

Forty-five-year-old migrant dies in US Border Patrol custody

By Meenakshi Jagadeesan
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A 45-year old man taken into custody by US Customs and Border Patrol (CBP) agents in early February has died in a medical facility in McAllen, Texas. This is the third reported death of migrants in the custody of CBP in the past few months and yet another horrifying illustration of the inhumane anti-immigration policies of the US government.

CBP released a short statement about the death, providing no details except to state that the man was from Mexico, and had been taken into custody at the Texas-Mexico border for “illegal reentry.” On February 2, upon being picked by agents while attempting the border crossing, he requested medical assistance and was taken to a medical facility. However, he was cleared by the facility for travel and taken to the Rio Grande City Border Patrol Station.

On February 3, the patient requested medical attention once again. This time, the McAllen, Texas facility admitted him, after diagnosing him with cirrhosis of liver and congestive heart failure. Within two weeks, these conditions claimed his life.

The official statement included a formal expression of condolence: “This loss of life is tragic ... CBP remains committed to ensuring the safe and humane treatment of those within the care of our custody.” Given recent reports, the claim cannot be taken seriously.

In early December, CBP reported the death of 7-year-old Jakelin Caal Maquin, who had to be hospitalized within days of being taken to a Border Patrol station. On Christmas Eve, 8-year-old Felipe Gómez Alonzo died after he was taken to a hospital, released, then returned to the hospital. This latest death, much like those of the young children from Guatemala in CBP custody, is the product of a system which has increasingly tended to treat those attempting to cross

the border without documents as less than human.

In early January, having conducted a close analysis of numerous internal audits and government reports, NBC News exposed the fact that in the past two years 22 migrants died in ICE custody. Some of these victims had arrived in the US as refugees and asylum seekers and had been long-term legal residents in the country. More than half of those who died in federal custody were younger than 45.

Roxana Hernandez, a Honduran transgender woman who had arrived with a migrant caravan, died within two weeks of being in ICE custody. On May 9, 2018, Hernandez requested asylum at the US-Mexico border and was taken into CBP custody. Four days later, she was transferred to ICE, which began a series of moves from California to Texas, and from there on to Arizona and finally New Mexico, all within a week.

On arrival in New Mexico on May 17, Hernandez was rushed to a hospital where doctors found her to be “dehydrated, starving and feverish” and diagnosed her as being in septic shock, in addition to having untreated HIV. A week later, she was dead. An independent autopsy later found that she had also been subjected to physical abuse.

The brutal and inhumane conditions under which migrants are being held in ICE facilities are by now well known. Department of Homeland Security’s (DHS) internal audits have revealed massive and system-wide issues, including maltreatment of detainees and lack of oversight.

In late 2017, the DHS inspector general reported “problems that undermine the protection of detainees’ rights, their humane treatment, and the provision of a safe and healthy environment” at four facilities. A second audit revealed that ICE failed to adequately inspect and monitor the more than 200 federal, local

and private facilities it uses across the country.

Last summer, a group of human rights organizations released their own report, showing that a series of problems including unnecessary delays, botched emergency care and administrative incompetence had led to “dangerously substandard” conditions for detainees. For some detainees, this situation led to suicide. As reported in the NBC News story, since January 2017, five men have taken their lives while in ICE custody. Three of the men were mentally ill and had spent days or weeks in segregation or solitary confinement.

Facing a situation where it can no longer deny the blatant abuse of detainees, the Trump administration has ludicrously taken to blaming the lack of funding for its foul anti-immigration policies. DHS Secretary Kirstjen Nielsen stated recently that the immigration system had reached a “breaking point,” advising those “who planned border crossings, to desist.”

ICE facilities have indeed been inundated with detainees, but this has less to do with the supposed flood of migrants swarming across the US border, and more to do with increasingly indiscriminate detention policies. Under Trump, ICE has been empowered to carry out ever-more expansive sweeps across communities in the US, resulting in massive arrests. In the past two years, these “administrative” arrests for violations of civil immigration law have risen 44 percent.

This is a situation that is unlikely to change in the near future. The ongoing militarization of the border, which has the support of both Republicans and Democrats, reveals the willingness of the ruling class to resort to even more brutal policing measures. The fact that despite all the measures already in place President Trump has declared a national emergency to deal with the “immigration crisis” shows that the war against immigrants will only escalate, leading to further tragedies.

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