

Obama administration prepares raids on Central American immigrants

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The US Department of Homeland Security is preparing to unleash widespread raids on Central American immigrants, mainly women and children, once the new year begins, according to unnamed Obama administration officials who spoke with the press last week.

It would be the first ever program of mass deportations to target Central American refugees specifically. Most are women and children who have sought to escape gang attacks, drug-related violence and brutality by US-backed security services in Guatemala, Honduras and El Salvador.

Raids are expected in Houston, New Orleans, Los Angeles and the Washington, DC area, which have the largest concentrations of Central American immigrants. Other cities are likely to be targeted as well.

The DHS has begun adding capacity to handle increased detentions during the raids, since those arrested will be held in federal facilities in the days preceding their deportation. The agency recently opened two new “shelters”—actually detention centers—in Texas, one with 700 beds and the other with 300 beds. A third, 400-bed facility is being readied in California as well.

The *Washington Post* first reported the mass deportation plan on December 24, noting that hundreds of immigrants facing current deportation orders would be targeted for arrest and returned to the countries from which they have fled.

According to the *Post*, “The ICE [Immigration and Customs Enforcement] operation would target only adults and children who have already been ordered removed from the United States by an immigration judge... The adults and children would be detained wherever they can be found and immediately deported. The number targeted is expected to be in the hundreds

and possibly greater.”

ICE spokeswoman Gillian Christensen issued a statement in response to the *Post* report reiterating that it was DHS policy to focus on individuals “who pose a threat to national security, public safety and border security.” The reference to “border security” amounts to targeting anyone who crosses the border without US government permission, including women and small children fleeing violence, rape and the threat of death.

A follow-up report in the *Wall Street Journal* confirmed that the campaign of repression will begin early in 2016, once it receives the expected final approval by the Obama administration. Secretary of Homeland Security Jeh Johnson was said to be pushing hard for the decision.

“Starting early next month, US Immigration and Customs Enforcement, a DHS unit, plans to start rounding up hundreds of families that entered the US illegally and who have ignored a final order to leave the country,” the *Journal* reported.

According to the press accounts, there are two immediate factors behind the new campaign. First is the series of court defeats for the Obama administration over the brutal conditions in which Central American women and children have been held at recently opened camps in Arizona and Texas.

A federal district judge in August ordered DHS to begin discharging women and children who have been detained in violation of a consent decree issued during the Clinton administration barring the imprisonment of children, whether held with or without adult companions. The Obama administration is complying with the order pending appeal, but apparently intends to rearrest those released and deport them as soon as possible.

The second factor is the sharp increase in the number

of new refugees from Central America crossing the US border in Texas and Arizona during October and November, up 173 percent from the same period a year ago. While the overall refugee flow does not yet compare to the summer of 2014, when tens of thousands crossed the border each month, the number of unaccompanied minors from Central America topped 5,000 a month for October and November, reaching half the level of 2014.

More significant than these factors, however, is the political context in which the decision has been made to unleash sharply increased repression against Central American refugees. The Obama administration has been under fire from right-wing critics in both the Republican and Democratic parties over its plan to bring 25,000 Syrian refugees to the United States in the coming year. A measure aimed at banning Syrian refugees won overwhelming bipartisan support in the House of Representatives earlier this month.

On December 15, Texas Governor Greg Abbott ordered Texas National Guard troops to remain at the Mexico border, extending a deployment ordered by his predecessor Rick Perry during the refugee influx in the summer of 2014. Both Perry and Abbott are Republicans.

Billionaire Donald Trump has forged a significant lead in the campaign for the Republican presidential nomination based on racist diatribes against immigrants and refugees, first smearing Mexican immigrants as rapists and murderers, then denouncing Syrian refugees as likely terrorists, finally calling for a ban on any Muslim entering the US.

The DHS move against Central American refugees is a green light to Trump and other ultra-right anti-immigrant forces, and Trump quickly embraced the proposed raids as a triumph for his campaign. Immigrant rights groups, for their part, pointed out that it made no sense to proclaim sympathy for Syrian refugees fleeing violence and brutality, while locking up and deporting Central American refugees seeking to escape similar conditions.

Democratic presidential candidates Hillary Clinton, Bernie Sanders and Martin O'Malley all issued for-the-record statements opposing the planned escalation of repression against Central American immigrants. But Clinton has previously demanded in 2014 that the unaccompanied migrant children from Central America

“should be sent home.” All the Democrats are jointly responsible for the atrocious record of the Obama administration, which has deported more undocumented immigrants than any other in American history.

According to a report released earlier this month, during the 2015 fiscal year (October 1, 2014 through September 30, 2015), the ICE deported 235,413 people and the Border Patrol apprehended 337,117 people nationwide. Both figures, while staggering in terms of mass repression and individual suffering, were actually the lowest since Obama entered the White House in 2009.

The Obama administration has a cumulative deportation total of nearly 3 million people, plus several million more who were “returned”—detained and forced back across the southern border. Those figures alone make nonsense of the claims that the Democratic Party represents any alternative to the anti-immigrant racism of the Republicans, spearheaded by Trump.



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