

Center for the Victims of Torture

Torture, Former Combatants, Political Prisoners, Terror Suspects, & Terrorists

<https://www.cvt.org/blog/healing-and-human-rights/refugees-and-asylum-seekers-brace-themselves-covid-19>

Public Facing Advocacy Writing

The world's most vulnerable populations are facing unprecedented risks as the coronavirus continues to spread. Refugees and asylum seekers living in camps and detention centers, where prior to the current crisis access to adequate medical treatment was limited, face devastation with the most meager of defenses in place. Protective items like masks, disinfectants, soap and even water are scarce. Living in a tent or a cell with five or six other individuals makes social distancing impossible. Services provided by nonprofits are vanishing as those organizations pull employees and volunteers from the field to shield them from the virus. Resources in host countries will be stretched beyond their limits, which will leave refugees exposed and place their lives at even greater risk.

After recently visiting asylum seekers forced from their homes by violent conflict and currently waiting at the U.S. southern border, Andrea Cramo, CVT senior policy counsel, said, The shelters and camps are at capacity. Asylum seekers can't practice social distancing and appropriate hygiene, as they are crammed in rooms, and some shelters don't even have running water. The coronavirus is going to spread like fire if the Mexican or U.S. government doesn't step up.

Additionally, the Trump administration is using COVID-19 to further justify a rapid-fire deportation system that in practice does away with humanitarian protection and violates international and domestic law. The *Washington Post* [reports](#) that expulsions back to Mexico are occurring faster than ever. And this is without screenings for humanitarian needs, in violation of the United States non-refoulement obligations under both the Convention against Torture and the Refugee Convention, which are not excusable because of the COVID-19 pandemic. Indeed, there are reports showing that migrants have been tortured and persecuted in dangerous border Mexican cities, and that potential asylum seekers the U.S. has expelled to their countries of origin have then been persecuted on protected grounds.

Although an internal [guidance](#) document [reportedly](#) circulated by DHS to U.S. Border Patrol indicates that asylum seekers might be referred to an asylum officer if the asylum seeker makes an affirmative, spontaneous, and reasonably believable claim, in practice it's extremely unlikely that someone who was tortured would be able to communicate this effectively and without any prompting to a uniformed (and likely armed) officer. Suspended in limbo, those subject to the Remain in Mexico policy waiting for court dates that have been delayed will be exposed to sickness and other dangers like kidnapping and torture.

At Mexico's northern border they face a serious risk of kidnapping, said Andrea. In one of the shelters in the Rio Grande Valley border sector, MSF (Doctors Without Borders) reported that 80 percent of the people in shelters had been kidnapped at some point. Perpetrators were kidnapping and holding people who have family in the U.S. for ransom purposes.

The situation in overseas refugee camps is similarly dire. Our clients are experiencing fresh nightmares, fresh fears, says Paul Orieny, Ph.D., LMFT, CVT senior clinical advisor for mental health. Some of CVT's clients are locked at home and that looks very similar to being locked up as they were in the past. There's no progress in healing. There's a lot of anxiety, and with anxiety there's so much comorbidity with depression.

In the Kenyan refugee camps of Dadaab and Kakuma, CVT is transitioning to a telehealth format, with counselors speaking to survivors of torture via mobile phones. Stress and trauma levels are high according to Paul. With cramped spaces that are often too hot to stay inside during the day and with the requirement to get basic rations at crowded distribution centers, daily life in the camps is an incubator for a virus such as COVID-19. People often have to wait in lines for hours to get water, and the water they get is prioritized for cooking, which can jeopardize other hygiene needs like frequent hand washing. Paul fears the removal of essential services like food distribution as NGOs are pulling aid workers from the camps. Refugees are scrambling to meet basic needs. There have been a few reported cases of COVID-19 in camps around the world, but medical personnel lack the means to test for the coronavirus.

Many refugees and asylum seekers confined to shelters and cells, noting how the outside world struggles to contain the virus and mitigate its damages, feel hopeless and abandoned. Both Andrea and Paul agree that the conditions in the camps and shelters are grave. Andrea said, As COVID-19 continues to reveal weak points in government action, it is also exposing many gaps in protections for the most vulnerable gaps that we now know must be fixed. She urges concerned readers to call congressional representatives to tell them to demand that the administration end MPP, stop the expulsions of asylum seekers at the border, and ensure that all asylum seekers have a fair and meaningful opportunity to seek protection in the United States as required by domestic and international law.

In addition, people who wish to help [can send donations](#) to support our work on behalf of torture survivors during these extraordinary times, which includes:

In this dark time, CVT is doing everything we can to protect and support refugees and asylum seekers. We are all in this together.

We **heal victims** of torture through unique services and professional care worldwide.

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We **strengthen partners** who heal torture survivors and work to prevent torture.

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We **advocate** for the protection & care of torture survivors and an end to torture.

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