

New York Times

Editorial - Secrets of the Immigration Jails

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Americans have long known that the government has been running secretive immigration prisons into which detainees have frequently disappeared, their grave illnesses and injuries untreated, their fates undisclosed until well after early and unnecessary deaths.

What we did not know, until a recent article in The Times by Nina Bernstein, was how strenuously the government has tried to cover up those failings — keeping relatives and lawyers in the dark, deflecting blame, fighting rigorous quality standards, outside oversight and transparency. These deficiencies endure today.

It took digging by The Times and the American Civil Liberties Union to unearth the evidence. A detainee with a broken leg killed himself; his pain had been unbearable but never treated, and someone later faked a medication log to show that he had been given Motrin. A spokesman for Immigration and Customs Enforcement told a reporter asking after a mortally injured African detainee that nothing could be learned, even though the spokesman and top managers already knew the man had fallen, fractured his skull, lain untreated for more than 13 hours, was comatose and dying. The officials fretted by phone over how to avoid unflattering publicity.

Here, as evidence of the agency mind-set, is a spokesman's warning to his supervisors about a Washington Post reporter who was looking into detention deaths and the story of a man whose fatal cancer had been ignored and untreated:

“These are quite horrible medical stories, and I think we'll need to have a pretty strong response to keep this from becoming a very damaging national story that takes on long legs.”

The strong response? A misleading public-relations offensive designed to show that mortality in detention was less serious than it really was.

The Obama administration has since promised a top-to-bottom reform of the immense detention system, which was erected in sloppy haste during the Bush years, largely by private contractors that had dim regard for oversight and standards. John Morton, the leader of Immigration and Customs Enforcement, has promised to create a system of civil detention suitable for inmates who are mostly not criminals.

But his agency has a long way to go. And it still is resisting adequate outside oversight and the adoption of legally binding detention standards, insisting instead that it can best change its own rules and police itself. The new disclosures about the agency's deep-set culture of shameful secrecy do not inspire confidence