

Visiting with prisoners in Bangkok's Immigration Detention Center

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BANGKOK -- Mom, Dad: don't freak out but I have something to tell you. Yesterday afternoon I spent the day in jail.

It was just as I imagined -- hot, overcrowded and sequestered by age and sex. We stood behind bars, with our hands grasping through the rails and shouting at the people on the other side just so they could hear us.

An hour later, though, I was able to leave. Others are not so lucky.

In the past week, I've made two visits to the [Bangkok Immigration Detention Center](#). The IDC was originally built as a way to temporarily house foreigners, migrants and the occasional farang (Thai slang for Western tourist) who overstays his or her visa or finds themselves on the wrong side of Thai law. Many refugee families who are arrested end up in the prison, regardless of their status with the United Nations and with few other options.

Thailand is one of the few countries that have not ratified the 1951 [Refugee Convention](#), and therefore does not recognize the status of refugees. Because of this, refugees seeking asylum in Thailand are not automatically resettled even if they are technically of United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees status. All immigrants caught without valid documents and visas are seized and detained by Thai authorities until they have the funds to self-deport. Most, however, do not have the means or relatives available to help them, and thus can end up in the IDCs for years.

Unless bail is posted for the immigrants, or asylum speakers are granted refugee status by the [UNHCR](#), there is no way out of the detention centers unless the prisoner can pay their way out. Even those granted UNHCR status remain in the prisons or a separate detention center awaiting resettlement indefinitely.

Conditions in the cells are critical, with up to 100 prisoners to a single cell. According the [Jesuit Refugee Service Correspondence](#), an organization that provides basic supplies to detained refugees, the prisons supply only enough food and water for 700 prisoners at a very basic level. The immigrants rely mainly on visits from NGOs and volunteers to bring them additional food and water. In addition to relying on nonprofits and volunteers for basic needs, they depend on the NGOs for free legal aid in asylum cases.

I had been meaning to visit the Bangkok IDC since January, when I first learned about it from a friend



who organizes twice-weekly visits through his hyper-local nonprofit organization, In Search of Sanuk (sanuk means happiness in Thai). It wasn't until this week, however, that I was finally able to make good on my word and venture down the soi in Bangkok where the center was located.

This week, a group of about seven volunteers gathered to visit the detainees, who hail from Sri Lanka, Burma, Cambodia, Laos and other countries throughout Asia. Some have been there for as little as a few months to as long as multiple years and all vary in age.

Each visitor is given one prisoner to "take out" for the visiting hour to talk to them from behind a port-a-fence and offer up support and the chance to be reunited with their other loved ones in the prison. Volunteers often bring food such as chicken, rice, water and milk to the prisoners along with magazines, coloring books for the child detainees and plastic bags that the prisoners weave as crafts.

Despite the squalid conditions, refugees in the IDC are delightful to be around. They are smiling and engaging in conversation. They want to know about you and are more than willing to speak on their personal situations and how they ended up in the detention center.

Unfortunately, however, not enough travelers come to visit the jail. At times, refugees will not be taken out of their cells for weeks or months on end because no one has come to visit them. While it's understandable that visiting a prison -- especially in a foreign country -- is an uncomfortable and scary experience, it is still important for travelers and expatriates to see the other side of the traveling world.

I know I was hoping to never see the inside of a jail, especially not one specifically for immigration purposes, however after these visits I will most certainly be making the weekly return to prison until my stay in Bangkok is up.

Sarah Lipman is documenting her travels around the world. Visit her blog, Passport: The World, at www.stamfordadvocate.com. To read Sarah's blog, go to <http://blog.ctnews.com/lipman>.

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