

US, Mexican and Guatemalan governments harass caravan of Honduran refugees

By Andrea Lobo
18 October 2018

Last Saturday, almost 2,000 people from all over Honduras gathered in the northwestern city of San Pedro Sula in order to travel together northward to reach the United States and Canada. The migrants and refugees are escaping generalized conditions of violence and poverty, which were imposed by a century and more of imperialist plundering by US corporations of the region's natural resources and cheap labor, enforced through military invasions, occupations, CIA-backed coups and other forms of political meddling.

The caravan has been faced with an ongoing and increasingly brutal crackdown against immigrants by Mexican and Central American authorities at the behest of the US government.

The Thursday prior to their departure, a security summit took place with Central American and Mexican officials, along with the US vice president, secretary of state and secretary of homeland security as part of the second conference of the Obama-era Alliance for Prosperity of the Northern Triangle, which includes Guatemala, Honduras and El Salvador.

At the meeting, US Vice President Mike Pence demanded governments “stem the flow of illegal immigration and drugs. He referred angrily to the fact that over the last year 225,000 migrants from the Northern Triangle traveled northward, making up most apprehensions at the US-Mexico border. This figure is a 61 percent increase from Honduras and 75 percent from Guatemala over the last year.

Pence threatened migrants not to “put your families at risk by taking the dangerous journey north,” adding later: “We will confront those who would do us harm through drug trafficking and gang violence.”

The US officials also used the meeting to threaten Central America against building closer economic ties with China, considered by Washington as its main geopolitical rival, while making clear that the “national

security” framework for the attacks on immigrants across the region is an integral part of the militarization and other preparations for war against major powers.

By Monday, about 1,000 more migrants, carrying backpacks along with children and infants, joined the caravan within the initial 110 miles before reaching the border crossing point with Guatemala at Agua Caliente.

The Guatemalan government deployed about 100 anti-riot police to block the highway to meet the caravan. According to *El Periódico*, a military helicopter even flew close to the caravan.

However, the intimidation tactics didn't work against the enormous mass of thousands of migrants. After some hours of waiting and confusion, with children hungry and some fainting, humanitarian groups from Guatemala arrived with food and water. Eventually, as it was clear that the migrants were being illegally halted, as Northern Triangle citizens only need their national ID card to each other's cross-borders, the caravan was allowed to march into Guatemala chanting “*¡Sí se pudo!*” (Yes, we could!), despite the continuous harassment of the armed forces.

Many speaking to reporters about why they are leaving speak of the gang violence, lack of health care for serious conditions, and how “the rich have all the money.” One mother carrying her daughter told reporters: “What happens is that the sons and daughters of politicians get jobs, but there are no jobs for the poor.” A man told the Honduran HCH Noticias “It's not the president and his ‘zero poverty’ promises. No, we are the ones that will avoid this poverty by sending remittances to our families back there. ... And we are no single country, we are Central America, we are united.”

After the successful crossing, the group advanced 58 miles to the city of Esquipulas with the help of buses and trailer trucks provided by pro-immigrant groups.

There, the police arrested Bartolo Fuentes, a journalist and former deputy of the LIBRE coalition, who had

become one of the spokesmen of the caravan. He was also one of the organizers of the caravan, which was largely put together through social media.

Fuentes was quickly sent to the capital, Guatemala City, where he was fraudulently accused of “illegally entering the country” and sentenced for deportation back to Honduras. Using the relationship between some organizers and the official opposition parties, the Honduran Foreign Ministry justified the arrest and urged Hondurans in a statement not to “take part in this irregular mobilization by a movement that is clearly political.”

A reporter of HCH Noticias in the shelter in Chiquimula was quickly surrounded by migrants hoping to send “I-miss-you” greetings to their loved ones, to thank Guatemalans for the warm welcome, and call for international support. One explained that salaries are only \$4-\$5 per day in Honduras and are not enough to pay for food and utilities for his family. A youth said: “I want to say hi to my mom, Reina Hilda Hernández, to my friends, brothers, my girlfriend—the love of my life who decided to stay. I’m doing well, it has been ‘yuca’ [tough], but ‘there are no spikes.’”

The plan of these migrants is to reach the Mexican and US ports of entry and to apply for asylum. Although the Trump administration officially ended the policy of separating families in late June—with many separated children never to be reunited with their parents, already deported— applicants continue to be sent into detention camps in record numbers, but now as “family units.”

Moreover, the end of the summer has seen a new surge in immigration to record levels, with US Customs and Border Protection reporting a jump in border arrests of 43 percent between June and September. According to Trump aides, speaking anonymously to the *Washington Post*, this surge, a few weeks away from the US mid-term elections, has made the president “furious.”

Back in April, Trump used a slightly smaller caravan of Central American migrants as a pretext to deploy the National Guard to the US-Mexico border with the cooperation of the Democratic Party.

Now, under advice by his fascist aide Stephen Miller, Trump has been pushing to rapidly re-instate family separation in some other form. On Tuesday he told AP, “The one thing I will also say is that when a person thinks they will not be separated, our borders become overrun with people coming in.”

He has reportedly also given orders to Secretary of State Mike Pompeo to push Mexico to carry out more

aggressive measures, to round up and deport Central American immigrants, including stopping the caravan. On Tuesday, Trump fired off a tweet against Honduras: “If the large Caravan of people heading to the U.S. is not stopped and brought back to Honduras, no more money or aid will be given to Honduras, effective immediately!”

The Mexican government has responded by mobilizing hundreds of police, military and migration officials to Tapachula, Chiapas, according to several local reports, with the National Migration Institute announcing that it will inspect each case individually, requiring visas for entry and will deport those not qualifying for refugee status. As evidenced by the experience at the Honduras-Guatemala border, such a detention of the caravan at the heavily militarized Guatemala-Mexico border could quickly turn into a humanitarian disaster for the migrants.

This militarized assault on immigrants by the Mexican authorities, acting as an extension of the US deportation forces, is expected to escalate during the incoming Mexican government of Andrés Manuel López Obrador.

While demagogically promising during the campaign that he will not do the “dirty work” of US immigration policy, once elected he immediately adopted a tone of subservience to US imperialism. In a press conference yesterday, referring to a vague plan to reduce immigration by increasing US-Mexican capital investments in the Northern Triangle, López Obrador still stated with deference “I exposed this to president Donald Trump; he’ll accept our proposal.” When asked specifically by reporters whether the caravan should be allowed to enter Mexico, he evaded the question—“There are options, there are alternatives. It isn’t only about that.”

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