



Sigourney Weaver, a Human Rights First Board Member, talks to Eleanor Acer, the Director of the Asylum Program at Human Rights First, at a New Jersey Detention Center. Human Rights First is the new name of the Lawyers Committee for Human Rights.

## Foreword

Working with Human Rights First (the new name of the Lawyers Committee for Human Rights) since 1986, I have seen firsthand the challenges facing those who flee to this country in search of asylum. Several years ago I met with asylum seekers who were detained at an immigration detention facility in the United States. I was shocked to learn that they were being held in what was basically a prison and treated, in effect, as criminals.

Many Americans are completely unaware of how this country treats people who arrive in this country in search of refuge, often risking their lives to get this far. A new Court TV film – that will air in January and February 2004 – will give many Americans an opportunity to learn about the U.S. detention of asylum seekers. “Chasing Freedom” tells the story of a young Afghan woman who flees to the United States after being persecuted by the Taliban for running a school for young girls and the *pro bono* attorney who takes on her asylum case.

The film was inspired by the case of a refugee we represented through a team of dedicated *pro bono* attorneys. “Mina,” as we have called her to protect her identity, has described what it was like for her to be brought to a U.S. immigration detention facility:

*I was brought there in handcuffs and shackled to another person I did not know who was also seeking asylum. At the facility, they took away my clothes and gave me an orange prison uniform. I was treated like a criminal. I was kept in a room with 12 other women for 23 hours a day. There was no privacy. The toilets and shower were in the same room behind only a low wall — so that you could see someone's upper body as they sat on the*

*toilet. We were only taken out of the room for one hour a day; the outdoor recreation area was really like a cage — an internal courtyard with a fence for a roof. We could not see the trees or anything other than a small patch of sky through the fencing. Every day, guards woke us up at 6 am and told to stand in a line to be counted. They searched us several times a week.*

In this report, Human Rights First describes the lack of a fair process that asylum seekers like the real “Mina” face in trying to be released from detention and the many significant changes that have been made to U.S. immigration policies in the wake of the horrific events of September 11.

I am working with Human Rights First to help convince the U.S. government to improve its treatment of asylum seekers. Read this report, and if you decide that you also want to help, I urge you to write a personal note and send it in to Secretary Tom Ridge of the Department of Homeland Security (you can use the postcard enclosed with this report).



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January 2004