

Asylum seekers endure horrible conditions in prison

By **ANDREW SELSKY**
Associated Press

SALEM — Strip searches. Overcrowded cells with open toilets. Scant meals that violate religious restrictions.

Federal public defenders say 120 asylum seekers are enduring those conditions at a federal prison in Oregon where some have considered suicide and at least one has attempted it.

“We are dying day by day inside here,” one detainee said, William Teesdale, chief investigator for the federal public defender’s office in Oregon, wrote in a filing in federal court in Portland.

The immigrant was unwilling to be identified in the filing due to fear of persecution or retaliation, Teesdale said in the documents.

Most of the asylum seekers held at the prison in rural Sheridan say they faced risks in their home countries, including India, Nepal, Guatemala, Mexico and China.

Instead of being welcomed to the U.S., they ran into the “zero-tolerance” policy of the Trump administration that calls for the detention of people who try to enter the country illegally.

“Here we have come to save our lives but I think we will die here in jail,” one detainee said, according to Teesdale’s affidavit.

Several detainees have

untreated medical conditions, including a heart problem, gunshot wound and broken leg.

He said they are triple-bunked and confined for long hours in cells with open toilets. They must eat in the cells and have no indoor or outdoor recreational opportunities.

They are strip-searched in front of other detainees, and Hindus were given beef and pork to eat, even though it’s against their religion, and tried to survive on just the vegetables accompanying the meals, Teesdale said.

Immigration and Customs Enforcement recently transferred four detainees to a center in Tacoma, Washington, for specialized medical care, ICE spokeswoman Clarissa Cutrell said.

The agency has no comment on the conditions in Sheridan due to pending litigation, Cutrell said.

Leland Baxter-Neal, an attorney with the American Civil Liberties Union of Oregon, called the conditions inhumane and unconstitutional.

The Trump administration’s decision to put the immigrants in the prison, where they mixed for three weeks with the general prison population, has caused “chaos, confusion and massive human suffering,” he said.

Federal Public Defender



Doug Brown/ACLU via AP

In this June 25 photo provided by the ACLU, Leland Baxter-Neal of the American Civil Liberties Union of Oregon poses in his office in Portland. Baxter-Neal said Friday that massive human suffering has resulted from the Trump administration’s decision to lock up asylum seekers at the prison in Sheridan.

Lisa Hay said in a letter to Warden Josaias Salazar and Acting ICE Field Office Director Elizabeth Godfrey that her office learned of an apparent suicide attempt by a detainee.

“Both those who witnessed the incident and those who heard of it have expressed great distress,” Hay said.

Other detainees also considered killing themselves, court documents state.

Petitions were filed Wednesday by Hay’s office

seeking court hearings for five detainees, whose names were redacted because of their security concerns.

“I have to cry in my pillow,” an immigrant identified as ICE detainee No. 1 said in his habeas corpus brief. “I have suicidal thoughts but then I remember my family. My family is all that keeps me going.”

The public affairs office of the Federal Bureau of Prisons did not immediately respond to a request for comment.

A statement filed in court shows the prison had to scramble to take in the immigrants, who were sent there because other holding facilities used by ICE were overloaded.

The prison received only one day of notice — on May 30 — that about 130 detainees would be arriving, Amberly Newman, an adviser to the prison warden, said in a declaration in federal court.

She said they had to be mixed with the general

prison population for the first three weeks before they could be separated into different units.

One of the detainees described guards making him and his two cellmates strip to their underwear.

“In the night, it gets so cold in the cell and when I was in boxers and T-shirt, I was terribly cold,” he said, according to his habeas corpus filing.

Victoria Bejarano Muirhead of Innovation Law Lab said her Portland-based group has engaged over 80 volunteers to provide legal services to the detainees.

Those seeking asylum must show authorities they have credible fear in their homelands. Twenty of those immigrants at the prison have provided statements that lead to hearings before a judge, Muirhead said in a conference call with journalists.

Hay wrote on July 9 to Salazar and Godfrey that some conditions have improved, “but continue to fall below the minimum standards set by our government for immigration detention and, in my view, violate the Constitution by imposing punitive detention on civil detainees.”

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TAKEN: Alvaro was led away in handcuffs, no goodbyes allowed

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“Never in my life have I seen fear like I saw in his eyes that night,” Torres-Medrano said.

She waited helplessly as police sorted through the fact that Alvaro was undocumented, driving without a license and had a juvenile record from years earlier when, she said, he tried to escape the neglect at home by looking for acceptance in the wrong crowd. She said she must have smoked a whole pack of cigarettes, one right after another, to try to calm herself down.

“It was the most intense feelings I have ever felt,” she said, breaking into sobs.

“I’m sorry, I don’t ever talk about this,” she said after a moment, her voice cracking as she wiped away tears with the back of her hand. “It was harder because they showed no sympathy. It was just another traffic stop for them.”

Alvaro was taken away in handcuffs without being given the chance to hug his girlfriend, his mother or his infant son goodbye. He spent Christmas in a holding facility in Tacoma, then was sent to Mexico, a country he had only vague memories of. They left him with an ill-fitting pair of shorts, a T-shirt, cheap sandals and enough money to make a single phone call to Torres-Medrano.

“He said, ‘I don’t even

have socks. I don’t know what to do,’” she said.

He spent the night on the street, and was able to eventually make contact with his grandparents, who lived in a different city, and make his way there.

Meanwhile, Torres-Medrano — who had just turned 18 and wasn’t on speaking terms with her family — fell into depression.

“I didn’t want to be alive,” she said.

She survived those first confusing, terrifying months as she tried to figure out what the rest of her life would look like, and pulled herself together for her son. After two years she was able to scrape together enough money to visit Mexico.

Alvaro seemed to have lost the will to live, she said. When she headed back to the United States for work a couple of weeks later, he begged her to leave their son in Mexico and she relented, worried what it would do to him if she said no. She knew other people who had died after getting deported and deciding they didn’t care — a fatal attitude in a place where walking down the wrong gang’s street can get you killed.

“That was the hardest thing for me,” she said.

She sent money as often as she could, and picked the boy up a year later. They have not returned since.

A complicated process

Torres-Medrano is now living with her sister Selene

Torres-Medrano, a Umatilla city councilor.

Selene recently made a passionate plea during a council meeting for community members to show compassion to their immigrant neighbors. She was born in the United States, but she has been touched by her sister’s story, by growing up in the care of her undocumented mother, and by friends who are undocumented “Dreamers,” not allowed to become citizens of the country they grew up in.

She remembers waiting each night with Thalia for their mother to come home from working in the fields, sometimes for less than minimum wage. They stayed inside and hid when there were rumors of immigration officials — “la migra” — in town. And they knew if mom didn’t come home they were supposed to call their aunt and tell her she had been taken away.

In the end it was their aunt who was deported and their cousins who made that call to them.

“I do remember it was a pretty sad time in our family,” Selene said. “The kids were left behind and we didn’t know what would happen. Our cousins missed their mom.”

The cousins — U.S. citizens — went to Mexico for a while, but the region where they lived didn’t have a school that went past elementary level and so even-

tually their mother sent them back to the United States to get an education and start their families where there is more opportunity, less poverty and less violence.

“My aunt can’t be part of her kids’ life,” Selene said. “She can’t be a grandma. She misses those milestones, those birthdays. It’s hard on my cousins.”

Immigrating legally from Mexico costs more than many are able to afford and it takes years, even decades. That’s not counting the 10 years that those who have been deported from the U.S. must wait before trying to return legally. Congress has so far declined to create a path to citizenship for those currently living in the country undocumented.

Selene said she can’t believe the misconceptions people spout about undocumented immigrants. She

doesn’t understand why Americans think that people who walked thousands of miles across the desert, risking death and rape and enslavement, then suddenly decided they were too lazy to fill out some paperwork that would solve all their problems.

“It’s not like the DMV, where you go and get in line for a couple of hours and you get your paperwork settled and they call and say you’re going to take your test in a couple of weeks,” she said. “Is that how people think it works?”

Selene worries about Initiative Petition 22, which will allow voters this fall to vote on Oregon’s “sanctuary” status, which bars local law enforcement from using their resources to apprehend people whose only crime is being in the country illegally. She said even citi-

zens such as herself could be affected by racial profiling — being pulled over and asked to prove their citizenship because of the way they look.

Thalia said it has been hard seeing so much about immigration on the news, from debates about DACA to children being separated from their parents at the border. She cried when she talked about seeing a news report about a man in his 60s who was deported from his wife and family — and realized she was jealous of him.

“I think, you guys had all those years together and I didn’t even make it to adulthood,” she said. “We didn’t end it, they ended it for us. He just got taken away ... It hurts me because I get reminded that I’m part of that.”

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