

An Open Letter From Scholars to President Barack Obama: Release Mothers and Children from Detention

We are writing to you as scholars concerned with the well-being and safety of the Central American mothers and their children being detained at the “Karnes Family Residential Center,” and in other family detention camps in Dilley, TX and Berks County, PA. Although many have passed credible fear screenings, they remain in detention after as many as eleven months.

National news stories have recently brought necessary attention to the critical situation of these families. In the face of this increasingly untenable situation, detained mothers announced a hunger strike on Monday, March 30, 2015 to demand their release. In a document signed by 74 detained women, the strikers call for their release. The document created by the women expresses their frustration with the length of their detention period and the conditions they endure there. In particular, they draw attention to chronic hair and weight loss among the families—issues that are especially troubling in the case of the children.

Through reports from visitors to the center, we are also alarmed to learn of women and children’s widespread psychological trauma resulting from prolonged detention. We know of children as young as 9 years old who state they no longer want to live at all if they must live under these conditions. Indeed, Dr. Luis Zayas, a clinical social worker and the Dean of the School of Social Work at the University of Texas at Austin noted in a declaration that the practice of family detention has caused “irreparable damage” to the families held in detention.

Rather than work to alleviate the conditions facing these families, ICE officials and GEO employees have responded with further abuse in the following forms: placing women they presume as “strike leaders” into isolation rooms along with their children; threatening striking mothers with the legal loss of parental rights and the physical separation from their children; and invading the families’ privacy through systematic surveillance that includes video taping. We condemn these punitive measures along with the entire practice of family detention.

As scholars, we join U.S. faith leaders and the American Bar Association in calling on President Obama to end its detention of families and other deterrence-based detention practices. Many of these families have already suffered severe violence in the form of domestic abuse, gang violence, or sexual violence. They left their home countries to flee these conditions only to find that the United States government, through its practices of detention, is also violating their rights. Based on our studies of the dynamics that lead to the forced migration of the families, it is clear to us that this detention as deterrence policy is dangerous and destined to fail. To date, this policy is responsible for these women and their children having languished in detention centers where they feel they are treated as prisoners without having committed any crimes. Political considerations should not prevent us from providing international protection to these families under the principal of non-refoulement, which states that governments should not return asylum seekers to their prosecutors.

In light of declining health of the women and children and the punitive and authoritarian nature of ICE's response to the families, we call on you, President Obama, to use your executive authority to alleviate this critical situation. We urge you to release the women and children held in the nation's three family detention centers (including those with a prior deportation) and end the practice of family detention.

Sincerely,

The Undersigned