For many immigrant families, migrating to the United States means more than just a change of address or country—it's a chance at life.

Thousands of individuals and their families endure the difficult journey of crossing jungles, rivers, and deserts. Many endanger their lives hoping to escape the violence, poverty, and political distress they face in their countries of origin.

Still, the American dream has become a nightmare for many families separated at the U.S. Border under the Trump Family Separation Border Policy. Such is the story of Leticia Peren and her son, Yovany, a Guatemalan
family who endured a forced separation in 2017 that lasted over two years.

Shortly after they arrived, Peren's son was separated from his mother without cause or explanation, losing contact for more than a month, with border authorities denying Peren information about her son or his whereabouts. Held in Texas, she was denied medical attention and coerced into deportation while Yovany was sent to a shelter.

Leticia and son reunited after two years separation. | Credit: Courtesy of ASAP
Now, with the help of the Asylum Seeker Advocacy Project (ASAP), Peren has filed a lawsuit against the government for inhumane treatment. The lawsuit seeks monetary damages for the trauma and injuries suffered due to the separation while outlining the wrongdoing by government officials at the Department of Homeland Security's Customs and Border Protection, Immigration and Customs Enforcement, U.S. Citizenship and Immigration Services, and the Department of Health and Human Services' Office of Refugee Resettlement.

In an exclusive interview with People Chica, Peren shares her grueling story of separation, how she remained hopeful during difficult times, and the path she is paving alongside her son to create a new life in the U.S.

**Many families have been separated over the course of the last six years at the border. What was your experience crossing and being detained like?**

We came to this country trying to find safety and build a new home, but what we found was cruelty. We were detained by government agents and then they separated us. They took my son away without any warning or explanation. That was the worst time of my life. I didn't know if my son was alive or dead, nobody would tell me.
Leticia and son reunited after two years separation. | Credit: Courtesy of ASAP
I cried every day and begged the guards to tell me where my son was, but they wouldn't tell me anything. I spent nearly a month without knowing anything about Yovany, where he was, if he was ok, if he knew where I was, or what had happened to me. It was torture. I didn't see my son for more than two years. It was the worst torture a mother can suffer.

I was so worried about my son. I was depressed and physically ill all the time. And it wasn't just us. The government did this to thousands of families—so many mothers like me, suffering because we had to escape the violence and death threats. We thought we would be safe in this country.

Anti-immigration policies base much of their reasoning on protecting the U.S. against criminal activity coming through the border. However, many families cross in the hopes of a better life. What led you to leave Guatemala to come to the U.S. under the risk of facing these policies?

I don't know very much about U.S. policies, but I do know that they treated us like we had no rights—like animals. We came to this country because we were afraid of the violence in Guatemala. My son was being persecuted by gangs and his life was threatened. They were coming after both of us, and I knew we had to leave or they would kill us.

All we wanted was to be safe and to be together. My son and I are good people, we work hard, and take care of our family. What the government did to us and so many other families—that was the real crime.
Protestors demanding an end to the separation of migrant children from their parents. | Credit: Getty Images / NICHOLAS KAMM

**How did it feel to be separated from your son for almost two years? What was the process of reunification like?**

I can't express it in words. It was torture. The worst torture a mother can suffer. I never stopped thinking about him. What he was doing, if he was too cold or too hot, what he was eating, [and] how they were treating him. Once they told me he was in a shelter, I knew I had to do whatever I could to get him out of that place. I was deported back to Guatemala and he was put in foster care in the U.S.

He was so worried that I would be killed in Guatemala, and I was worried that I'd be killed, too, but I had to be brave for my son. Seeing him again for the
first time after more than two years—it was bittersweet. I had my son back, but he wasn't the same, and I wasn't the same. We will never be the same. The trauma of everything we lived through, the separation, the abuse in detention, it will never go away.

**While you were detained, what were living conditions like?**

The living conditions in detention were terrible. They treated us like animals. They took away everything I brought with me, including personal and religious items, and never gave them back. The agents laughed at us and mocked us.

It was freezing cold in the first cell and they took our sweaters. It was so crowded. They put me with the women and took Yovany somewhere else. I never got to say goodbye. They didn't tell us they were taking him away. Then I found out they were taking everyone's kids away, ripping families apart, and I couldn't believe it, I didn't know what to do. It was torture.

It only got worse. Not knowing where my son was, thinking they must be treating him as badly as they were treating me. All of the mothers, we were being tortured not knowing where our children were. And the guards just laughed at us, threatened us, [and] told us horrible things. If someone was sick and asked for help, they didn't care. There was no help, there was no humanity, just cruelty.

**What do you believe people don't fully understand about being detained? What is an element you aren't seeing reported in the media?**

People don't understand how terrible it is not knowing if your child is alive or dead, if he is suffering, [or] if you will ever see each other again. That was the worst part. Nobody knows how cruel people can be until they live through it themselves. Why would anyone laugh at mothers being tortured? At kids being ripped away from their parents? Why would people who work for the U.S. government be so cruel to parents and children who came to this
country trying to find safe haven?

**Now that you have been reunited, what are your hopes for the future?**

My biggest hope is that we get justice. Justice not only for me and my son but for all the families. There are still children who have not been reunited with their parents and parents who don't know where their children are.

Those of us who have been reunited, we still have to live with everything that happened. I will never forget, my body won't let me. Everything that my son and I have suffered, we still carry it with us: the pain, the desperation. It has made a lasting impact that can't be erased.

We need to know that this will never happen again, [and] that the U.S. government will never again torture families who are trying to find safe haven here by snatching their children away.