

Trump administration kept secret database targeting journalists and immigration activists at US-Mexico border

By Kevin Martinez
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A series of documents released to NBC 7 San Diego revealed the Trump administration was using a secret database to spy on journalists and immigration activists as they crossed the US-Mexico border to cover last year's caravan of immigrants from Central America. The database was used to place alerts on passports and deny entry into Mexico.

Journalists and others aiding the caravan reported being under increased scrutiny every time they crossed the San Ysidro port of entry but had no way to prove they were being singled out for secondary inspections. The release of the documents proves that the attacks on immigrants is being increasingly used to attack the democratic rights of all workers, regardless of national origin.

The documents leaked to NBC 7 show that the government listed the names of the targets in a database with other personal information as well. The documents, given anonymously, show screenshots from a SharePoint application that was used by a coalition of government agencies including Customs and Border Protection (CBP), Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE), the US Border Patrol, and the San Diego sector of the FBI.

The spying was done under the codename "Operation Secure Line," which according to the anonymous source was specially created to monitor the migrant caravan. The document explicitly lists individuals who should be targeted for screening at the border.

The targets included 10 journalists, seven of whom are US citizens, an attorney, and 48 others from the US and other countries labeled "organizers," "instigators," or simply "unknown." Some of the activists were immigrant rights groups based in San Diego including

Border Angels and Pueblo Sin Fronteras.

The documents are named, "San Diego Sector Foreign Operations Branch: Migrant Caravan FY-2019, Suspected Organizers, Coordinators, Instigators and Media." They also contain a seal with the American and Mexican flags labelled, "ILU-OASSIS-OMEGA." The ILU stands for the International Liaison Unit, which shares intelligence between the Mexican and US governments.

Each person listed in the documents had their photo included, usually from a passport but sometimes with pictures from their social media account, as well as other personal information. Also included is the person's date of birth, their "country of commencement," and their alleged tie to the migrant caravan. There is also indication on whether a person's passport was placed on alert.

Individuals which had an "X" colored over their photo were arrested, interviewed, or had their visa or SENTRI pass, which allows for expedited entry from Mexico into the US, revoked. Dossiers were also created for each of the individuals targeted.

The anonymous source from Homeland Security told NBC 7, "We are a criminal investigation agency, we're not an intelligence agency," adding, "We can't create dossiers on people and they're creating dossiers. This is an abuse of the Border Search Authority."

Nicole Ramos, the Refugee Director and attorney for Al Otro Lado, a law center for immigrants in Tijuana, was included in the dossier. It included her personal details like the car she drives, her mother's name, as well as work and travel history.

Ramos told NBC 7 by email, "The document appears to prove what we have assumed for some time, which

is that we are on a law enforcement list designed to retaliate against human rights defenders who work with asylum seekers and who are critical of CBP practices that violate the rights of asylum seekers.”

CBP responded to the news outlet’s requests for comments by stating ludicrously that the agency was investigating any leads that had to do with last year’s “breach” of the border wall, where agents shot tear gas and pepper spray at unarmed civilians on the Mexican side of the border crossing.

Freelance photojournalist Ariana Drehsler told the news affiliate she had crossed the San Ysidro border dozens of times to cover the caravan. “I was very transparent about what I was doing,” Drehsler said. “Sometimes you would see me carrying a camera and if I was asked by an agent what was I doing, I would tell them I was photographing the [migrant] shelters.”

On December 30, 2018, Drehsler was forced into secondary inspection and questioned by border agents as she attempted to cross back into the US. “Two people in plainclothes came down and took me to another room,” Drehsler said. “They questioned me in a small room, asking me questions about the shelter, what was I seeing there, who was I working for.”

“They said that I was on the ground and they’re not, which I thought was really interesting.”

After an hour, agents told her that if she tried to enter the US again she would be pulled aside for secondary inspection and to plan accordingly. When she asked why, the agents told her they had no idea. Drehsler would be questioned twice more while crossing the borders and each time by the same agents in plainclothes.

“They asked about the new caravan and if word had gotten out about how difficult it is to seek asylum in the U.S.,” Drehsler said. “Then before I left, the female agent asked if I rented or owned my home.”

Drehsler told NBC 7 that personal details of her in the leaked documents were accurate including her photo, which came from her passport.

Another freelance photojournalist shown in the slides, Kitra Cahana, whose work has been featured in National Geographic, the *New York Times*, and the Canadian CBC, also told the media that she also faced additional scrutiny and denied entry into Mexico for no apparent reason.

On a January 17, 2019 flight from Canada to Mexico

City, Cahana was stopped by US Customs before she boarded a connecting flight in Detroit. They asked her questions about her work and how she was being funded. While she was allowed back on her flight, she was detained by Mexican officials for 13 hours and later denied entry. When trying again to cross through Guatemala, she was again denied entry.

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