



Testimony of Zena T. Asfaw
before the House Subcommittee on Immigration, Citizenship, Refugees,
Border Security and International Law
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Hearing on "Problems with Immigration Detainee Medical Care"

Hello, my name is Zena Asfaw. I am a political refugee from Ethiopia. I arrived in the United States on November 15, 2006, fleeing persecution from my home country. Upon arrival, I asked for political asylum in the United States. I was taken into custody by Immigration officials, and remained in custody for about five (5) months until an Immigration Judge granted my political asylum application on April 10, 2007.

I had never considered coming to the United States until I was jailed, beaten, and sexually assaulted after being arrested by the Ethiopian government. In late June of 2005, after the May elections in my country, the government arrested me for what they believed was my participation in the opposition party. There were many demonstrations regarding the legitimacy of the elections. Many believed that the government had committed fraud to win the election and to retain power. The government began to crack down on opposition party members as well as anyone they believed might be involved with the opposition. I was arrested after a police officer grabbed my cell phone and found some messages that had been sent to me by someone who did not support the government.

I was held for 12 days and released after I was forced to sign a document stating that I would not involve myself in any political movements. After I was released, I went to the hospital because I was having physical/female problems because of the sexual assault. I was given some medication for my symptoms.

I tried to put what happened to me at the jail out of my mind. I tried to move on with my life, continuing to work. In late October of 2005, there was a riot that happened after a demonstration. People were demonstrating once again against the government because of the fraudulent elections. The government began to arrest and detain opposition party members and anyone they suspected of being such. Soon after this, I received a letter from the police asking me to report for questioning regarding the riots. I decided to flee my country in order to save my life. I fled first to Kenya on October 27, 2005 and arrived in Los Angeles on November 15, 2006. It took me 13 months, traveling through 17 countries to arrive here.

Because of the troubles and difficulties I endured in my country, I will never regret making the decision to leave. I am alive and safe and I am grateful to the United States for giving me refuge.

Upon arrival in the United States, I was photographed, fingerprinted, X-rayed and then transferred to the Immigration detention center located in San Pedro, CA. Upon arrival at the detention center I went to the medical unit and reported having female problems. I was given some antibiotics, which did not help.

After complaining about not being able to sleep because I was nervous about being deported, I was seen by a psychologist. The psychologist concluded that these problems were because of what I had experienced in Ethiopia, together with the stress of being under deportation proceedings. He prescribed medication that was

supposed to relax me and allow me to sleep at night.

After taking this medication for about four or five days I found it difficult to wake up and get involved in the daily activities of simply dressing and feeding myself. I told the attending nurse of the problems I was having because of the medication and informed her that I would no longer take them. I requested to see the psychologist. Within a couple of days I saw the psychologist and told him how the medication was affecting me. He changed the prescription. The new medications were working for me. I remained on them for over a month.

One day I had a near death experience due to the negligence of the attending nurse. As is the procedure, it is the attending nurse that gives all the detainees their medication. On this day, between 7 and 8 pm, the attending nurse gave me seven pills to take at the same time. In the evening, I was only supposed to take two pills. Also the pills she was giving me were different in color and shape than my regular pills. I asked her if she was sure that those were my pills and told her that I was supposed to only take two at night. She became angry and told me loudly to swallow them. Then she instructed the security guard to check my mouth to make sure I did not hide the pills in my mouth. The guard used a flashlight to examine my mouth. I believe I was forced to take medications that I am sure were not mine.

Immediately my body started shaking. I felt so cold that I thought I was freezing to death, but at the same time I was sweating. I went to my bed and lay down. Within minutes I had a seizure and my body began to shake so violently that I fell off the bed onto the floor.

The other detainees became alarmed and thought that I was dying. They yelled and made all kinds of noise to get the attention of the security guards. The guards, sensing the severity of the situation, cleared the room. I was taken to the detention center medical unit where I was seen by the same nurse who had given me the wrong pills. She took my blood pressure, gave me another four pills and ordered the guards to take me back to my bed. I spent the entire night shaking and sweating.

In the morning a different nurse came to give me my pills. She noticed that I was shaking and sweating and asked me what was wrong. I told her what had happened the night before. She looked at my chart and immediately locked up all the medication she was going to dispense and called ICE officers. The officers immediately took me to the hospital. At the hospital, I had my stomach pumped so that I would throw up the medication that was inside me. The doctor asked me why I was taking so many medications. I told him that I was only taking medication for depression and for sleeping. I remember that he said there was some kind of allergy medication that had been given to me. I was then taken back to the detention center.

The next day I was still feeling sick. I was vomiting continuously. I lost control of myself and fainted. Again, the other detainees started making noise and yelling as they had done before. Emergency was called and two nurses came. I was taken to the medical unit at the facility by wheelchair and examined. They gave me an I.V. and I started bleeding from my mouth and my private parts. The nurses noticed the severity of my situation and ordered a lock up of the detention facility. A fire department ambulance came and took me to the hospital again. I was still vomiting.

At the hospital numerous tests were done on me. The examining doctor came and informed me that the test results showed damage to my liver and said he needed to do more tests and that ICE would be informed about the results.

It took about a month for me to feel better. I needed help from other detainees to dress, bathe and walk. During this month I was only given medication to manage my pain. I couldn't even go to the bathroom by myself. The other detainees needed to help me with just about everything. Sometimes the guards would also help me. Also during this time the detainees and myself were told to sign some document which

absolved the facility from liability for dispensing medications related to depression and difficulty sleeping. I refused to sign.

I had my attorney call ICE and request my medical records. He was refused and told that I personally had to request these documents. I requested all my medical records on numerous occasions. To date, I have not received any of my records.

To this day, I am not sure to what extent my health has been damaged. I was never officially told that I was given the wrong medication. It was only in passing that one of the male nurses told me that he was sorry that I had been given the wrong medication. I have repeatedly requested that I be informed about my test results, especially regarding my liver. I have just recently obtained health insurance and have taken some tests. I hope that these tests will finally allow me to find out what if any permanent damage was done to my health while I was detained by ICE.

I hope that my testimony helps this committee to evaluate the state of medical care within the ICE detention centers around the country.