

# Immigrant Detainees Speak Out For Asylum

By [Josh Hudelson](#)

Published September 8, 2004

*Columbia Daily Spectator*

Visitors to immigrant detention centers, some just an hour's drive from campus, can't bring much. Even small gifts for the detainees are against the rules, so recording devices are out of the question. What follows are fragments and stories that have been rescued from the detention walls. The rescuers are adults and students alike, several from Columbia and Barnard, who regularly visit immigrants seeking asylum and were willing to retell what they have seen and heard. To protect the sources, the names of both visitors and detainees have been concealed. For some, this is the first time that their lives have not.

## An Unexpected Stay

L. is 19 years old and this month marks her one-year anniversary in an immigrant detention center in the New York metropolitan area. L. has not been convicted of any crimes. She was raised in China, and she says that she had only been planning to visit the United States when customs officers arrested her upon arrival.

Today, the view from the concrete chamber, where she and up to 40 other block-mates eat and sleep, is as grim as ever. Perhaps L. would have a more sprightly step if it weren't for a skin ailment that she claims is due to poor nutrition and the unfamiliar dryness of New York winters. And perhaps things would have gone more smoothly at first, with both her block-mates and the judge, if she had spoken any English upon arrival. There is always room for speculation.

In this case, however, that's almost all there is. The past decade, starting with the Oklahoma City bombing in 1995, has seen increased restriction on illegal immigrant rights. September 11th didn't help things. Now, the traditional route of investigation leaves many questions unanswered.

"If you want to go in under their auspices, they will show you what they want you to see," said H.

## Finding Friends

H. is a member of the Sojourners Detention Center Visitor Project that was formed in 1999 at Riverside Church. She and others visit detainees regularly to provide emotional support and give them a link to the outside world.

"We are there to say that we know who you are," she said.

But visitation is not simply a matter of showing up. Visitors must first know the name and both identification numbers of whom they want to see, a substantial task considering that the Bureau of Immigration and Customs Enforcement, formerly the Immigration and Naturalization Service, does not disclose a list of names of those incarcerated.

During visitation, detainees and visitors pass "hugs" through the glass barrier by pressing their hands together against the same places. Some detainees prefer to keep conversation casual, since, as one detainee put it, a night doesn't pass that someone isn't crying in bed. Others cross their fingers that security guards will turn a blind eye so that they can pass hand-made gifts, such as paper flowers, to their visitors through the small speaking-holes between them.

## Abuse and Affirmation

E. is a college-graduate and computer repairman whose rural hometown is not far from Darfur, Sudan. As a political--and he claims peaceful--dissident, E. was beaten in Sudanese jails and his friends were

killed during demonstrations. The violence, he says, didn't quite end when he arrived to America. E. claims he has been hit by detention center guards and suffered verbal abuse and intimidation.

The BICE, a branch of the Department of Homeland Security, states simply on its Web site that, "Under no circumstances shall force be used to punish a detainee. Staff shall attempt to gain the detainee's willing cooperation before using force."

E.'s physical condition, however, is not the first thing on his mind.

"I have one sickness," he said, "I'm missing freedom."

Those close to E. believe that his good behavior will help him return to Sudan soon. But deportation is rarely the true goal of detainees, especially when it means returning to war-torn or dangerous areas. To gain asylum, however, detainees generally need to prove that returning to their homeland would put them in harm's way. They also must provide documentation of their identities.

E. himself embodies just how plastic the issue of documentation can be. E.'s Sudanese birth certificate shows that he's 28, but he says he knows for certain that he's 33.

### A Silenced Refugee

Y. says he had just finished his first year of college in India when religious violence forced him to flee. He says his parents sold many of their belongings to purchase his plane ticket to Miami, a ticket that brought him no farther than the terminal gates before he was handcuffed. That was in 2002; Y. is now 20.

During his time in detention, Y. has taught himself fluent English. His opportunities for using it are limited. U.S. Immigrant and Customs Enforcement permits the use of phones by detainees, and the detention centers pay working detainees a stipend of \$1 per day. However, given the high cost of phone cards, a day's work adds up to about one minute of phone time. Conversations, with visitors and via telephone, are often more about relief than rescue. The Sojourners' visits are intended for human comfort rather than political assistance.

"I try to keep it light for them," said H, "I rarely ask questions except 'Are you alright?', 'How's your family?'... I don't believe in interrogating. They've been through that enough.'