THE AMERICA TEAM FOR DISPLACED ERITREANS

CORONAVIRUS UPDATES

March 20, 2021

(Updates to this document will appear at http://eritreanrefugees.org/news/)

The global coronavirus pandemic has affected Eritreans in Eritrea, Eritrean refugees and Eritrean asylum seekers in various ways. In this document, The America Team for Displaced Eritreans has undertaken to report on pertinent developments that have come to our attention.

We do not purport to cover all developments. The dates set forth in the various entries are sometimes approximate, and may be based in part on when The America Team actually received the pertinent news reports.

A. In Eritrea.


March 17 – Although Eritrea was coronavirus-free at this point, the government banned all internal travel.

March 21, 2020 – An Eritrean national residing in Norway flew to Eritrea and was then confirmed to be infected. That was the first known case in Eritrea.

March 23, 2020 – The Eritrean government imposed additional travel, gathering and social distancing guidelines on its population.

March 25 – After three more international air arrivals tested positive for coronavirus, the government banned international flights.

March 27, 2020 – The government imposed a more severe lockdown, shuttering transport facilities and schools.

March 29, 2020 – Six more international air passengers who had arrived in Eritrea prior to the flight ban were diagnosed with coronavirus, bringing the total number of confirmed cases to 12.
March 30, 2020 – As the number of infections reached 15, the government ordered the closing of bars, restaurants and other service outlets. It also suspended payment obligations for household electricity, water and telephone bills, and it postponed all court sessions.

April 3, 2020 – The Eritrean government ordered all citizens to remain in their homes for 21 days.

April 5 and 6, 2020 – The Eritrean government announced that Eritreans in Scandinavia, Saudi Arabia, Italy, Germany, Kuwait, the United Kingdom and the U.S. were sending substantial financial and other contributions to help contain the spread of the coronavirus. Eritreans within Eritrea were also contributing funds. For the most part, the reports did not state where or to whom the contributions were being sent, or what they would be used for. (The government reported additional contributions from Eritreans at home and abroad from time to time in the months that followed.)

April 6, 2020 – VOA reported that a Chinese air shipment of protective masks and test kits that was destined for Eritrea never arrived, for reasons not then known. Subsequent reports confirmed that the Eritrean government had forbidden the plane to land, on grounds of Eritrea’s national policy of self-reliance.

April 9, 2020 – Some 33 coronavirus infections had been reported by the government, but still no deaths.

April 18, 2020 – In connection with the pandemic, the U.S. Embassy in Asmara repatriated 29 U.S. citizens, and it assisted other countries in repatriating their own nationals. The operation was part of a worldwide effort on the part of the U.S. State Department to repatriate American nationals.

April 26, 2020 – Eritrea Hub reported that Sawa, the combination high school and military training camp for young adults, had remained open during the pandemic, despite expatriate advocacy to close it.

April 28, 2020 – The Eritrean government announced that it had confirmed 39 coronavirus cases, no resulting deaths, and 19 recoveries.

April 30, 2020 – Abraham Zere, writing in Al Jazeera, broadly described the Eritrean government’s response to the pandemic within the context of the country’s authoritarian political environment and its impoverished medical system. Developments included the regime having rejected foreign assistance while forcing many of its already struggling citizens to contribute funds to the public health response; the earlier flight of physicians from the country; the ongoing rationing of goods and constraints on private commerce and personal spending; the ongoing shortages of water and electricity; the habitual secrecy and untruthfulness of the government; President Isaias Afwerki’s public absence and even his private unavailability for decision-making in recent weeks; the calls by human rights groups and the United Nations’ Special Rapporteur for the freeing of perceived dissidents from the country’s overcrowded and unsanitary prisons; and the similar calls to release students from the Sawa military school.

May 2, 2020 – The chargé d’affaires at the U.S. Embassy in Asmara posted a video on Facebook about the embassy’s coronavirus response, travel advisories and challenges, recommended coronavirus protections, and related items: [https://www.facebook.com/usembassyasmara/](https://www.facebook.com/usembassyasmara/).

May 9, 2020 – The Eritrean government reported that 37 out of its 39 coronavirus patients had recovered, and that there were still no deaths.

May 12, 2020 – The Eritrean government reported that another patient had recovered, leaving only one still infected.

May 15, 2020 – The Eritrean government reported that the last remaining coronavirus patient had recovered, causing the country be virus-free.

May 30, 2020 – Reports appeared that the Afar region was suffering from acute food shortages as a consequence of Eritrea’s continuing coronavirus lockdown.

June 4, 2020 – The Eritrean government reported that two new coronavirus cases had appeared, following city-wide testing in Asmara.

June 13, 2020 – The Eritrean government reported that 24 coronavirus cases had been detected among the 7,158 Eritreans who had returned from other countries in the region and had been placed in quarantine. That brought total cumulative infections to 65, with the recovery figure still at 39. Some 3,135 returnees remained in quarantine.

June 16, 2020 – The Eritrean government reported that coronavirus cases now totaled 109.

June 24, 2020 – BBC reported that, as a consequence of Eritrea’s continuing coronavirus lockdown, prices of goods had doubled country-wide, and shortages had appeared in some basic foodstuffs, fuel and water.

June 24, 2020 – The Eritrean government reported that the cumulative number of confirmed coronavirus cases had reached 144. The government reported that 39 of the infected people had fully recovered. It continued to report no deaths from the disease.

July 9, 2020 – Surgo Foundation posted its new Covid-19 Community Vulnerability Index, in which it stated that, based on its statistical modeling, Eritrea is the fifth most vulnerable to the coronavirus pandemic as among the 20 countries of East African. The ranking was based on such factors as household crowding, poor sanitation, poor health systems, and the relatively aged population within Eritrea.
July 13, 2020 – Human Rights Concern Eritrea warned that the Eritrean government’s currently published count of only 251 coronavirus cases and zero deaths was suspect; that the government’s reporting on its pandemic response measures was totally opaque; and that its continuing, severe social and economic lockdown risked starvation for its citizens. HRCE also warned that health services had been disrupted by the pandemic, such that there now was no effective medical care for children, the elderly and pregnant mothers. The organization also decried the filthy, unhygienic and inhumanly crowded conditions being experienced by the estimated 10,000 incarcerated prisoners of conscience, putting them at heightened risk for contracting Covid-19. In addition, it alleged that the many continuing cash contributions to the government’s response efforts from Eritrean individuals and enterprises that the government regularly publicized, lauded and characterized as voluntary were in fact forced.

July 14, 2020 – Human Rights Concern Eritrea reported with specificity on the Eritrean government’s alleged forced starvation if its citizens in the Afar region of Eritrea, as a consequence of, or under the guise of, a broad, coronavirus-driven lockdown of commerce in that region.

July 29, 2020 – As published in Eritrea Hub, a critic of the Eritrean regime’s coronavirus response recapped and confirmed as still extant the country conditions that other observers had already reported: lock-downs leading to extreme food insecurity; health peril to political prisoners detained in miserable conditions; insufficient medical facilities, including due to earlier forced shut-downs of Roman Catholic clinics; and the regime’s refusal to accept international coronavirus assistance.

August 3, 2020 – Eritrea Focus, together with some 21 other organizations and some 3,000 individuals, sent a letter to the Secretary General of the United Nations urging that the UN take emergency action to relieve the Eritrean people of the twin threats posed by the coronavirus pandemic and by an associated government-imposed famine in that country.

August 27, 2020 – The U.S. Ambassador for Religious Freedom announced that the Eritrean government had released some 100 religious prisoners due to the risks of their contracting Covid-19 while in detention. (Whether the 45 Christians who were rounded up and imprisoned earlier in the year were among those released was not mentioned in the announcement.)

December 21, 2020 – Amid a surge in infections, the Eritrean government’s High Level Task Force on Covid-19 issued a new and more extensive lock-down order. The new order imposed additional restrictions on travel, trade, non-essential government functions, and social gatherings (including for funerals and mourning). All public and private institutions that were allowed to continue to operate were directed to strictly observe social distancing, sanitation, and use of disinfectants and masks. Police and neighborhood committees were ordered to enforce the new restrictions and to punish violators.

December 22, 2020 – The Eritrean Information Ministry reported the country’s first death from Covid-19, and 832 cumulative cases. The previous day it had reported 597 recoveries.
February 4, 2021 – UNICEF announced that the pandemic had forced it to divert resources to fighting the disease in Eritrea from other important needs there.

March 19, 2021 – The Eritrean Information Ministry reported cumulative figures of 3118 infections, 2865 recoveries and seven deaths.

B. In Ethiopia.

March 13, 2020 – The Ethiopian government reportedly adopted a plan to close the Hitsats refugee camp in Tigray, which houses many Eritreans. The closure would likely result in the refugees being moved to other, overcrowded camps. Overcrowding threatens the rapid spread of the coronavirus. Alternatively, the refugees might attempt to flee to other countries, where they could spread or be infected by the coronavirus in chaotic circumstances.

March 23, 2020 – The Ethiopian government moved to close nearly all of its land borders so as to stop the spread of the coronavirus, subject to certain exceptions. The result could prevent Eritreans from fleeing to Ethiopia.

March 31, 2020 – An increase in violence against foreigners in Ethiopia, owing to suspicions about foreign coronavirus carriers, was reported.

April 3, 2020 – UNHCR issued a release stating that the Ethiopian government had postponed the closing of the Hitsats refugee camp, apparently due to the coronavirus emergency. The statement also indicated that refugees arriving from Eritrea were being kept in quarantine at the border, and not proceeding through the regular registration, screening and distribution process. In addition, the statement said that UNHCR had suspended its own activities at its reception center for urban refugees in Addis Ababa.

April 19, 2020 – News reports indicated that the planned closure of the Hitsats camp was proceeding.

June 9, 2020 – An Ethiopian health official reported three Eritrean coronavirus cases in the Adi Harush refugee camp, prompting fears of a rapid spread of the disease in the crowded camp. The Ethiopian health ministry did not immediately confirm the cases.

March 5, 2021 – The president of the International Federation of Red Cross and Red Crescent Societies told CBS news that the civil war in Tigray, Ethiopia was so devastating, and the humanitarian needs there so dire, that coronavirus protections were almost a luxury. (Thousands of Eritrean refugees were stranded in Tigray, amid the fighting.)

C. In Libya.

March 24, 2020 – UNHCR closed two of its facilities in Tripoli due to the spread of the coronavirus. On March 25 it resumed some emergency services.
April 3, 2020 – UNHCR warned that the Libyan civil war had weakened the ability of the country’s health services to respond to the coronavirus, including by way of damage to hospitals. The organization also called upon Libyan authorities to release all detained migrants, in that their crowded conditions, poor sanitation facilities and limited access to health care services was placing them at particular risk for contracting the disease. To that date, ten coronavirus cases and one death had been reported in Libya.

April 4, 2020 – An Al-Jazeera report more fully described the risks to the 700,000 refugees and migrants in Libya, including the thousands detained in dire conditions, and it warned that the coronavirus outbreak could become “truly catastrophic” for them. By then the country had 17 reported cases, a curfew, and a ban on inter-city travel.

May 13 – UNHCR, IOM, the World Food Program, UNICEF, the World Health Organization and several other United Nations units issued a joint statement cautioning that all of Libya, and particularly its migrant and refugee population, were at risk from the pandemic, including by virtue of water, food and health care shortages.

D. In Uganda.

March 25, 2020 – The Ugandan government announced that it had closed its borders to all new refugee arrivals, owing to the pandemic.

E. In Israel.

March 22, 2020 – The Israeli government was reported to have determined that Eritrean and Sudanese asylum seekers would receive the same medical care for the coronavirus as Israeli citizens. The asylum seekers do not have public health insurance, and most had lost their jobs due to the closing of businesses and services in connection with the pandemic.

April 24, 2020 – Israel’s supreme court overturned the controversial “deposit law,” pursuant to which the employers of Eritrean and Sudanese migrants were obligated to withhold 20% of their earnings until they emigrated. The decision came at a time when the Israeli parliament was considering allowing the migrants to withdraw money from their deposit accounts so as to be able to better cope with the economic effects of the country’s coronavirus shut-down. A movement in the parliament promptly arose to override the court’s ruling by way of legislation.

F. In Europe.

March 31, 2020 – NGOs’ search and rescue missions on the Mediterranean had reportedly stopped.

March 31, 2020 – Anti-foreigner rhetoric in some Europe countries had risen – including in Spain and Italy, which had been particularly hard-hit by the pandemic.
G. In Mexico.

March 31, 2020 – The Mexican government was reportedly taking few steps to slow the spread of the disease, thus jeopardizing migrants seeking and waiting to enter the U.S. at the border.

April 3, 2020 – Would-be asylum seekers wishing to enter the U.S. from Mexico at regular ports of entry were reportedly unable to practice social distancing in crowded migrant shelters or amid the congested conditions on the bridges connecting the two countries. Physicians attending to the migrants expected substantial outbreaks of the coronavirus under those circumstances.

April 28, 2020 – UNHCR reported that Mexico continued to process asylum claims despite the coronavirus. The report also noted that Mexico had recently announced that it would release all asylum seekers from immigration detention because of the pandemic, and that UNHCR was supporting some 93 shelters housing asylum seekers there in seeking to protect them from the disease.

H. In Canada.

March 17, 2020 +/- – The Canadian government announced that it would suspend all refugee admissions, and would close the country’s borders to all non-Canadian residents. The suspension pertained, among other things, to Canada’s undertaking to receive several hundred refugees from Libyan detention centers.

March 20, 2020 – the Canadian government announced that, due to the coronavirus pandemic, it would stop considering asylum claims by individuals who crossed the border from the U.S. between regular ports of entry, and it would instead turn those individuals back to the U.S. (Claims by individuals crossing at ports of entry had previously been barred, but irregular crossing between ports of entry had been permitted.)

I. By the U.N. and NGOs, generally.

March 17, 2020 – The United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) suspended all refugee resettlement operations, due to international air travel restrictions and public health restrictions in some destination countries.

April 2, 2020 – The UN’s Special Rapporteur for the situation of human rights in Eritrea called upon the Eritrean government to free all political prisoners, prisoners of conscience, low-risk offenders and others such as the sick and elderly, in an effort to save them from contracting the coronavirus in overcrowded prisons. On April 3, Human Rights Watch and Amnesty International issued similar calls. On April 16, Human Rights Concern Eritrea issued a similar call.
April 7, 2020 – UNHCR announced that it was increasing its capacity to prevent, treat and limit the spread of the coronavirus within refugee communities in several African regions, including the Horn. The organization pointed to factors that were seen as increasing the risks of infection in those communities: crowded conditions, inadequate water and sanitation facilities, geographical remoteness as between refugee camps and strong medical facilities, and refugees’ already precarious livelihoods and food security that were now made more severe by the pandemic. Among other things, UNHCR urged national health ministries to include the refugees whom their countries hosted in their overall national response plans; and it urged host governments to provide distance learning to students, cash assistance to the most economically vulnerable refugees, and public awareness campaigns for their entire populations. The organization also announced that it had solicited from its donors some $15 million in special coronavirus funding for East Africa and the Horn.

May 14, 2020 – The United Nations Network on Migration called on all countries to suspend forced returns of migrants during the coronavirus pandemic, in order to protect the migrants’ health. The organization also said that when temporary border closures are deemed necessary to prevent the transmission of the virus, they must be implemented in a way that is non-discriminatory and proportionate to achieving the public health aim being pursued. (It was not clear how the organization could square those two statements; but The America Team appreciates the legitimate, compelling and conflicting principles that they represent.)

June 18, 2020 – UNHCR and the International Organization for Migration (IOM) announced the resumption of resettlement travel for migrants and refugees.

J. In the U.S.

March 13, 2020 – The U.S. government said that its recent rule disqualifying more people from permanent resident status if they use government social welfare benefits would not apply to immigrants seeking medical care for coronavirus symptoms.

March 13, 2020 – The U.S. government restricted travel to the U.S. from most European countries.

March 13, 2020 – Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE) announced that it was suspending social visitation at its detention facilities.

March 15 +/- – ICE began posting reports on its handling of Covid-19 within its detention facilities, after which it posted updates from time to time. The site appears at https://www.ice.gov/coronavirus.

March 18, 2020 – The U.S. paused all refugee admissions.
March 18, 2020 – After having already closed some immigration courts, the Executive Office for Immigration Review (EOIR) announced the closing of additional courts and the postponement of all asylum and deportation hearings for immigrants who were not already in detention. The move came in response to calls for such closings by immigration judges, attorneys and government prosecutors, and to the sometimes crowded conditions which immigrants had been experiencing in connection with their hearings. One consequence of the closures appeared to be that migrants who had been paroled into the general U.S. population pending their asylum or deportation hearings could expect to remain paroled until courts reopened. For some of them, the delay may have been welcome; for others – eager for a court hearing – a frustration, as the backlogs of the courts increased. Another possible consequence was that migrants seeking to enter the U.S. from Mexico would have to wait even longer in Mexico (pursuant to the Migrant Protection Protocols program, known as “Remain in Mexico”) before being scheduled for asylum or withholding-from-removal hearings here. In fact the “tent courts” at the Mexican border soon came to be closed, confirming those longer waits in Mexico. The border was reportedly now almost entirely sealed as to would-be asylum seekers.

March 18, 2020 – ICE said that it would halt arrests of undocumented migrants during the pandemic except as needed to maintain public safety and national security. ICE also said that individuals should not avoid seeking medical care because they fear civil immigration enforcement actions (a fear that had been widely reported). The announcement came at a time when an increasing number of employees of the Department of Homeland Security (DHS) and its constituent agencies had come to be infected and/or quarantined. In the days following the announcement, some prominent voices within President Trump’s administration criticized the ICE order to scale down its enforcement actions, thus raising uncertainty as to the order’s efficacy.

March 18, 2020 – ICE suspended some deportation flights.

March 18, 2020 – The U.S. Citizenship and Immigration Services (USCIS) suspended its routine interviews, such as would enable immigrants to pursue obtaining green cards, citizenship and employment authorizations (including extensions of such authorizations).

March 20, 2020 – President Trump and the Centers for Disease Control announced that Customs and Border Patrol would begin summarily expelling undocumented migrants seeking to cross from the Mexican border rather than placing them in U.S. detention and rather than giving them an opportunity to apply for asylum. The stated goal of the new operation was to protect migrants and government staff already located at ports of entry, as well as residents in the U.S. interior, from coronavirus infection. The operation appeared to apply not only to those who had crossed into the U.S. illegally, but to those who had lawfully presented themselves to U.S. border authorities at ports of entry and requested asylum. (The latter group – if they had passed through Mexico from a third country – were already barred by recent presidential order from applying for asylum, but not from applying for withholding from removal for fear of torture if returned to their home countries.) The new expulsion undertaking was named Operation Capio, but its name and details were not publicized. Reportedly, migrants who could make an immediate and compelling case to border authorities that they feared torture if returned to their home countries would be excepted from expulsion; but (a) the process of granting that exception was opaque; (b)
those border agents making the decisions were not trained in that type of evaluation; (c) exceptions appeared likely to be rare; (d) being excepted from expulsion would not amount to being granted legal status in the U.S. (for example, under the doctrine of withholding of removal under the Convention Against Torture); (e) how the new “torture” exception and procedures for those who presented themselves at ports of entry differed from the old “torture” exception and procedures was unclear; and (f) no exception was expressly provided for asylum seekers – those who fear “persecution” on internationally specified grounds if returned home (as opposed to fearing torture). As of April 2, over 7,000 people had been expelled at the border under the new operation. As of April 9, the figure was 10,000. Overall, the development amounted to a material addition to the U.S. administration’s efforts in recent years to deny asylum to those entering from Mexico, and it was criticized by immigration advocates as effectively closing the southern border to asylum seekers and thus as violating international asylum law.

March 20, 2020 – At least two staff members working at U.S. immigration detention centers tested positive for the coronavirus, illustrating the threat to detainees in the often-crowded detention centers.

March 21, 2020 – The Department of Justice (DOJ) was reported to have asked Congress for an emergency power to suspend habeas corpus – the right of detainees, including those seeking immigration relief – to timely appear before a judge or to obtain release. Many critics objected, on constitutional grounds.

March 26, 2020 – A federal district court judge in New York City ordered the release of 10 immigration detainees from New Jersey jails, on grounds that their pre-existing medical conditions made them especially vulnerable to contracting the coronavirus.

March 29, 2020 – Four out of the thousands of migrant children in federal detention were reported to have tested positive for the coronavirus.

March 31, 2020 – A federal judge in Harrisburg, Pennsylvania ordered the release of 10 detained immigrants in that state who were medically vulnerable to coronavirus infection.

April 2, 2020 – Sam Brownback, the U.S. Ambassador for Religious Freedom, called for religious prisoners of conscience to be freed in Eritrea and other named countries, owing to the high risk of coronavirus transmission within prisons.

April 3, 2020 – The Coronavirus Immigrant Families Protection Act was introduced in the House of Representations. If enacted, among other things, the bill would expand immigrants’ access to coronavirus testing, treatment and public health information; expand protections against the arrest of undocumented migrants by ICE at locations necessary for their well-being, such as food banks, public assistance offices, child care centers, schools, and businesses that provide essential services during the coronavirus shut-downs; require telephonic bond hearings for immigrants in detention; enable all tax-paying immigrants to collect federal coronavirus cash relief benefits; and automatically extend work authorizations from USCIS.
April 7, 2020 – ICE announced that it had identified 600 detainees as vulnerable to the coronavirus, and that it was considering their release on a case-by-case basis.

April 9, 2020 – Some 37 ICE detainees were reported to be infected with the coronavirus.

April 13, 2020 – The Intercept reported that each ICE detention facility was making its own determination as to whether to release vulnerable detainees (as distinguished from following a systematic nationwide process or order), and that many were not releasing anyone on vulnerability grounds.

April 17, 2020 – According to CBS News, an ICE official testified before Congress that ICE had no plans to expand the categories of immigrants who could be freed due to coronavirus risks beyond older immigrants, pregnant women and those with certain medical conditions. (ICE said that it had released nearly 700 detainees on those grounds to date – some of them, seemingly, because courts had ordered ICE to do so.) With regard to the low volume of coronavirus testing that ICE had conducted with detainees, the official said that ICE would test more if it had access to more testing kits.

April 20, 2020 – A federal judge in California ordered ICE to expedite the review of all its detainees at risk for severe illness or death from the coronavirus, including all those who were over age 55, pregnant or suffering from certain chronic medical conditions.

April 20, 2020 – President Trump announced in a late-evening tweet that he would shortly order a halt to all immigration to the U.S. – asserting that foreign coronavirus carriers threatened Americans’ health and that foreign workers threatened American jobs. On the face of the tweet, it was the broadest immigration ban in American history. On April 21, Mr. Trump clarified that his main goal was to protect American jobs from immigrants at a time of high unemployment due to the coronavirus. On April 22, he signed the actual order, now more specific, which by its terms would operate for 60 days (or beyond, if extended). The order froze much more limited categories of immigration phenomena than the initial tweet had indicated: most permanent immigration visas for employment; family reunification for citizens’ parents and siblings; all family reunification for green card holders; the diversity visa lottery; and possibly green card processing overseas (for which U.S. consulates had already been closed). Not frozen, among other categories, were green card applications for those already in the U.S.; many temporary work visas; and family reunification for spouses and under-age children of U.S. citizens. The order did not address asylum or refugee matters, which were the subjects of other presidential orders. The order was expected to be challenged in court.

April 20, 2020 – A federal judge extended the CDC’s March 20 order authorizing the summary expulsion of noncitizens who arrive at U.S. borders without valid entry documents.

April 21, 2020 – The Washington Post reported that ICE was testing detainees for coronavirus prior to deportation only by taking their temperatures; and that many infections had thus escaped detection, resulting in deportees infecting many others at their destinations.
April 22, 2020 – CBS News reported that some 253 ICE detainees were infected with the coronavirus.

April 24, 2020 – Congressmen James McGovern and Chris Smith – chairs of the Tom Lantos Human Rights Commission – joined Senators Chris Coons and Thom Tillis in calling on governments around the world to release arbitrarily detained Americans and prisoners of conscience on humanitarian grounds due to the coronavirus pandemic.

April 25, 2020 – President Trump announced by Twitter that he would send a supply of ventilators to Ethiopia.

April 25, 2020 – Due to the coronavirus risks in detention facilities, a federal judge ordered ICE to promptly and safely release minors for whom suitable sponsors were available.

April 30, 2020 – CBS News reported that at least 449 ICE detainees were infected with the disease. It also reported that the ACLU had filed 30 lawsuits around the country seeking the release of detainees on coronavirus grounds, which had resulted in the release of 90 detainees.

May 6, 2020 – ICE reported the first coronavirus death among its detainees. The victim was a Salvadoran man who had been detained in the Otay Mesa Detention Center in California, where he appeared to have contracted the disease.

May 13, 2020 – The Washington Post reported that since March 31, under the government’s recent coronavirus policy, no migrants newly crossing America’s southern border had been allowed to apply for asylum; only 59 had been allowed to apply for withholding of removal under the Convention Against Torture (CAT); and of that number, only two had been granted withholding, while three CAT cases were still pending. Also under the policy, border patrol agents were not informing migrants of their right to seek CAT protection – rather, the migrants had had to initiate those inquiries themselves.

May 19, 2020 – The Philadelphia Inquirer reported that over 1,000 ICE detainees were now known to have been infected with the virus; that half of all those tested had proven to have been infected; and that only 8% of the country’s 28,000 immigration detainees had been tested.

June 13, 2020 – CBS News reported that since the president’s March 20 order barring asylum applications during the coronavirus crisis, only 85 migrants crossing from Mexico had now been allowed to apply for CAT withholding protection, and only four of those had then been allowed to proceed with their claims. CBS also reported that migrants were no longer even able to get on waiting lists for processing at official ports of entry at the border, and that those stranded in northern Mexico were at risk for kidnappings, rapes and beatings.

July 13, 2020 – NBC News reported that more than 3,000 ICE detainees had been diagnosed with Covid-19.
September 17 – Huffington Post reported that more than 5,000 ICE detainees had contracted Covid-19 while in custody, and that an unspecified number of detainees had died from it in Texas, Louisiana, Florida and Virginia. Advocates alleged that ICE was not providing detainees with sufficient testing, sanitary equipment or room for social distancing, and was concealing from them information relating to the incidence of and protection against the pandemic.

September 30 – CNN reported that 8 ICE detainees had died from Covid-19 since the beginning of the year.

October 29 – JAMA (the Journal of the American Medical Association) reported that for the period from April through August, the mean number of Covid-19 cases within ICE detention facilities was 13 times higher than in the general U.S. population.