

US “border security”: Troops, torture, barbaric prisons

By Patrick Martin
5 February 2019

The Pentagon has confirmed that it is deploying an additional 3,750 troops to the US-Mexico border, continuing the build-up of repressive forces directed against defenseless immigrants and refugees seeking asylum in the United States.

Some of the 3,750 soldiers will replace those being rotated out of the border area, but there will be a sizeable net increase of at least 2,000. The total number of troops, regular and National Guard, will be more than 6,000, the largest force deployed to the southern border since 1917, when General John J. Pershing led a punitive expedition against Pancho Villa during the Mexican Revolution.

The confirmation of the troop deployment Sunday came only two days before President Trump is to give the State of the Union speech at the US Capitol building, in which a major focus is expected to be border security. Trump forced a partial shutdown of the US government for 35 days in an effort to force Congress to approve \$5.7 billion in funding for a border wall.

The White House had to back down January 26, agreeing to a three-week reopening of the government while House and Senate negotiators discussed the budget for the Department of Homeland Security, which includes both Customs and Border Protection and Immigration and Customs Enforcement.

The House-Senate conference must reach agreement by February 8 to give time for congressional approval of a bipartisan deal by February 15. Otherwise there will be another shutdown, or Trump has threatened to declare a national emergency and use funds appropriated for some other purpose, such as military construction, to build the wall.

In discussions with reporters last week, Trump hinted that he might declare the national emergency in his

State of the Union speech. “I don’t want to say it, but you’ll hear the State of the Union, and then you’ll see what happens right after the State of the Union,” he blustered. Whether or not that is the case, he is likely to center the speech on demands for the wall and warnings about crime and drugs supposedly associated with immigrants and refugees.

Congressional Democrats, while opposing a permanent structure or wall, largely on the grounds of its proven ineffectiveness, continue to offer vast sums for the CBP, ICE and other repressive measures against immigrants, under the rubric of “border security.”

This includes the mobilization of troops without any significant Democratic opposition, but also the abusive treatment of tens of thousands of immigrants held in ICE and CBP facilities in the border region, some operated directly by the two agencies, others by contractors, some of them billion-dollar companies that are making vast profits operating what amount to concentration camps.

A report by the Department of Homeland Security’s inspector general, issued last week, found that ICE detention facilities don’t meet national standards for prisons, despite billions in outlays to build and operate the camps. According to the report, over a 33-month period ending in June 2018, “ICE paid contractors operating the 106 detention facilities subject to this review more than \$3 billion ... Despite documentation of thousands of deficiencies and instances of serious harm to detainees that occurred at these detention facilities, ICE rarely imposed financial penalties.”

The inspector general’s report examined half of the 211 detention facilities run by ICE directly or indirectly, housing an average of 35,000 detainees every day—the size of a small city. The report found that ICE regularly issue waivers to excuse deficiencies,

some of them of grotesque proportions, such as allowing a detention facility to use tear gas against detainees, although the standard limits efforts to “control” detainees to pepper spray, which is much less toxic.

ICE did not dispute the inspector general’s findings, instead issuing a worthless declaration that it is “committed to continually enhancing civil detention operations to promote a safe and secure environment for both detainees and staff.”

More than a dozen immigrants have died in ICE custody since 2015, including two children from Guatemala who died in December, prompting wide publicity and popular revulsion.

Prisoners at ICE facilities have begun to fight back against their brutal treatment in one of the few ways still available to them, a hunger strike, which began at the detention facility in El Paso, Texas, but has since spread to facilities in Miami, Phoenix, San Diego and San Francisco, according to an ICE spokesman.

On Sunday, ICE confirmed to the Associated Press that it was force-feeding nine of the hunger strikers in El Paso, up from six the week before, after obtaining a federal court order authorizing the brutal procedure, condemned as torture by international human rights groups, and banned by the American Medical Association.

Most of those being force-fed, and a majority of the hunger strikers, are Sikhs from the north Indian state of Punjab who have fled persecution by the right-wing Hindu supremacist government of India.

One detainee, identified by the AP only by his last name, Singh, which is very common among Sikhs, described “being dragged from his cell three times a day and strapped to a bed before being force-fed liquid through tubes pushed through his nose.”

“They tie us on the force-feeding bed, and then they put a lot of liquid into the tubes, and the pressure is immense so we end up vomiting it out,” Singh told the AP. “We can’t talk properly, and we can’t breathe properly. The pipe is not an easy process, but they try to push it down our noses and throats.”

Human Rights Watch issued a statement February 1 calling force-feeding “a cruel, inhuman and degrading” practice and pointing out that “medical ethics and human rights norms generally prohibit the force-feeding of detainees who are competent and

capable of rational judgment as to the consequences of refusing food.”

All these brutal measures would become much worse—and virtually impervious to legal challenge—if Trump declares a national emergency and orders the military to build his 30-foot wall along the US-Mexico border.

Under the 1976 National Emergencies Act, if Trump declares an emergency, Congress can take action to overturn the declaration under an expedited procedure under which the Senate would be required to vote within 30 days of action by the House of Representatives. However, Trump could veto the resolution and the emergency would remain in effect unless his veto was overridden.

Congressional leaders and civil liberties groups have indicated they plan to challenge an emergency declaration in the courts, but the White House expects that any appeal would be expedited quickly to the US Supreme Court, which has a 5–4 right-wing majority expected to uphold virtually any executive action.

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