

IMMIGRATION

Rights group investigates T. Don Hutto immigrant detention center

Group looking into care of immigrants in Taylor center.

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A delegation of the Inter-American Commission on Human Rights was in Austin on Wednesday on a fact-finding mission on the treatment of immigrant families and asylum seekers at the T. Don Hutto detention center in Taylor and other Texas facilities.

The commission, a body of the Organization of American States, monitors compliance by members, including the U.S., with human rights obligations established by international law.

The mission marks the first time the human rights commission has visited Texas to examine detention issues, said Denise Gilman, a professor at the University of Texas Law School's immigration clinic. She said the clinic and other organizations requested the visit during a hearing last year in Washington.

"It's a very important opportunity to raise some of these human rights issues taking place in our back yard before an international forum," Gilman said of the delegation's Austin visit. "The hope would be that the commission's findings and recommendations would lead the U.S. government to make changes in the way it handles immigrant detainees and asylum seekers."

A spokeswoman for U.S. Customs and Immigration Enforcement, ICE, which oversees detention of illegal immigrants, could not be reached late Wednesday.

In 2007, the UT clinic and the American Civil Liberties Union of Texas sued federal officials, alleging that the government violated the rights of minors held at Hutto, a former prison and one of two facilities in the country which detains immigrants seeking asylum or being held on noncriminal violations of immigration law.

A settlement led to broad changes in how families are treated at Hutto and to the first-ever federal standards for treatment of immigrant women and children held at ICE facilities. ICE oversees Hutto, which is operated by for-profit Corrections Corp. of America through a contract with Williamson County.

Opponents of holding families in detention advocate alternatives such as electronic monitoring and intensive supervision. Federal officials say they have an obligation to ensure that individuals accused of being in the country illegally show up for their court hearings.

In Austin, the human rights delegation interviewed former Hutto detainees as well as representatives from immigrant rights organizations.

The delegation was scheduled to be in Harlingen today to examine unspecified complaints of human rights violations in the construction of a wall along the Texas-Mexico border. It was in San Antonio earlier this week.

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