

# IT WAS SUPPOSED TO BE MORE HUMANE.

by Victoria Rossi



When the Karnes Civil Detention Center in southeast Texas first opened its doors to undocumented immigrant men in 2012, it was hailed for its “gentler approach” to immigrant detention. *The New*

*York Times* remarked on Karnes’ landscaped courtyards and library access; National Public Radio noted its walk-up pharmacy and commissary. The Women’s Refugee Commission called the unrestrictive atmosphere at Karnes a “positive step.”

Built from the ground up to provide a less jail-like setting for detainees, Karnes was put forth as a symbol of the Obama administration’s efforts to reform the country’s immigration detention system and improve harsh conditions for detained immigrants. Karnes was “a first in the entire history of immigration detention,” John Morton, then the director of U.S. Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE), said in a press release. The agency’s contract with GEO Group Inc.—the corporation that built and managed Karnes—would prioritize “the health and safety of detainees.” Karnes was, Morton added, “part of an ICE detention reform program that is sensible, sustainable and attentive to the unique needs of the individuals in our custody.”

The new 608-bed facility also marked a shift in the agency’s treatment of immigrant detainees, said Gary Mead, then head of ICE’s enforcement and removal operations. “It was never our authority or our responsibility to punish people or correct their behavior,” he said in a 2012 interview with NPR. “Our authority is only to facilitate removal. So we have to treat them very differently than how the state prison system or county jail system would treat people in their custody.”

The average detainee stay at Karnes, he told the *Houston Chronicle*, would be 30 days.

This was before women began arriving with their children at the United States’ southwest border in the tens of thousands, fleeing violence and poverty in Central America, many of them turning themselves in at government checkpoints to ask for refuge. Responding to the border’s “urgent humanitarian situation,” in June 2014 President Obama announced an “aggressive deterrence strategy” aimed at southwest border crossers—one that placed most migrant women and children in detention facilities and signaled a return to the practice of family detention, which Obama himself had all but ended five

years earlier.

Quickly converted to house women and children, Karnes became part of the rapid re-expansion of family detention centers throughout the United States and southeast Texas in particular: More than 1,000 women and kids are now being held at Karnes and a new detention facility in Dilley, Texas, alone.

Two months after Obama’s announcement, Karnes stopped housing immigrant men. The first bus of women and their children pulled up to the newly minted family detention center in August 2014. Far from humanely treated, the new arrivals were to be made examples of, warnings to other potential asylum seekers that they should not make the journey to the United States. They would find no refuge here.

**Gone were the average 30-day stays afforded to Karnes’ immigrant men. Caught in a legal limbo between Obama’s policy of migration deterrence and the United States’ global commitments to protect refugees, as of April 2015 many of the asylum-seeking families at Karnes had been held there for more than 8 months.**

The women work for as little as \$1 a day and widely report that their children have grown skinny and malnourished from their months in detention. “We see our children suffer, they don’t eat, because the food they give us here is not prepared well, not even those that work here will eat it,” says a statement from 20 detained women. “There are detention officers that when we ask for water, they mock us and speak amongst themselves in English.”

On March 30, 2015, 78 women launched a hunger strike to protest their prolonged confinement and poor treatment at Karnes. “We will not use any of the services provided by this place until we have been heard and our freedom has been approved,” they announced in a declaration written in Spanish. “We know that any mother would do what we are doing for their children.”

Response to the strike, according to reports from several

...continued on p. 5



# ¡Ya basta con niños encarcelados!

— Kenia Galeano



A press conference on April 14th, 2015 called by RAICES in San Antonio, TX demanded the release of women and children incarcerated at the Karnes Detention Center. Pictured are Kenia and her son who spoke to the press: "No somos criminales y no somos amenaza a este país/We are not criminals or a threat to national security." Some women at this "family" detention center were placed in solitary confinement away from their children. Others were told they will lose their children if they continue their hunger strike calling attention to the inhumane and militarized practices in these prisons.

—Photo & Caption by Lilliana Patricia Saldaña

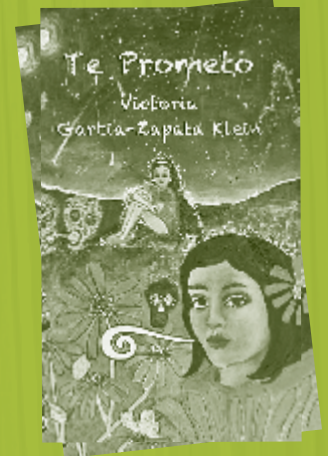
Mi nombre es Kenia Galeano. Yo soy una madre que tuve que estar en esa prisión de Karnes City durante 5 meses (150 días) con mi hijo de 2 años de edad. Se muy bien cuales son las condiciones en ese lugar, sobre todo para los niños. ¿Cómo es posible que encarcelen a niños? Unos llegan de 6 meses—y salen ya cuando tienen mas que el año de edad. El niño que salió el día que sali yo, había entrado en la carcel cuando tenía 6 meses, y salió de año y medio. El pobre estaba sorprendido—con la boca abierta de lo que veía: carros, vacas, caballos. A esa edad empezó a descubrir lo que desde pequeño hubiera podido hacer. También mi hijo cumplió sus 2 años de edad allí en el Karnes City. Yo quería celebrar su cumpleaños fuera de allí, no adentro.

Gracias a Díos, mi hijo y yo salimos de ese horrible lugar, por la unión y solidaridad de todas las madres que decidimos comenzar un ayuno o huelga de hambre hace 15 días. Gracias a ello logramos llamar la atención de ICE y algunas madres recibimos una fianza para salir de ahí. Fianzas muy altas—en mi caso pagamos fianza de \$7500. Y gracias a ello, hoy mi hijo esta libre de nuevo, y feliz—comenzando una nueva vida, pero desafortunadamente aún hay otras madres con sus hijos en ese lugar y por eso le pido a la Señora Sarah Saldaña, Directora de ICE, que haga los cambios necesarios para que no haya mas niños encarcelados.

Mi hermana Olga de New Jersey me dijo ayer: "Nosotros aquí, tu familia, estamos dispuestos a recibirte desde que llegaste en noviembre, a cubrir con todos los gastos de ti y Alejandro hasta el final del proceso. Pero no, te encarcelaron allí en Karnes City." ❖

## La Virgencita Speaks to Immigrant Children

Hijos míos  
milagritos  
I am here for you  
though the train's  
danger is real  
I am here for you  
though your journey  
will be bleak  
I am here for you  
though your parents  
left behind  
I am here for you  
though you have  
no shoes  
I am here for you



From the *La Verdad* section of *Te Prometo* (Paloma Press, 2015)

Victoria García-Zapata Klein

It was supposed to be more humane....cont'd from p.3

detai ned women, was anything but humane. Though ICE officials publicly denied any knowledge of a hunger strike at Karnes, three women claimed they were locked in an unlit medical room on the first day of their protest, according to the legal aid group RAICES. At least one woman has been charged with insurrection for allegedly chanting with a group of detainees and lifting up signs that spelled "Libertad" as a helicopter passed over the facility's open-air courtyard.

Others were told by GEO staff they'd be deported for their actions, or declared unfit mothers and have their children taken from them. When asked about this by *The New York Times*, a spokeswoman for Homeland Security (DHS), that oversees

ICE, replied by email: "ICE has been in constant communication with the residents at the facility. This communication has included discussing the negative health effects of not eating and how the decision of parents to stop eating may affect the care of their children."

At the end of the five-day hunger strike, more than half the participating women had dropped out—a result, the women's advocates said, of retaliation and threats. The DHS Office of Civil Rights and Civil Liberties is now investigating these allegations.

The women of Karnes have said they will resume their hunger strike if ICE does not release them.\* For now, they say they are waiting to see what the U.S.

government will do.

Karnes has become a new symbol for the Obama administration. It no longer heralds a gentler approach to immigration detention; now, it forms part of a U.S. deterrence policy meant to visibly punish asylum-seeking women and children in order to discourage others from coming to the U.S. for help. It shows us that family detention is never, and can never be, humane.

**\*Update: On April 14th, the women resumed their hunger strike at Karnes. They have said they will not stop striking until they are released.**

Bio: Victoria Rossi, a writer & paralegal living in Austin, was recently banned from the Karnes detention center after publishing an article about the facility—*Texas Observer*, Feb. 2015.