

No More Deaths volunteers prosecuted for providing humanitarian aid to migrants

By Anthony del Olmo
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On January 18, a federal judge rendered a guilty verdict against four volunteers from the humanitarian organization No More Deaths (NMD) for their actions in the Cabeza Prieta Wildlife Refuge in southwestern Arizona along the US-Mexico border a year and a half ago. Judge Bernardo Velasco's ruling marks the first conviction of humanitarian aid volunteers in the US in a decade.

The volunteers—Natalie Hoffman, Oona Holcomb, Madeline Huse and Zaachila Orozco-McCormick—were found guilty of misdemeanors related to entering a wildlife refuge without a permit and leaving behind “personal property.” The latter was a reference to basic lifesaving necessities such as food, water and other small items left behind by the volunteers in order to ensure migrants survive the dangerous desert crossing.

The four volunteers each face a sentence of up to six months in prison, along with a possible \$500 fine. Another four NMD volunteers are set to go to trial later this month on similar charges. A ninth volunteer, Scott Warren, will face trial in May on more serious charges including felony harboring and concealment for allegedly providing food, water, clean clothes and beds to two undocumented immigrants last year. If convicted and sentenced to consecutive terms, Warren could face up to 20 years in prison.

NMD has launched a campaign demanding that the Justice Department release the defendants on humanitarian grounds.

While NMD volunteers are not speaking to media while the trials are underway, WSWs reporters were able to speak to Enrique Morones, director of Border Angels, a sister organization of the group. Border Angels has been providing humanitarian aid to migrants in the US-Mexico border region of San Diego, California, since 1986.

“Border Patrol was very upset when NMD came out with a video of their agents destroying water bottles,” Morones stated.

“This [lawsuit], I think, is in direct response to two things—the hate rhetoric of the Trump administration, and the video that exposed these Border Patrol agents. We have been supporting NMD and demand that those charged should be released.”

“What they're trying to do is intimidate us. Border Patrol has approached us before—asking what we're doing, if we have a permit, etc.—and we tell them that we've been doing this for more than 20 years and that we're going to continue doing it. We're outraged and paying attention.”

In June 2017, an NMD humanitarian aid camp on the outskirts of Arivaca, Arizona, was raided by Border Patrol and four patients receiving care were arrested. A second Border Patrol raid was carried out in January 2018, at the NMD humanitarian aid base in Ajo, Arizona, where two individuals receiving humanitarian aid were arrested along with Scott Warren.

In a statement published earlier this month, Parker Deighan, one of the so-called #Cabeza9 defendants, detailed that the “remote terrain was being weaponized against people crossing the border, many of whom were fleeing poverty and violence. More specifically, since the mid-1990s, US border enforcement strategy has been to heavily concentrate enforcement in urban areas where people traditionally have crossed, thereby intentionally funneling migrants into remote and dangerous terrain, like Cabeza Prieta.”

The increased use of these more dangerous crossings, particularly along the Southwestern border, is the product of a deliberate strategy adopted by the Border Patrol under both Democratic and Republican administrations to use the harsh terrain as a means of

killing larger numbers of migrants who perish in the scorching desert and discourage others from crossing.

Rather than accepting and processing asylum seekers in accordance with international law, the US government's focus on militarizing the border has worked to reroute migrants, driving them further into uninhabitable terrain and territory controlled by organized crime syndicates and right-wing militias. This has only worsened with the Trump administration's efforts to build up the border wall, while ramping up the militarization of border areas in general.

Late last month, Pentagon officials confirmed the deployment of 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.

Under the fraudulent contexts of terrorist threat and an influx of drugs entering the United States, the Democrats have downplayed the mobilization of the military on US soil as a political stunt, refusing to acknowledge that the move is in violation of the Posse Comitatus law barring the military from performing domestic police functions.

Yesterday's declaration by President Trump of a national emergency at the US-Mexico border will mean billions more in funding for the mobilization US troops to build and construction of many miles of border wall.

These measures will only exacerbate the humanitarian crisis of migrant deaths in the deserts along the border. Between 2000 and 2016, the US Customs and Border Patrol (CBP) discovered the remains of 6,023 people who died crossing from Mexico into the United States. One Texas sheriff reported in May 2017 to the *New York Times* that, "I would say for every one [body] we find, we're probably missing five," putting the total dead in the tens of thousands.

The declaration of a state of emergency and mobilization of active duty troops coincides with the abusive treatment of tens of thousands of immigrants held in ICE and CBP facilities across the US, with billion-dollar companies making vast profits operating modern-day concentration camps.

In this context, the prosecution of the NMD volunteers demonstrates another step in the destruction

of democratic rights in the systematic criminalization of individuals and groups who attempt to provide life saving aid to the most vulnerable sections of society.

The Trump administration is seeking to make an example out of Scott Warren for charges that he harbored immigrants crossing the border. Such an attack finds historic parallels in the persecution of sympathizers for harboring of Jews during the Holocaust.

The crackdown is part of the administration's efforts to whip up national chauvinism and prevent a unification of the working class internationally. The brave strike by maquiladora factory workers in Matamoros, Mexico, and the unity of workers across North America and all borders is the primary target of such measures.

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