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**Immigrant abuse**

In mid-September, several organisations including Project South filed a complaint with the inspector-general of the Department of Homeland Security (DHS OIG) about medical abuse immigrants were facing at the Irwin County Detention Center in the US state of Georgia. It provided shocking details of medical malpractice including a high number of invasive gynaecological procedures with dubious consent procedures, in some cases leading to sterilisation. The complaint was based in part on revelations by Dawn Wooten, a whistleblower nurse employed at the centre.

According to media reports, at least 57 women have come forward with complaints of forced and harmful gynaecological procedures endured at the hands of the doctor contracted by Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE) to provide medical care and some have faced retaliation by the authorities for speaking up. The medical abuse at the detention centre has once again brought to light the need for the international community to investigate the practices of the DHS and its agency, ICE.

Several weeks after the complaint was filed, on October 23, House Representatives Rashida Tlaib, Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez, Ilhan Omar, and Ayanna Pressley sent a letter to the United Nations, calling for a thorough, impartial and transparent investigation by the Office of the UN High Commissioner for Human Rights (OHCHR) into the numerous, persistent and grave violations committed with impunity by DHS against immigrants detained in its custody.

Shortly after, several civil society organisations, including Project South, submitted a communication to the OHCHR Special Procedures Office with the relevant mandates, also requesting an investigation. The document also calls on the UN to urge the US government to take all necessary measures to end the abuse, and to provide full redress and reparations to those who have suffered in ICE custody at the Irwin County Detention Center, and immigrant detention centres across the country.

The different mandate holders will make decisions about what follow-up is necessary. They may issue a statement of concern urging an end to abusive practices within immigrant detention, protection and redress for those women who have come forward; request an invitation from the US to conduct a site visit to allow for an independent investigation and consultations with affected parties, other stakeholders, and US government representatives; and can ultimately issue a formal communication of their findings and recommendations, including urging an end to immigrant detention except in extremely limited circumstances and only as a matter of last resort, consistent with international law.

A statement or communication from the UN Human Rights mechanisms can then form the basis of advocacy within the US, especially with the incoming Biden administration and within the international community, including countries whose nationals have been directly harmed.

These formal requests submitted to the UN are a recognition of the failure of all three branches of the US government to bring an end to a history of abuse within immigrant detention. This is not just a failure of the Trump administration, but of successive administrations which have continued to pursue immigration policies that violate basic human rights and dignity and enrich private prison corporations.

Violations carried out by ICE officials have persisted and so has abuse in private detention centres. ICE has continued and expanded contracts with such institutions. including LaSalle Corrections, which operates the Irwin County Detention Center. Last year, ICE’s own inspector general issued a report detailing various violations by detention centres, including the inadequate provision of food and medical services.

Human rights organisations have also found evidence of various forms of abuse, including deprivations of the right to freedom of religion; medical neglect with fatal consequences; unsanitary and inhumane conditions of detention; forcible separation of children from their parents; deaths of immigrants at the hands of US Customs and Border Patrol; and retaliation against whistleblowers and others seeking redress for abuses in detention.

For years, immigrants at the centre and human rights advocates have been calling for recognition of their right to dignity and to be treated humanely, but with little success.

Having witnessed for a long time the refusal of the US authorities to hold themselves accountable for these grave abuses, we, as legal experts, have worked together in pursuit of accountability through international institutions.

In May 2018, Project South and the Penn Law Transnational Legal Clinic sent a letter to the OHCHR, which detailed numerous violations suffered by immigrants detained at both Irwin and Stewart, including the rampant use of solitary confinement as a form of punishment and control; forced labour and exploitation of immigrants’ labour; alarmingly inadequate, neglectful and negligent medical care, as well as the provision of unsanitary food and water; a disregard for immigrants’ cultural and religious beliefs and race-based discrimination; denial of due process; and interference in the right to family life.

In October 2018, 11 separate independent human rights monitoring bodies operating under the auspices of the OHCHR sent a formal communication to the US government expressing grave concern over reported rights abuses committed against individuals held in immigration detention at the Irwin County Detention Center and the Stewart Detention Center, also in Georgia and run by the for-profit corporation, CoreCivic.

In the two years since we sent this letter, we have repeatedly called upon the US government to end these abuses, yet instead, they have persisted. Between October 2018 and now, 30 immigrants are reported to have died in immigrant custody, four of whom were detained at Stewart.

The time has come for DHS and ICE to have their reckoning. The international community must respond by leading an independent, thorough and transparent investigation that ultimately results in accountability and redress for the untold number of immigrants and their family members who have suffered at the hands of ICE and the contractors profiting from their detention and abuse.

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