

Mexican police confront immigrant protest caravan

By Rafael Azul
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On April 15, a march of 293 Central American immigrants broke through police lines blocking their entry into the city of Ixtepec, in Mexico's Oaxaca state. Ixtepec is the location of an immigrant shelter administered by the Catholic Brothers of the Path (*Hermanos en el Camino*), headed by Father Alejandro Solainde, a well-respected immigration advocate, and leader of this Easter season protest march.

Two weeks before, on March 24, the immigrants and refugees had crossed the Suchiate River, the border between Guatemala and Mexico, into the state of Chiapas on foot, marching 380 kilometers (230 miles) across that state. They were set to board buses in Oaxaca on their way to Mexico City as part of a campaign for the rights of immigrants and refugees in Mexico.

Thirty people were injured in a confrontation with the Federal Police and agents of Mexico's National Migration Institute (INM) before the authorities gave way. The immigrants are being helped by human rights organizations, the *Hermanos* and the dissident Oaxaca teachers union (Section 22 of the SNTE), many of whose members formed a human shield between the immigrants and police. Also in support are the National Human Rights Commission, the Oaxaca Human Rights Defenders, Amnesty International, and the International Peace Brigades.

The annual Easter protest called "*Viacrucis, Fronterals Aliadas*" (path of the cross, allied frontiers) usually takes place in a peaceful manner. Immigrant rights advocates and Central Americans are allowed safe passage. This year recent anti-immigrant legislation was used as a pretext to block the march. Marchers were held up, allegedly, so that their legal status could be "checked".

Via Crucis every year follows one of the routes that

immigrants take in southern and central Mexico with the purpose of drawing attention to the ongoing and continuous violations of human rights that immigrants are subject to both by federal and state authorities and by organized crime.

This year the demonstrators also directed their fire against President Enrique Peña Nieto's Southern Border Program, designed to block the movement of immigrants, no matter what their motives are for traveling north.

Coupled with the economic misery and constant threat of criminal gangs, Central Americans now face the expulsion from their lands to benefit mining and agricultural transnational corporations.

During the showdown, INM agents stood by while 100 federal police attempted to block the protesters. According to one report, the police had orders to arrest leaders of the protest. Armando Medina, a Honduran refugee and organizer of the *Via Crucis*, was briefly detained but was removed from police custody by angry protesters.

Alberto Donis, spokesperson for the *Hermanos*, denounced the "unconstitutional and illegal" repression by the federal police. According to the Mexico City newsweekly *Proceso*, Donis credited the SNTE support and the solidarity of Mexicans for the groups' success against the police and the INM.

Against the police barricade, human chains of activists and SNTE members surrounded the refugees and pushed the police back.

"If they touch us again, the consequences will be serious," said Donis. The INM and police, however, intimidated the bus owners into not lending or renting the marchers any buses. The marchers are proceeding on foot this weekend.

The government of President Peña Nieto introduced

last year the Southern Frontier Program, which grants limited rights to Guatemalans to cross the border into southern Mexico and provides substandard shelters along the border for migrant women and children.

These measures (presented as a way of “developing” the Mexican southeast) are window dressing for a draconian policy designed to block the movement of Central American migrants and refugees through Mexico and toward the United States. The program is designed to serve US anti-immigrant policies and is conducted with the active involvement of the US Immigration and Customs Enforcement agency (ICE) and the Drug Enforcement Administration (DEA), whose agents operate freely in Mexico.

At the same time, security along the border is being tightened, detention centers expanded and other measures taken (freight train speeds are being increased, for example, making it more dangerous for migrants to board. Humanitarian shelters are either being shut down or watched over by police; immigrant caravans are being detained to impede the passage of immigrants and refugees into central and northern Mexico, and on to the United States.

Since the anti-immigrant program was implemented last July, immigration activists have noted that migrants are avoiding shelters and are choosing more isolated and dangerous routes to travel north, exposing themselves to violence and abuse. At the same time, the number of deportations has risen dramatically (from 12,830 in 2014 to 25,069 this year). They also point out that the defense of immigrants is being criminalized.

Immigrant rights groups have denounced the Southern Frontier Program as “inhumane,” a fact that is freely and cynically admitted by INM commissioner Ardelio Vargas Fosado, who indicated in a recent meeting with Father Solainde that human rights do not matter. What is paramount, he said, is the imposition of law, the closing of crossings and denying basic rights.

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