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PRELIMINARY REPORT ON IMMIGRATION DETENTION CONDITIONS AT SOUTH LOUISIANA CORRECTIONAL FACILITY, BASILE, LOUISIANA

The following report on the detention conditions for ICE detainees at the South Louisiana Correctional Facility in Basile, Louisiana, was prepared by the New Orleans Workers' Center for Racial Justice based on a facility investigation including interviews with 28 detainees from seven different countries. Detainees' times of residence at the facility ranged from less than one week to over five months.

Scarcity and Inhumane Conditions

Detainees report regular hunger and weight loss because the facility provides them with inadequate food and drink. The food that is provided lacks nutritional value, and detainees regularly develop stomach problems after consumption. For instance, rice and meat are undercooked. Detainees also report that a Jewish detainee recently conducted a three day hunger strike before he was finally provided with Kosher food. Detainees report that meal times are irregular and occasionally a meal is skipped.

Detainees report unhygienic conditions and increased illness because the facility provides irregular and inadequate rations of basic hygiene products including toilet paper, soap, toothpaste, and deodorant. Rations are provided approximately every two weeks; however, they are inadequate to last more than a few days. Detainees are required to supplement by purchasing additional supplies or borrowing from newly arrived detainees.

Detainees report the facility provides inadequate basic clothing. Until the recent fast, male detainees were provided one pair of socks and two pairs of nylon underwear at entry processing. After the fast, the facility provided 20 additional pairs of boxers for 72 detainees in one cell. Replacement of underwear and socks takes weeks or months, and so detainees wash them nightly. Detainees desiring undershirts and cotton underwear or boxes are required to purchase them at the commissary. Investigators witnessed many detainees lacking undershirts who reported they could not afford them.

Detainees report the facility provides irregular replacement of towels and inadequate bedding for the temperature of the dorms. Despite cool temperatures, detainees are not provided blankets and must purchase them. Many detainees reported chronic illness and inability to sleep because they are so cold.

Detainees in one cell report that only one of the two toilets available to approximately 70 detainees is functioning. Because of a malfunction, the showers run water all day and night; however, detainees are only permitted to shower at one time daily.

Detainees report increased anxiety, depression, and mental tension because the facility provides limited access to recreation. Recently, several weeks passed without detainees being allowed recreation time outside. Recreation equipment is limited to one checkerboard inside and several deflated balls outside for approximately 1000 detainees.

Finally, detainees report feeling humiliated and degraded based on guards' lack training, cultural sensitivity, and racism. Detainees report that some guards are abusive and use profanity on detainees, particularly those that cannot communicate in English. Other detainees report that some guards walk around clicking their handcuffs to signal authority. In sum, detainees repeatedly described that guards treated like "animals" and "dogs."

Lack of Access to Fundamental Information

Detainees report a high level of stress and anxiety that they do not know when their Court dates are, where their case is in the legal process, and other fundamental information. They have difficulty reaching their deportation officers or finding out answers to these basic questions. There are no regular "Know Your Rights" trainings, videos, or materials available to detainees at the facility. Detainees are not given copies of the "National Detainee Handbook" in Spanish upon arrival at the facility.

Detainees further reported language access as a major problem. Although a majority of the detainees are monolingual Spanish speakers, the detention center has no staff that is bilingual in Spanish and English. Miscommunication often results in aggression and punishment from guards. Guards use detainees who speak and understand some Spanish and English to interpret for other detainees even in confidential medical, grievance, or other matters. Detainees are not provided handbooks, grievance forms, or other documents in Spanish. This contributes to the severe isolation described herein.

The majority of the detainees reported difficulty accessing their Consular officials reporting that the telephone numbers posted in the detention center did not appear to function and were not answered.

Severe Isolation

The majority of the detainees reported suffering depression based on gaps of at least one month—and often more—in communication with their families. Several detainees speak of it as if they have been "disappeared" from their families. The facility does not provide detainees a free opportunity to communicate their basic location to their family upon arrival. The phone cards are prohibitively expensive for many detainees. Detainees who are able to purchase them wait 3-4 weeks before receiving the card even after the money has been deducted from their account. Finally, detainees report that different cells use different phone service providers. One detainee related how he used his only money to buy a phone card to speak to his family and waited weeks to receive it. The day he received it he was transferred to another cell with a different phone system and the card was worthless. He still has not spoken to his family to alert them of his whereabouts.

The isolation from being out of touch with family by telephone and being unable to communicate with detention center staff is compounded by the geographic distance of the facility from family, friends, and advocates. Basile, Louisiana is located approximately four hours from New Orleans, the closest metropolitan area with a substantial immigration bar and social service providers. Detainees from Nashville, Tennessee, the largest percentage, are over 700 miles from their communities.

Finally, the detention center allows only one family visit each month for those who have family and friends nearby. One detainee reported that his wife, who is now eight months pregnant, lives nearby, but he is not able to see her more than once a month even after their child is born.

Non-transparent and Inhumane System of Deportation

Detainees report lingering at the facility for months after the Court has entered a deportation order. They are not given information about when they will be deported. Detainees from the same country are not deported in the order that their deportation orders were entered. The lack of transparency creates anxiety and an inability for detainees and their families to plan.

Detainees also report that ICE refuses to expedite deportations even in cases of extreme emergency—including the grave illness or death of parents and children.

Lack of Responsible Oversight by Immigration and Customs Enforcement

Despite housing close to one thousand immigration detainees, this facility has never been reviewed by those generally monitoring detention standards in these facilities: DHS, the ABA, or the United Nations High Commission for Refugees.

Detainees report that there is no effective way to address conditions that fall below the INS detention standards. Facility grievance forms are often unavailable and formal complaint forms to DHS are never available. Detainees report that facility staff, including those apparently deputized by ICE to review grievances on its behalf, refuse to accept complaints and/or dismiss them in a cursory way without opportunity for appeal or review by a higher authority.