

Central American migrants facing horror on US border

By Bill Van Auken
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A humanitarian disaster is unfolding on the US-Mexican border. Thousands of Central American men, women and children seeking asylum in the United States have been trapped under desperate conditions in tent camps in Tijuana, Mexico, lacking adequate food, shelter, sanitation and health care.

The Central American refugees are caught between the militarized US border, where last Sunday border patrol agents backed by US Army troops unleashed tear gas, rubber bullets and stun grenades against hundreds of men, women and children trying to cross into the US, and the Mexican police, whom the government of President Enrique Peña Nieto has turned into auxiliary border guards for Donald Trump.

Neither the Mexican government nor any international aid organization, not to mention the anti-immigrant government in Washington, is providing sufficient aid to the Central American migrants—some 6,000 of them, including 1,000 children, with more on the way. The obvious aim is to create such suffering and misery that they will be forced to return to the systemic violence, repression and poverty in the countries from which they fled.

These conditions are not only shameful. They constitute a blatant violation of international law guaranteeing the right to asylum and a crime against humanity on the part of both the US and Mexican governments.

The migrants, who include 516 girls, 542 boys, 1,127 women and 3,877 men, are housed in an outdoor sports complex set up for 2,000 people. They sleep in the winter cold in makeshift tents and under sheets of plastic on pieces of cardboard. Many are forced to sleep on sidewalks for lack of space.

A heavy rain on Thursday soaked the camp and its residents, turning the ground into mud and overflowing a foul-smelling pool that had accumulated near a woefully inadequate number of showers and portable toilets.

Medical officials report rampant respiratory ailments, lice and food poisoning. Fears are growing over an outbreak of chickenpox, and doctors have warned that children and

adults could be coming down with pneumonia.

“The shelter is already filled beyond capacity. It is horrible and it seems like they don’t care, even though there are women, adolescents and children,” Melany Murrillo, a Honduran immigrant who is five months pregnant, told *Univision*. “My greatest fear and my husband’s is under what conditions, where and how my baby will be born.”

Norberto Caña, 50, from El Salvador, told the Spanish-language network, “In the nights you hear the people crying, men and women. I believe we must try to think about other things because if we think about this we will hang ourselves.”

Many say they face an impossible dilemma of being unable to return to their homelands and unable to survive in the appalling conditions they face in Tijuana.

Mexican authorities seized on the deteriorating conditions on Friday to order the relocation of the migrants to another shelter, this one at least 10 miles from the US border. Officials announced that they would stop providing food or any other assistance at the Benito Juárez sports complex near the border.

Many of the immigrants insist they will stay where they are even without food, shelter or other aid, fearing that the Mexican authorities are only trying to make it more difficult for them to achieve their aim of seeking asylum in the US.

US authorities, meanwhile, have made it nearly impossible for the migrants to apply for asylum. Immigration officials at San Ysidro, the world’s busiest land border crossing, are processing on average 40 to 50 asylum applications a day, meaning those stuck in the deplorable conditions of the camps in Mexico would have to wait many months to even begin a process that ends in most cases in deportation.

This deliberate go-slow operation is designed to force the caravan migrants back to the horrors from which they fled. While a federal judge has issued a ruling against the Trump administration’s attempt to deny asylum to anyone entering the country outside of the designated crossings, the administration is challenging the decision.

On Thursday, a group of the Central American migrants

began an indefinite hunger strike outside the Tijuana offices of Mexico's National Institute of Migration (INM) to demand that the US authorities respond to those on their border seeking asylum.

More forceful—and even lethal—measures have also been put in place on the other side of the border. Trump last week issued an order granting US troops the authority to use “lethal force” against migrants attempting to reach American soil. The memo, signed by Trump's chief of staff, Gen. John Kelly, granted the military the power to conduct “a show or use of force (including lethal force, where necessary), crowd control, temporary detention, and cursory search.” It followed a statement by Trump that troops should answer any rocks thrown by migrants with gunfire.

The Pentagon has indicated that it is considering a 45-day extension of the deployment of nearly 6,000 regular Army troops on the border. Defense Secretary James Mattis told reporters Wednesday that the Pentagon and the Department of Homeland Security were in discussion on the extension.

“As far as the use of force, the Border Patrol is using what they believe is appropriate. We would be backing them up,” Mattis said. “I can't even forecast what would be necessary after seeing the Border Patrol's response under the pressure that we saw this last weekend.”

There are reports that the present military deployment, consisting of engineering and logistic troops who have laid concertina wire and erected barricades, would be replaced by military police units prepared to use lethal force against refugees and immigrants seeking to cross the border.

In a further indication of the fascist and militarized response of the US government to the humanitarian crisis on the border, an internal memo obtained by *Politico* revealed that Homeland Security Secretary Kirstjen Nielsen has requested that other federal police agencies, including national park police and those guarding US nuclear facilities, be drafted to serve as border patrol agents to confront the supposed threat of “migrant caravans originating from Central America.”

There was an obvious political motivation behind the vicious and seemingly unhinged reaction to a relative handful of migrants attempting to enter the United States—in the first nine months of 2018, some 71,886 migrants from the so-called Northern Triangle of Central America have returned from the US to their countries—i.e., to whip up xenophobia in order to mobilize the Republican base in the midterm elections.

More fundamentally, however, the militarized response is driven by a determination to crush what the American ruling class sees as a dangerous mobilization of immigrants collectively demanding their rights as workers, marching on the US border and chanting, “We are international workers,

not criminals.” The financial elite is extremely sensitive to the threat of contagion, namely, that such demands could spread, challenging their monopoly of wealth and power.

To quash such a challenge, Washington is determined to extinguish amid the mud and disease of the Tijuana refugee camps any spark of the “American dream” among the Central American migrants, just as it has done for the millions of workers in the US confronting layoffs, declining wages and deteriorating conditions of life.

That this is a bipartisan policy has become increasingly clear. The Democratic Party leadership issued a directive that Trump's draconian immigration policies were not to be made an issue in the midterm elections.

Signaling a further shift to the right, Democratic Senators Cory Booker (New Jersey) and Kamala Harris (California) have signaled that they are not going to make the fate of immigrants at risk of deportation following Trump's decision to rescind the Deferred Action for Childhood Arrivals (DACA) program an issue in their votes on a year-end funding bill. Both are potential candidates for the Democratic presidential nomination in 2020 and are making it clear that they are prepared to follow in the footsteps of Barack Obama, dubbed the “deporter in chief,” and Trump himself.

The response of the American working class must be unconditional defense of these immigrant workers fleeing the conditions created by US imperialist oppression in their homelands, and support for their right to asylum. The answer to the barbaric attacks on immigrants by governments all over the world is the socialist demand for open borders. All workers must be able to live and work in their country of choice with full citizenship rights and without fear of deportation or repression.

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