survivors concur.

And in yet another blow to asylum seekers, President Trump has proposed changes to the asylum process in which Customs and Border Protection (CBP) officers will conduct credible fear interviews of asylum seekers. Survivors of torture or extreme trauma applying for asylum will be required to recount very personal and painful information to CBP officers—armed law enforcement officers, charged with securing the border and apprehending people—who lack the skills and training necessary to conduct these critical and often difficult interviews. CVT’s clinicians have expressed grave concerns about this change in policy and we are advocating against it.

This new tactic could make it nearly impossible for deeply traumatized torture survivors to successfully pass the first stage in the asylum process. This could mean that a significant number of survivors will be deported to face persecution, and even death, in their home countries.

CVT has been fighting for a humanitarian response to the crisis at the border and for more effective, humane alternatives to detention. We are forcefully refuting the false and intentionally misleading claims about asylum seekers that Donald Trump is spreading. The dangers in the countries that force people to flee are very real and the administration’s cold-hearted and callous response is unconscionable.

Thank you for standing with CVT in advocating for the rights of refugees and asylum seekers. As the Trump administration tries to narrow the path to asylum and healing for survivors of torture, your voice and your vigilance have never been more needed.

I’m grateful to have you with us.

With my thanks,

Curt Goering
A Passion for Helping

For many years, Eric Radtke and Jane Eccles have been supporting CVT in many ways, both as volunteers and financially. Recently, Eric and Jane were kind enough to share their passion for helping survivors of torture with CVT staff.

Why did you first get involved with CVT?

When Jane and I retired in 2013 we agreed we would use some of our new free time for volunteering and were moved by CVT’s mission and the stories of clients. Our initial assignments were to serve as “community guides,” which we have continued to do.

What motivates you to support CVT?

For CVT clients, the transition of adapting to a new and foreign place is more daunting as they face the complexities and uncertainties of the asylum process. For many, having left family behind adds tremendous strain. Plus they’re living with the painful effects of torture.

Helping ease the burden of these challenges and aid in the healing process for our clients has been rewarding beyond words. Some of the assistance is very practical—helping with driver’s tests, filling out paperwork, getting to medical appointments and food shelves, learning to use public transportation, providing reading and cultural lessons, etc.

One client with two young children, following a visit to the State Fair, told us his kids considered us their Minnesota grandparents since they were unable to see their own back in their home country.

What are the greatest challenges facing refugees and asylum seekers today? How do you see CVT facing those challenges?

CVT provides a safe space in which clients can address the unimaginable torture and pain inflicted on them. It also provides multiple resources and advice: connecting clients with services to help with health, housing, transportation, legal and social services.

On a broader scale, the role of CVT as a national and international leader in the public policy arena on issues of human rights and torture is also critical.

CVT at the Southern Border

(from page 1)

working for Annunciation House in El Paso, guided us. Crossing the bridge back to the U.S., we waited for over an hour—not long compared to other days. Taylor pointed toward the middle of the bridge, where asylum seekers are turned away by U.S. authorities. When another attorney asked Taylor if it was safe to be in Ciudad Juarez, Taylor replied that it was safe for us because we had American passports. Sadly, it’s a different story for migrants who’ve been stripped of their rights by their own government, by Mexico and by the United States. Taylor once saw a family who had just been denied entry get kidnapped right in front of her. She was powerless to help.

Day 5: Before I left, I helped detainees with asylum case preparation. I also visited the gay detainee, and informed him that someone from the Borderline Rainbow Center would visit him to conduct an evaluation that would be helpful in his case. LGBTQI individuals are considered vulnerable by the U.S., but often detained, usually for indefinite periods. I heard that at least one transgender woman was detained in the male section of a detention center outside El Paso. Disturbingly, these individuals are often detained with people who look like their former perpetrators.

I realized on this trip that the media isn’t paying enough attention to what’s happening at the border, or at least not the right kind of attention. If you aren’t willing to listen to individual stories, you won’t get the truth. And the truth is that asylum seekers at our southern border face egregious human rights violations daily—violations that continue to worsen with the Trump administration’s policies.
Finding “Furaha” (Happiness) at CVT Kakuma

by Justine Chepngetich

I joined CVT Kakuma as a physiotherapist last year, eager to begin serving clients who are survivors of torture. When I started conducting intake interviews for our first 10-week-long group therapy session, I gave them an overview of CVT and explained how physical therapy not only addresses the physical wounds sustained from torture, but treats manifestations—sleeplessness and headaches, for example—of emotional stress.

While most clients were intent on enrolling, some wondered how they would manage to complete the physical exercises our sessions involve, due to factors such as age and/or limited mobility.

At the first physical therapy session I presented CVT’s physiotherapy manual to the group. I wanted to communicate right away the information clients needed to know and understand, primarily the stages of trauma healing.

We immediately and collectively set clear, attainable goals for the 10-week, once-a-week sessions, so the group felt supported, ready to work and confident about fulfilling their objectives. Setting goals and basic rules for achieving them allowed clients to feel grounded in, and in control of, the healing process from the very beginning.

Very quickly, the group developed a great rapport. Whenever we’d stop for refreshments, clients seemed uplifted. They were not only benefiting from physical therapy, but also from the opportunity to socialize. They talked freely, promised to support each other and even came up with a name for their physical therapy group: Furaha, which means happiness.

After completing CVT Kakuma’s first 10-week session, clients’ perceptions of CVT and physical therapy changed drastically. Many now consider CVT to be a hospital that heals the body and the mind without injections or drugs. They view exercise as medicine. They wish CVT could serve more people in Kalobeyei.

Ways to Support Healing and Hope for Survivors

Charitable Contributions—To help survivors heal from the wounds of torture 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—Monthly sustainers help survivors on their healing journeys year-round! 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.

Contact giving@cvt.org or 612.436.4808 if you have any questions about donating to CVT.