

# INCREASED ANXIETY AND UNCERTAINTIES

## IMMIGRATION DETENTION IN COVID-19 TIMES



DURING MY VISITS IN JUNE 2020 I MET A LADY FROM CAMEROON WHO'D BEEN DETAINED SINCE JANUARY AND WAS ONLY RELEASED IN JULY

SHE TRIED TO ASK FOR ASYLUM IN THE CENTRE TWICE AND TOLD ME SHE'D LOST 25KG DURING HER STAY.

SHE COULDN'T UNDERSTAND WHY SHE HAD TO STAY FOR THE LONGEST TIME WHILE EVERYONE AROUND HER WAS RELEASED AROUND MARCH

SHE WAS EVENTUALLY RELEASED WITHOUT DOCUMENTS AND PUT ON THE STREET.

At JRS Europe we respect everyone who shares their story with us. So while their stories are true, names have been omitted to protect their privacy. Faces and places are the products of the author's imagination.

By Ivo de Jaeger

JRS detention visitor in Belgium

The risk of infection increased anxiety levels in many detainees. Two cases of self-harming incidents are worth mentioning. The first: a detainee tried to hang himself with a cord. About the second, initially the detainee slammed his forehead against a wall when he was notified of the execution of his return order. On the same day, he had an altercation with a police officer before going to bed and reported being insulted and abused. At around 3 a.m., his cellmates found him hanging from a sheet tied to a ceiling grate. They took him down while shouting for help.

SJM Detention visitor, Spain

**Lack of clear policies and information fuels anxiety**



Some form of information on Covid-19 prevention measures was generally provided to detainees, in the form of posters or flyers. However, the inability to regularly follow news from the outside world, or get in contact with family, friends or visitors,

left detainees feeling uninformed. Moreover, people generally did not receive clear and sufficient information on how the pandemic would impact their legal situation and their stay in detention. In several countries, detainees were released

or transferred to facilitate the respect of social distancing within the detention centres, but often without clear transparent information on the criteria applied to select people. This, combined with the fear for the virus, fuelled anxiety among detainees.

### Need for transparency and communication

JRS believes that the use of detention is unlawful as long as international travel is discouraged and enforcing returns is hence not feasible. However, if states maintain the use of detention during the pandemic, we recommend:

**1** **Guaranteeing the possibility for detainees to maintain contact with the outside world, e.g. by ensuring sufficient IT means to allow for remote contact with family, friends and visitors, and to follow the news.**



**2** **Providing clear communication on Covid-19 related measures to detainees. If people are released to reduce a centre's population their selection should be based on objective and non-discriminatory criteria (i.e. vulnerability, length of stay in detention, existence of autonomous alternative accommodation) and all detainees should be informed about it.**

