

February 10, 2005: Insane asylum - New York Daily News

New York Daily News

February 10, 2005

Some poor soul arrives at our borders seeking refuge from political or religious persecution. "Of course, you can come in," says Uncle Sam. "But while we're waiting to see if your claims are legit, I'm afraid you're going to have to go to jail." Beg pardon? An individual who may have suffered torture and degradation must now be degraded again because he or she peeked into the open golden door? Not very humanitarian on America's part. Yet, according to a just-released study by the bipartisan United States Commission on International Religious Freedom, this nation's treatment of asylum-seekers leaves much to be desired. At best, it's inconsistent. At worst, it's cruel. And among the worst detention centers are those in the New York metropolitan area. In addition to harsh conditions, facilities such as the one in Queens are far less likely to free asylum-seekers pending adjudication of their cases. Compare: In San Antonio, 94% are released while they await a court decision. In Chicago, 81%. In Queens, 8.4%. That is not a readily explainable discrepancy. The average detainee who is found to have a credible fear of being sent back to his native land spends 60 days in detention. But some are held in jails for years, often with the ordinary criminal population. They are treated like the criminal population, too - shackled, denied privacy, allowed only limited exercise in the fresh air. And of the 19 detention centers studied, not one had any guards trained to deal with torture victims or those who have otherwise suffered under repressive regimes. That may explain why the standard "treatment" for suicidal detainees is solitary confinement. The report did cite one detention center, a contract facility in Broward County, Fla., as a model of "a secure but appropriate and noncorrectional environment for noncriminal asylum-seekers." Why this has not been replicated throughout the system is a mystery that needs solving. And rectifying.