

February 14, 2005: Refugee politics - The Baltimore Sun

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At a time when Congress is debating the fairness of laws that aim to keep asylum-seekers out of this country, a recent report finds that those already here are not being well treated by U.S. immigration authorities. The U.S. Commission on International Religious Freedom reports that asylum-seekers are being held in detention centers for months, and even years - often without legal representation - even though the law permits their release while they await decisions on their asylum claims. They are routinely strip-searched, shackled and kept in solitary confinement. They are granted or denied asylum arbitrarily. It is a sad irony that people who fled persecution and turned to the United States for help are being treated worse than many common criminals. People who have already been violently traumatized in their home countries should not have to suffer such treatment in the one place they believed would offer them protection. The authors of the report urged the incoming secretary of homeland security to appoint "a high-ranking official" to coordinate refugee and asylum matters among the department's various bureaus - and to answer directly to the secretary. We second the recommendation, and urge that aggressive steps be taken to fix the flaws identified in the report. The report by the bipartisan commission, which was created by Congress, illustrates a painful truth: The United States' refugee welcome mat has been pulled up, and the nation's image as a haven for those suffering religious, political and ethnic persecution has been badly tarnished. Since the 9/11 attacks, the number of people arriving here in search of asylum has dropped by 50 percent, according to the report. Unmoved, some members of Congress would apparently like to diminish those numbers even further. Last week, the House of Representatives passed a measure that would make it more difficult for refugees to get asylum. The Senate should not follow suit. Almost 6,000 asylum-seekers were held in 19 detention centers around the country last year, according to the commission report; many suffered from depression. Others ultimately asked to be sent back to the countries from which they fled - a coercive effect of detention. The report is an indication of a troubling trend that the Department of Homeland Security should work mightily to reverse.