

## ***Detained Asylum-Seekers Find It Harder to Win Release***

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### **Body**

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As a human rights advocate in West Africa, Jean-Pierre was jailed four times, repeatedly tortured and forced to pay a \$15,000 ransom to his captors in exchange for his freedom. He faked his own death and even staged a funeral to escape his native Guinea, and in 2007 sought asylum in the United States.

But instead of refuge, he **found** a new form of captivity: He was handcuffed at Kennedy International Airport and locked up for five months in an immigration jail in Elizabeth, N.J.

"I had a genuine reason for coming here and ask for protection, but I was **detained**," said Jean-Pierre, 29, who insisted that his last name be withheld to preserve his privacy in his current work on AIDS prevention. "They handcuffed me like a criminal and gave me a uniform. That was devastating and stressful. It was like reliving my jail in Guinea."

For more than a decade, arriving **asylum-seekers** have faced the possibility that they will be **detained** while immigration authorities oppose their admission, under stricter laws passed in 1996. But a new study by the international advocacy group Human Rights First, shows that it has become **harder** for them to **win release** while their cases are considered.

Since 2003, when the Department of Homeland Security took over immigration enforcement, the number of beds in prisonlike **detention** centers has risen by at least 62 percent, the study **found**. At the same time, the percentage of **asylum seekers released** on bond or parole dropped by 42 percent for those the authorities **found** to have a "credible fear" of persecution. In 2007, more than 3,000 **asylum seekers** were **detained** soon after arrival in the United States.

In jail, they often face inadequate medical and mental health care, and a lack of legal representation that can keep them locked up for years, according to the researchers, who visited **detention** centers in New York, New Jersey and other states.

On Tuesday, the group planned a briefing in New York for Congressional staff members and others, calling for remedies that include improved conditions and alternatives to **detention**.

"The U.S. **detention** system needs to be reviewed from top to bottom," said Eleanor Acer, the director of the group's refugee protection program.

In response, Dora Schriro, recently appointed as the immigration agency's special adviser, wrote the group a letter saying she had already begun a thorough review of **detention** policies and practices. The report, she wrote, "identifies areas for improvement we can address immediately."

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Jean-Pierre said that during his months in the Elizabeth Detention Center, which is run for the federal government by the Corrections Corporation of America, he thought of suicide whenever he heard that another detainee had been deported. He had nightmares in which a soldier tried to kill him.

"In jail, doctors just gave me sleep medication, but I did not want to sleep, to have more nightmares," he recalled.

But Jean-Pierre was one of the lucky ones. He was released in April 2008 and was granted asylum three weeks later. Now he is active in a Christian congregation in Manhattan and is trying to bring his wife over from Africa.

Other asylum seekers have grown sicker. This report and others have traced the damage that detention can work on the physical and mental health of refugees, many of whom have endured torture and trauma in their native countries.

A 2003 study of 70 detained asylum seekers by Physicians for Human Rights and the Bellevue/N.Y.U. Program for Survivors of Torture found that 86 percent suffered significant depression, and half suffered from post-traumatic stress disorder. Dr. Allen Keller, the program's director, said people in detention could easily be retraumatized. "The longer the detention the higher the psychological distress."

The report cited the case of a Brazilian woman who had come to the United States to escape domestic violence, but could not cope with the stress of eight months in jail. She withdrew her application and returned to her home country, even though she faced grave danger there.

"At one hearing, when she heard that the case was to be continued again -- meaning she would be detained longer -- she had a panic attack," her pro-bono lawyer, Kelleen Corrigan, recalled. "An external psychological evaluation stated that she needed ongoing therapeutic treatment, but despite my repeated requests to ICE, the client was never seen by a mental-health specialist while detained."

Immigration and Customs Enforcement would not answer questions about mental health services in detention. It said it could discuss specific cases if the individuals agreed to disclose their medical records, but the asylum seekers' lawyers advised against that.

Though detention in America holds few of the horrors many asylum seekers experienced in their home countries, it has its own torments; detainees can be placed in solitary confinement, and are often prevented from communicating with relatives by lack of access to phones or by the high costs of jail phone service.

"I left behind a pregnant wife, and I did not know about her for months," explained Kelsang, 23, a Tibetan who spent almost a year in the Elizabeth Detention Center before he was granted asylum in May 2008. He said he had seen his 2-year-old son only in photos.

"I barely slept, no more than two hours, and I was always nervous and afraid for my family back in Tibet," said Kelsang, who asked that his last name not be published because he feared the family would be harmed.

A Buddhist who supported the Dalai Lama, Kelsang said that during 13 months in Chinese custody he had been "tortured and beaten with an electric prod and a club." The New Jersey jail, he said, was not as bad. "At least I could practice my religion."

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## Graphic

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## Detained Asylum-Seekers Find It Harder to Win Release

PHOTO: Jean-Pierre, a human rights advocate, fled his native Guinea and was held for five months at a New Jersey immigration **detention** center. "That was devastating and stressful," he said. (PHOTOGRAPH BY HIROKO MASUIKE FOR THE NEW YORK TIMES)

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