

Obama administration rings in new year with deportation of children

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The White House began the New Year with a series of nationwide raids targeting immigrants at their homes. Department of Homeland Security Secretary Jeh Johnson said 121 children and adults were taken into custody over the weekend in Georgia, North Carolina and Texas.

Children as young as four years old were separated from their families and locked up prior to deportation. “They took away children so young they would’ve needed car seats in their vehicles for them,” said Adelina Nicholls, executive director of Georgia Latino Alliance for Human Rights (GLAHR).

The targets of the most recent raids were families seeking refugee status after fleeing their homes in Central America, where many said they had received death threats stemming from the rampant gang violence in Guatemala, Honduras and El Salvador. Most of those swept up in the raids had turned themselves over to border patrol agents upon entering the US, submitted paperwork requesting refugee status, and complied with court instructions, but were denied asylum.

The operations were reminiscent of the workplace raids carried out under the Bush administration in the mid-2000s. But Obama, the candidate of “hope” and “change” added his own touch by targeting children at their family homes.

The raids were carried out without warrants, and thus predicated on immigration officials being “invited” into homes. But there were widespread reports of officers “inviting” themselves in, then demanding the documents of anyone in the residence and carrying out mass arrests.

The White House was entirely unapologetic in describing the raids. Johnson declared, “I know there are many who loudly condemn our enforcement efforts as far too harsh,” but “we must enforce the law consistent with our priorities.” He called the deportations “consistent with American values, and basic principles of decency, fairness, and humanity.”

“As I have said repeatedly, our borders are not open to illegal migration; if you come here illegally, we will send you back,” Johnson declared. He bragged about accelerating the pace of deportations even before the latest raids, declaring, “Since the summer of 2014 we have removed and repatriated migrants to Central America at an increased rate, averaging about 14 flights a week.”

Declaring that the raids “should come as no surprise,” Johnson declared, “I have said publicly for months that individuals who constitute enforcement priorities, including families and unaccompanied children, will be removed.”

Obama deported a record 438,421 people in 2013, the highest number of annual deportations in US history, according to figures by the Department of Homeland Security. The Obama White House has already deported more people than any other presidency. In Obama’s first six years in office, he deported more people than Bush in his entire eight-year tenure, and more than twice as many people as Clinton.

Immigrant rights advocates denounced the raids as cruel and inhuman. “The administration is doubling down on a system that is rigged against these families,” said Cecillia Wang, director of the American Civil Liberties Union’s Immigrants’ Rights Project. She added, “Many of these mothers and children had no lawyers because they could not afford them. Without counsel, traumatized refugees don’t understand what is happening in court and cannot get their legitimate asylum claim heard.”

The White House had telegraphed its intention to begin mass roundups and deportations late last year, leaving many families to spend the holidays worrying about whether they would be deported. Immigration activist Greisa Martinez told *USA Today* she “spent the holiday break counseling her mother on what to do if immigration agents came looking for her,”

The magazine added, “The moment was especially difficult, Martinez said, because they had spent the previous Christmas celebrating President Obama’s new program to protect up to 4.5 million undocumented immigrants from deportation.”

“It’s emblematic of this administration,” Martinez said. “Obama is cementing his legacy as the ‘deporter in chief.’”

Last year, the world was shocked by images of children and adults cramped in squalid facilities on the US border following an increase in children seeking asylum from Central America. Immigrant rights groups, despite overwhelmingly supporting Obama during the elections, picketed his appearances. In response to the crisis, Obama sought to refurbish his image by announcing an executive order that would sharply reduce the number of deportations.

But that measure, as he no doubt expected, was blocked in the courts, allowing him to posture as an advocate of refugee rights while in reality continuing his policies of mass deportation. Not blocked, however, were his plans to sharply expand the militarization of the southern border of the US.

Johnson boasted of these measures, declaring that US Customs and Border Protection has implemented “the largest deployment of vehicles, aircraft, boats and equipment along the southwest border in the 90-year history of the Border Patrol,” and that “CBP has also increased surveillance capabilities by adding tethered aerostats (long-range radars) and other technology, along with additional aircraft.”

The White House’s latest attack on refugee children makes clear that the brutal treatment by European countries of refugees fleeing the Syrian war is a phenomenon that is not confined to that continent. All over the world, countries are stepping up mass deportations, militarizing their borders and denying the most elementary democratic rights to asylum-seekers and immigrants.



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