

“Some kids are hiding in their house, Anne Frank-style”

Residents compare trauma of Mississippi ICE Raid to Hurricane Katrina

By **Norisa Diaz**
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Children, families and communities in Mississippi continue to experience the devastating fallout from last week's ICE raids on seven food processing plants. Nearly 700 primarily Latino mothers and fathers were seized by an army of 650 ICE agents in the largest mass roundup in over a decade.

The suffering continues, with children afraid to attend school or leave their parents' side. Families are hiding in their homes, hesitant to venture out for basic necessities. All of the 680 who were detained have lost their incomes and are uncertain how they will care for their families and pay rent. They are living in constant fear.

Of those detained, nearly 300 were released, the majority of whom are mothers who have children to care for while their spouses remain in detention. Those who were released have been forced to wear ankle monitors as they await their immigration proceedings.

Reports are emerging that a majority of those who remain in detention, primarily men and fathers, are engaging in hunger strikes at various detention centers.

Buzzfeed reported that over the weekend “100 immigrants were tear-gassed, shot with rubber bullets, beaten and put in solitary confinement after they launched a hunger strike at the Pine Prairie ICE Processing Center.” The teargassing occurred a day after officers at another Louisiana immigration jail pepper-sprayed over 30 immigrants for engaging in a hunger strike, according to the advocacy group Freedom for Immigrants.

Tony Caldwell, a clinical social worker who has been leading grief counseling sessions at a local church with children affected by the ICE raids, said, “The nightmare isn't over. Trauma is a lifetime journey. And the journey started in the past 48 hours for some of these kids, and it'll be with them for the rest of their lives in some way.”

Caldwell has worked for decades with traumatized children who have been abandoned or orphaned. He told CNN, “This is even worse in some ways... The level of grief in the group work I just did, it's off the charts—as much grief as I've ever been in the room with. Because there are just so many reasons to grieve. It's so fresh, and it's so not over.”

“I was with an infant this morning who was separated from her parent,” he continued. “That's attachment disorder happening in real time.” Caldwell is also concerned that the families have no source of income and will be driven to desperate measures. “Desperate people do desperate things. It's a complete and total setup.”

Sixteen-year old Pricila Mateo told reporters that she is having difficulty sleeping since her mom was seized at the Peco Foods plant in Canton, Mississippi. Her mother, originally from Guatemala, was released Wednesday evening with an ankle bracelet after processing.

“People need to understand what we're going through,” said Pricila, who is terrified that her mom can be taken again. “They treat animals better than they're treating my parents and other parents. They should be treated better than that,” she said. “They're just trying to live. They're just trying to get things for their children.”

A black cloud hangs over her town. A friend missing from school messaged Pricila, “I don't want to go to school anymore. I don't want to go somewhere without knowing where my mother is... I'm scared that they may not let her go,” he said.

The government timed the raids to achieve maximum cruelty and terror, launching them soon after the workers had dropped their children off at school. The school authorities were not notified in advance.

Fourteen-year-old Edna Perez spoke on the phone to her father once since he was detained last week. “I just really want my dad to come back,” Edna said. “He does everything. My mom doesn't know how to drive. She doesn't know what to do right now. My dad knows. He takes us to the nurse if we get sick. He takes care of us all the time.”

Edna and her best friend, Emily, both had parents seized in the raids. “She [Emily] called me, and then she told me, ‘My mom was taken away.’ Then I told her, ‘My dad was taken away.’ We were crying together... I told her, ‘Maybe don't go to school. Maybe the ICE people are going to go to our school. They might take us, too.’”

Isabella Gregorio Alonzo, 27, and her husband were detained

last week. She was released later that day with a GPS monitor tethered to her ankle. Her husband is still being held in a detention center 150 miles away, near the Louisiana border in Natchez, Mississippi. Her family arrived in Mississippi about a year ago, hoping to escape threats in Guatemala and build a better life for her children.

She has two daughters Juana, 7, and Angelina, 3 months. Isabella believes her crying infant can sense something is wrong. Her 7-year-old daughter, Juana, keeps asking when her stepfather is coming home.

“I am alone. I don’t have a job. There is no money,” she said through tears. “I’m thinking of him day and night.”

Scott County School Superintendent Tony McGee told NBC reporters that two plants in his county were raided, resulting in 154 students missing school on Friday. “Because there is child separation, we have counselors,” he said. “Last time we had them was after Hurricane Katrina.”

Chad Harrison, assistant superintendent of Scott County, told NPR that of the 500 children in the district who are Hispanic, “Probably 50 percent of those kids checked out of school early,” on the day of the raid.

Harrison said school officials were concerned that the children who took buses or walked home would be dropped off to find no one home. “One thing that we did was we told our school bus drivers, look. If nobody’s there, if you don’t make visual contact with someone, bring the kids back to the school.”

When asked if any of the kids had to come back to school, Harris said, “We didn’t have any. We were very blessed. We didn’t end up in a situation where we had anybody come back,” indicating that relatives and neighbors had intervened to care for all the children of the detained.

News of the raids has spread around the world, triggering revulsion and a desire to help. In just a few days, donations have poured in from thousands of people across the country and beyond to multiple campaigns. A GoFundMe page for the Mississippi Immigrants Rights Alliance has raised \$50,000, primarily in small donations under \$100. Another Facebook donations page for the Mississippi Center for Justice has raised \$45,000 in four days.

Trinity Mission Center in Forest, Mississippi is inundated with donations of food, diapers and other goods at a rate the center can barely process. The center announced that it will need to use another facility to store all the donations.

“I’m amazed at the support in this community and from everywhere,” said Pastor Sheila Cumbest. We’ve had calls from East to West Coast literally nonstop.”

Aid volunteers report that many families are too shocked to leave their homes, so volunteers have begun to visit families to drop off meals and donations.

As community and local aid groups have sprung into action, protests have broken out across the country in response to last week’s raids. On Sunday, over 100 people were arrested

outside an Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE) office in New York City after protesters shut down a major roadway.

In another protest, 40 people in New York City who demonstrated against Amazon’s work with Immigration and Customs Enforcement were arrested. It was one of more than 50 demonstrations against US immigration policy held across the country to mark Tisha b’Av, the traditional Jewish day of mourning.

On Sunday, children of the detained parents held their own protest march to the Madison County Courthouse in Canton, Mississippi. A Sunday school teacher at Sacred Heart Catholic Church in Canton said she organized the event at the urging of her students.

The response by the Trump administration and federal authorities to the string of anti-immigrant mass shootings has been to double down and tout the raids as historic, with Trump warning Friday that more is to come. “I want people to know that if they come into the United States illegally, they’re getting out,” Trump said. “They’re going to be brought out. And this serves as a very good deterrent.”

Trump’s fascistic aides continue to express their callous disdain for the families affected by the raid. In a TV interview on Sunday, Mark Morgan, the acting commissioner of US Customs and Border Protection (CBP), who served in the Obama administration, responded to the viral video of eleven-year-old Magdalena Gomez Gregorio tearfully begging for ICE to release her father by saying, “I understand that the girl is upset and I get that. But her father committed a crime.”

Morgan dismissed the girl’s pleas as serving a political agenda. “I know it’s emotional and I know it’s done on purpose to show a picture like that,” he said.

Adding insult to injury, a meat-processing plant owned by the Koch brothers hosted a job fair on Monday in Forest, Mississippi to replace workers seized in the raids. In its online announcement, the plant noted that two forms of valid identification were required when applying.

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