



Submission to the United Nations Special Rapporteur on Human Rights Defenders

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We welcome the opportunity to contribute to the report by the Special Rapporteur on the situation of human rights defenders on challenges and risks faced by human rights defenders in remote and isolated areas. This submission describes harms perpetrated by the United States against organizers, hunger strikers, and advocates for human rights incarcerated in immigration detention centers, the majority of which are in remote and isolated areas.

The United States operates the world’s largest immigrant incarceration regime, detaining a daily average of 37,000 people while it determines their eligibility for protection from deportation. Immigration detention centers are repurposed prisons formerly used for criminal punishment or jails that currently incarcerate people awaiting criminal trial or serving a criminal sentence. Over 90% of detained immigrants are held in for-profit, private prisons.

The majority of immigration detention centers are located in remote and rural areas and 67% of detained people have been held in a rural and isolated location at some point during their custody. This isolation, in turn, restricts access to legal counsel and protections from deportation, prolonged detention, and abusive conditions of confinement. The United States also weaponizes transfers of detained people to remote detention centers to retaliate against human rights defenders.

Immigration detention is rife with human rights abuses. Detained people experience inhumane conditions, including preventable deaths, medical neglect, torture through prolonged solitary confinement, forced labor, physical and sexual abuse, denial of due process, denial of language access, and discriminatory and racist treatment. The supposedly “civil” immigration detention system is intentionally punitive, designed to coerce people to renounce legal rights to protection from deportation and to deter further immigration.

Detained human rights defenders regularly protest abuses of human rights in detention by engaging in peaceful demonstrations and hunger strikes. In response, the United States retaliates through brutal force, deployment of pepper spray and rubber bullets, life-threatening medical neglect, torturous solitary confinement, and isolation in remote locations. The following examples illustrate these tactics.

- **Pine Prairie ICE Processing Center (Pine Prairie, Louisiana)**

Pine Prairie ICE Processing Center (“Pine Prairie”), a private prison owned and operated by the GEO Group, is a former criminal detention facility in Louisiana over 100 miles from the nearest urban center. People detained there consistently report retaliation against protestors and hunger strikers.

Angel Argueta Anariba, a Honduran immigrant detained at Pine Prairie, participated in multiple hunger strikes to protest mistreatment and inhumane conditions. Officials retaliated against him with solitary confinement, constant verbal abuse, and physical attacks, including an assault that caused severe shoulder injury and left Angel with long-term pain and disability.

Retaliation against human rights defenders like Angel reflects a systemic pattern of abuse in remote Louisiana immigration detention centers. In August 2019, Pine Prairie officers shot tear gas and rubber bullets at approximately 115 hunger strikers. At least one required cardiopulmonary resuscitation after being shot with tear gas. After the attack, officials locked the hunger strikers in solitary confinement and denied communication with legal counsel, friends, and families. In August 2020, Pine Prairie officials attacked a group of 45 Black asylum participating in a hunger strike that began as a March 2020 peaceful protest against inadequate COVID-19 precautions and racist mistreatment. While protesters sat on the floor with raised arms, 15 officials attacked them with tear gas and pepper spray. One person heard the “snap” of bone as an official broke a protestor’s arm while wrestling him to the ground. Officials in riot gear then rounded up all 45 hunger strikers and took them to the solitary confinement unit. Many of these hunger strikers were subsequently deported to Cameroon, where U.S. officials retaliated against their activism while detained by giving documents from their asylum cases to the Cameroonian government, which then imprisoned several of them as national traitors.

- **Stewart Detention Center (Lumpkin, Georgia)**

Stewart Detention Center (“Stewart”), a private prison in Georgia owned and operated by CoreCivic, has been described as “one of the most remote immigration detention centers in the country” and one of the deadliest. On any given day, more people are detained at Stewart than the population of the nearest town, Lumpkin, Georgia.

Stewart is infamous for “notable claims about torture and abuse.” Detained human rights defenders have engaged in hunger strikes to protest prolonged detention, inadequate COVID-19 safety protocols, and inedible and inadequate food. A 2017 inspection of Stewart by the U.S. government found improper treatment of detainees, delayed medical care, and lack of cleanliness and access to hygienic supplies.

Retaliation against human rights defenders speaking out against these conditions is common. In 2019, guards used gas bombs, rubber bullets, and excessive force against human rights defenders peacefully protesting denial of time outside cells and inhumane conditions. In 2020, guards in military gear pepper-sprayed detained human rights defenders on at least two occasions for peacefully advocating for adequate protections against COVID-19. In 2023, more than more than 200 detained people signed a petition against inhumane conditions and daily mistreatment.

An organizer of the petition was subsequently threatened by detention center leadership staff with punishment for his advocacy.

- **Orange County Jail (Goshen, New York)**

The Orange County Jail incarcerates immigrants in deportation proceedings alongside people awaiting criminal trial and serving shorter-term sentences for criminal convictions. Orange County officials wield transfer to remote and isolated immigration detention centers in other parts of the United States to retaliate against human rights defenders.

In 2021, dozens of immigrants detained at Orange County Jail coordinated to speak out about medical neglect, racist harassment, and physical assault that they had faced. They filed grievances, administrative complaints, and contacted elected officials, reporters, and advocates. In February 2022, guards [retaliated](#) against hunger strikers with solitary confinement, preventing them from communicating with the outside world. The hunger strikers continued to advocate by filing complaints with the U.S. Department of Homeland Security and testifying before the New York City Council. In response, in July 2022, immigration authorities transferred several to a rural and isolated detention center in Mississippi, separating them from their families and attorneys in New York. The same day, officials locked other hunger strikers in solitary confinement.

- **Moshannon Valley Processing Center (Clearfield County, Pennsylvania)**

The Moshannon Valley Processing Center (“Moshannon”), a private prison in Pennsylvania owned and operated by the GEO Group, is the largest immigration detention center in the northeastern United States and one of the largest in the nation. Moshannon is located more than 200 miles from the nearest urban center and more than 250 miles from the Immigration Court where Moshannon’s detained population make virtual appearances.

U.S. officials [routinely mistreat](#) detained people at Moshannon. Denial of language access rights, compounded by Moshannon’s remote location and lack of access to legal services, directly impedes detained human rights defenders’ ability to file grievances and complaints in defense of fundamental human rights. Protection of rights is further impeded by fear of retaliation, including solitary confinement, [excessive force and sexual assault](#), and other oppressive measures. Human rights defenders attempting to navigate grievance procedures or seeking access to required care and other rights are routinely dismissed or met with disciplinary actions and other retaliation. Four of six individual complainants in a July 2024 complaint to the U.S. Department of Homeland Security experienced disciplinary actions—including solitary confinement—for raising and filing grievances or seeking care following assaults. Two additional individuals opted to participate in the complaint as anonymous declarants for fear of retaliation.

- **Northwest Detention Center (Tacoma, Washington)**

The Northwest Detention Center (“NWDC”), a private prison on the coastal tide flats of Washington state owned and operated by the GEO Group, is infamous for [egregious conditions](#) of confinement, including sanitation issues, medical neglect, and sexual assault. It also has one of the nation’s highest rates of [solitary confinement](#) in immigration detention, with deadly consequences:

on October 27, 2024, José Manuel Sánchez Castro, an immigrant from Mexico died in medical segregation. And in March 2024, [Charles Leo Daniel](#), an immigrant from Trinidad and Tobago, died serving the second-longest stretch in solitary confinement of any person in ICE custody since 2018: 1,244 days. Christian Dueñas Barraza, from El Salvador witnessed his death and made it public. As retaliation, he was transferred to Prairieland Detention Center, Texas.

Deaths at NWDC are not unprecedented. On November 18, 2018, Russian human rights defender Amar Mergansana died after being placed in solitary confinement for hunger striking. NWDC's life-threatening neglect of detained people prompted several mandate holders of the Special Procedures to the United Nations to issue urgent appeals in [February 2018](#) and in [April 2020](#). On July 27th, 2020, the Inter-American Commission on Human Rights implemented [precautionary measures](#) to address risks to the rights to life and health of people detained at NWDC.

NWDC officials use torturous tactics against human rights defenders. In March 2016, a 26-year-old Somali woman on hunger-strike was subjected to force-feeding. NWDC officials have repeatedly deployed force and chemical agents to suppress protests and hunger strikes. Between 2015 and 2023, at least [70 use of force incidents](#) have occurred at NWDC, including use of chemical agents at least 29 times. In [February 2018](#), in response to a hunger strike by over 120 people, officials severely beat the hunger strikers before subjecting them to 20 days in solitary confinement. In [February 2023](#), officials deployed tear gas against a group of 100 hunger strikers protesting inedible food, unsanitary living conditions, and forced labor. [Video footage](#) shows officials in riot gear and armed with rifles, surrounding the protestors and using hoods and handcuffs to restrain them. In 2024 alone, ten hunger strikes have been documented, including a person who attempted suicide, demanding release or affordable bonds, sanitation and cleaning, adequate food, and transfer to be closer to family, or deportation. They have faced retaliation including blocking communication with advocates and families, unwarranted searches and confiscation of personal and legal mail, and use of chemical agents by guards. In October 2024 the Inter-American Commission visited NWDC and interviewed hunger strikers, monitoring conditions. As of this writing, hunger strikers are being held in medical segregation.

- **Golden State Annex (McFarland, California), Mesa Verde ICE Processing Center (Bakersfield, California), Adelanto ICE Processing Center (Adelanto, California), Desert View Annex (Adelanto, California)**

The GEO Group owns and operates four ICE detention centers in California: the Mesa Verde ICE Processing Center, Golden State Annex, Adelanto ICE Processing Center and Desert View Annex, the latter two located in the remote Mojave Desert. For years, detained human rights defenders have [exposed](#) and [protested](#) ongoing [deplorable conditions and abuses](#) inside these detention facilities. In response the United States has [retaliated](#) with [further abuses](#), including excessive force and restraints, indiscriminate use of chemical weapons, forced strip searches, [sexual harassment](#) and [sexual abuse, weaponization of medical care](#), and [solitary confinement](#). Members of the U.S. [Congress](#) call [systemic abuses](#) at California's detention centers "disturbing," condemning retaliation against people who speak out about abuses and [calling](#) for the federal government [to end](#) its [contracts](#) with the GEO Group.

On July 1, 2024, approximately 60 people at Golden State Annex and Mesa Verde launched a labor strike to protest worsening conditions, ongoing retaliation, prolonged detention, and revocation of free phone calls.

One striker, Jonathan Montes, noted:

I'm going on hunger strike for the third time because I want ICE and those with authority to make a difference and I don't see them doing anything. I've seen my friends face retaliation, get sick, pass out, and get transferred out of state as punishment for standing up for what's right. People in here are putting their lives on the line

The labor strike escalated to a hunger strike and retaliation has included threats of solitary confinement, confiscation of legal materials, physical assault, and deprivation of recreational time.

In light of the United States' use of systemic retaliation to suppress detained people in remote immigration facilities, we encourage the Special Rapporteur to publicly condemn this abuse and meaningfully implement the United Nations Declaration on Human Rights Defenders to ensure the protection of human rights defenders in immigration custody.

Respectfully submitted,



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