

'If the virus gets in, it will spread like wildfire'

Refugees confined to detention centers believe they're sitting ducks for COVID-19

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The irony of possibly dying from COVID-19 is not lost on the many asylum-seekers who have been detained at the Tokyo Regional Immigration Bureau, a short bus ride from Shinagawa Station.

Patrick, a Cameroonian labor activist whose upper body is covered in scars from the torture he endured in his home country, was awaiting the results of his refugee application when an altercation at a traffic stop landed him in the detention center on the immigration bureau's seventh floor.

"Inside here, I am defenseless," he says. "It's strange. In my country, I escaped being murdered by the police and then was fleeing for almost a year. I learned how to survive. But here, in this place, there's nothing I can do. We cannot defend ourselves against the infection. We are trapped."

["Patrick" is a pseudonym. The detainees in this piece all spoke on condition of anonymity as they were worried about repercussions for speaking to the media.]

If you have been to the immigration bureau recently, you will have seen some of the longest lines there since the Great East Japan Earthquake of 2011. The bureau has implemented social distancing as a result of the current coronavirus outbreak, so there is a limit on how many people can enter the building at once.

If you take the elevator up to the seventh floor, however, you'll find yourself in a different world entirely: one where there's no chance of social distancing, and one in which the frustration and exhaustion we all currently feel has been compounded by dread and panic. It's certainly a tension that can be felt speaking to Patrick, who is sitting on the other side of a 3-inch Plexiglas window per visitor regulations.

Japan is a signatory to the 1951 Refugee Convention, which established the right of refugees to seek asylum here. However, the country accepts less than 1 percent of those who apply, the lowest figure of any industrialized major nation by far. There could be as many as 500 detainees on the seventh floor, many of whom are refugees whose applications have been rejected. Fearing persecution if they were to return home, they end up overstaying in Japan and thus violate the conditions of their visas. If they're caught, they're sent here.

The [Sophia Refugee Support Group](https://www.japantimes.co.jp/community/2019/08/14/issues/sophia-university-student-group-building-bridges-refugees-need/#.Xq0qjS9h1-V) (https://www.japantimes.co.jp/community/2019/08/14/issues/sophia-university-student-group-building-bridges-refugees-need/#.Xq0qjS9h1-V) (SRSG), a volunteer group run by students at Sophia University, was visiting detainees four to five times per week during the academic term. These trips have slowed due to restrictions that have resulted from the pandemic, but when SRSG members have managed to get to the center they have been told by some of the detainees that they are anxious and frightened.

Voices from the inside

During the current coronavirus crisis, we are all struggling to get the right information in order to modify our behavior, but detainees have been given almost no information on the pandemic. They are given no access to computers or phones.

Eri Ishikawa, board chairwoman of the Japan Association for Refugees, says the information that is provided is often inaccessible as many detainees cannot read Japanese.

“Not knowing what is happening makes you crazy and terrified because you don’t know what to believe,” says Paul, who has been in detention for a few months after his refugee application was rejected and he could not afford a lawyer to make an appeal.

In a situation like this, rumors fly. Over the course of a week, SRSG was told by detainees there were two suspected cases of COVID-19, which ballooned to 12 the following day before falling to zero the next.

Mac is a Congolese asylum seeker who married a Japanese woman and had a child. She divorced him, leaving him without a valid visa, and he was put into detention. He is now awaiting a court order to allow him to see his child. He says he has noticed detainees being moved around the facility, out of some blocks and into others.

“The place is maxed out, so crowded that every bed is full,” Mac explains, adding that he suspects recent movements were made because coronavirus was detected in parts of the center. “They tell us nothing, but why else would they do this? Making our situation even worse by overcrowding, the opposite of social distancing.”

Speculation and assumptions are not ideal in a state of emergency. SRSG has tried to get an official statement from the Tokyo Regional Immigration Bureau as to whether COVID-19 had been discovered in the building, but had not received an answer at the time of writing this article.

“Everything we come to know is from NHK,” says Angela, referencing the TV that is always on in the common room. “We cannot understand much, but we watch the diagrams — about being six feet apart, always using hand sanitizer, wearing masks and all that. We look around here and see that these are all things we cannot do ourselves.”

A total of 10 coronavirus infections have been reported at correctional facilities in Japan and, if the rest of the world is anything to go by, this is a figure that is likely to climb. A similar scenario [✉ appears to be unfolding](https://www.theguardian.com/world/2020/apr/04/us-jail-immigrants-coronavirus-deportation) (<https://www.theguardian.com/world/2020/apr/04/us-jail-immigrants-coronavirus-deportation>) at immigration detention centers overseas.

The potential for infection at the detention center becomes apparent when looking at its layout. There are two room sizes: [✉ one for four people and one for six](http://www.immi-moj.go.jp/tetuduki/taikyo/shisetsu.html) (<http://www.immi-moj.go.jp/tetuduki/taikyo/shisetsu.html>). The six-person room is about the size of 12 tatami mats, according to Florence from Uganda.

“There’s not enough space to even walk around, and when you lie down you are next to at least two other people. It’s like living in a sack,” she says, adding that someone had pointed out (half in jest), that they were “breaking Koike-san’s rules all night long.”

This is a reference to Tokyo Gov. Yuriko Koike, who has been promoting the national government’s “Three C’s” strategy of avoiding confined spaces with poor ventilation, crowded places and close conversations with other people.

“The germs are in the dead air, it never circulates,” Patrick says. “The windows are always closed, many of them don’t even open at all.”

Detainees are secured in their rooms from around 5 p.m. until morning, but when they are allowed in the shared spaces, things aren't much better. One detainee, Richard, points to the counters and the food and says that every time he touches something he wonders, "Is it safe?"

"Can I touch the door handle? Can I sit on the sofa? Will it infect me? This is a captive population and if the virus gets in, it will spread like wildfire," he says.

Infectious flows

If regulations concerning the comings and goings at the center were tight, it would at least provide a modicum of security for the people housed there. Unfortunately, there has been a steady flow of people entering the building that includes guards, service personnel and new detainees who the current detainees suspect are not tested.

[While the immigration bureau did not respond to requests for an interview, advocacy group Ushiku no Kai reported an official at the Ushiku Detention Center in Ibaraki Prefecture as saying that doctors give *shinsatsu* (medical examinations) to those suspected of having COVID-19.]

"If we cannot get out, at least we need to make sure that those who come inside are healthy," says James from Uganda. At the end of March, after seeing what was happening around the world on TV, a group of detainees called for a meeting with the center's head guard and requested that no other people be transferred into the facility. If they had to come in, they argued, then they should at least be quarantined for two weeks. Although the guard was sympathetic, the flow of new detainees continued until Prime Minister Shinzo Abe's state of emergency declaration on April 6.

Winston, who has lived in Japan for years while he goes through the application and appeal process, is not optimistic when it comes to systemic change.

"I understand that Japan cannot test everyone, and maybe those who are sick do not need to be tested if they are outside," he says. "But if they come inside the detention center, it's different. They could be carriers or almost sick or anything — you don't know (if you have it) for at least two weeks, right?"

"None of us have health insurance," says Diego from Peru, adding that testing for him and other detainees is likely impossible. "They don't give us health insurance, and there is no way we can pay for a test."

Staying healthy in a detention facility is difficult enough without the fear of a contagious virus slipping in. Detainees don't have access to wipes or hand sanitizer, as no products containing alcohol are allowed inside.

"When someone gets sick, no one does anything," says Tan from the Philippines. "We get some pain relievers, but that is only worse because they mask any symptoms."

From what we know about the new coronavirus, it is apparent that those who are most at risk are generally in poor health, older or immuno-compromised. With many experts saying that a vaccination is at least a year away, the population needs to be meticulous about personal hygiene, which in institutional settings is patchy at best.

Many governments are also requesting that citizens wear face masks when leaving their homes in an effort to prevent the spread of COVID-19. Male detainees at the Tokyo Regional Immigration Bureau say that they have been receiving more masks if they ask often enough. As a rule, the women get one mask per week.

"The masks get dirty, so almost no one wears them inside," says Grace, who was taken directly to the detention center upon declaring her refugee status at Narita Airport more than a year ago. "Some of the detainees don't know that the masks are important, and some don't care, saying we will all die anyway. The guards don't enforce any masks for us, but they all wear masks themselves."

One situation in which the wearing of masks is enforced, however, is when the detainees meet outsiders in the visiting room. Grace doesn't understand the reason for this rule, since she speaks to visitors with a 3-inch piece of Plexiglas between her and them.

"Maybe it's just so outsiders think we are being protected?" she says. "I don't know."

'Prison' without the crime

A detention center is neither a jail nor a prison, and it's important to make that distinction. Detainees are not criminals. The people there are detained, as opposed to being arrested, because of some violation in the terms of their visa. As immigration officials have become stricter in recent years, failure to report a change in address or a paperwork error can provide enough cause to land you in detention.

"All I did was I came to Japan seeking refuge after persecution in my home country," Patrick says. "Is that a crime?"

In many cases, detainees can leave detention as long as they go back to their country directly. This process is often referred to as "self-deportation," and can be done as long as the detainee in question can find a lawyer to file the paperwork.

"Of course, this excludes any refugee, like me, who cannot return to their home country," Patrick adds. "They say I can go back whenever I want, but if I return to Cameroon, I'll be killed before I get out of the airport in Douala."

Chie Komai, a registered attorney with the Tokyo Bar Association and former chairperson of the Foreign Human Rights Committee for the Kanto Bar Association, makes the case for release as the only humane option.

"At this moment, detainees are at great risk of infection and many have made a plea for release just to save their own lives," she says, adding that while some have been released, "the number is not enough and the risk is heightened day by day."

She is not alone in her thinking. Both Amnesty International Japan and the Japan Association for Refugees have been advocating for the release of as many of those held in detention centers as possible due to circumstances surrounding COVID-19.

On May 1, the Immigration Services Agency of Japan announced it would begin to allow "provisional release" and a two-week quarantine of some detainees under restricted circumstances, though there was no acknowledgement of how many would be involved.

While the release of some detainees would ease crowding and reduce the risk of viral outbreaks inside detention centers, being let out suddenly without any resources has its own set of problems. Many of those currently in the centers lack sufficient income to afford food or shelter, and risk ending up on the street, where the threat of infection is also high. Since most lack health insurance, they cannot get treated if they do get sick.

"We cannot isolate ourselves or practice safe living inside," Winston says. "If that virus gets inside, we cannot get it out, and we cannot live with it."

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COVID-19 OUTBREAK UPDATES

<https://www.japantimes.co.jp/liveblogs/news/coronavirus-outbreak-updates/>