

Immigration's human rights shame is now a moral crisis

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The human rights scandal that immigration has become gets worse with every new revelation of official abuse, neglect and lack of accountability.

Over the last couple of weeks, it has become clear that the scandal goes beyond the raids that terrorize thousands of immigrant families, or the hodgepodge of local - and often racist - anti-immigrant laws that have emerged after Congress failed to pass a rational immigration law.

Recent revelations have exposed the blatant disregard for the lives of those detained by Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE) and its private subcontractors around the country. What goes on inside immigration detention centers points to a moral crisis that threatens to shred the nation's basic values.

On May 5, New York Times reporter Nina Bernstein told the horror story of mistreatment, neglect and subsequent death of Boubacar Bah, who had been imprisoned at the Elizabeth Detention Center in New Jersey.

The 52-year-old tailor from Guinea, who had overstayed his tourist visa, became one of 66 immigrants who have died - several of them in murky circumstances - while detained in immigration jails.

Shockingly, between January 2004 and November 2007, more detainees have perished while in custody of ICE than in Abu Ghraib and Guantanamo combined.

Shocking but not surprising, given the extremes to which the government is taking its war on immigrants, said Roberto Lovato, an immigration writer for New America Media and The Nation.

"The death, violence and neglect suffered by immigrants would not be possible without the increasingly radical dehumanization seen daily on TV, heard on radio and felt in the daily raids on homes and workplaces," Lovato wrote in his blog.

It is an unfortunate fact of life that since 9/11, legitimate concerns about national security have been turned by nativists and racists into an excuse for the dehumanization and persecution of immigrants. Current immigration laws unfairly deny basic due process to millions of noncitizens, including many long-term, lawful permanent residents.

Noncitizens' rights - and the Constitution - are being violated by locking them up, exiling them from their homes and taking them away from their families without access to a lawyer, or an opportunity to post bond or explain their circumstances in immigration court, or to have a judge decide their fate.

The official attitude has been one of indifference toward the neglect and violence immigrants - asylum-seekers included - suffer while in detention.

Yet the consequences of these injustices are so terrible that suicide has become the most common cause of death among detained immigrants. In a May 10 to May 13 four-part investigative series about poor medical care in detention centers, Washington Post writers Dana Priest and Amy Goldstein reveal that suicide accounted for 15 of 83 deaths since 2003.

That was the year when ICE took over control of the detention centers.

"Inside these out-of-the-way compounds around the country," Priest and Goldstein wrote, "suicide attempts seem to be on the rise, according to internal documents: 16 in June, 21 in July, 20 in August."

Yet as Amy Gottlieb, director of the American Friends Service Committee's immigrant rights program said, "It is not just about the conditions at the centers. We have become a nation of jailers and we need to question very deeply how people are profiting from the suffering of others."

The country's moral fabric is as much a victim of this horror as the immigrants who die in these American gulags.