

Government moves survivors of San Antonio truck trailer disaster to for-profit jail

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The US government is transporting immigrants who survived nearly suffocating to death in the back of a semi-truck trailer to detention centers in Texas. The immigrants, some of whom spent 24 hours in the back of a hot trailer with no air conditioning or ventilation, were barely allowed to stretch their legs before the government began the process of deportation. With no regard for the trauma the immigrants suffered, the government has placed them *back* in a locked, confined space from which they are not allowed to leave.

The botched smuggling operation resulted in 10 deaths from heat-related injuries, and many victims remain in critical condition in local hospitals. Amy Fischer, policy director with the immigrant rights group RAICES, told the *World Socialist Web Site* that the survivors discharged from the hospital were taken immediately to a detention center in San Antonio, run by the private prison company, GEO, infamous for the brutal and inhumane conditions of their jails. The migrants have yet to find any relief from the nightmare that they have barely managed to survive thus far.

It has been confirmed that at least one of the immigrants who died grew up in the United States. He was 19 years old and lived in Fairfax County, Virginia after arriving in the US with his parents at the age of 2. After being convicted of a crime in his youth, he was deported back to Guatemala.

The stories of some of the survivors have surfaced from documents related to the criminal charge against the truck driver, James M. Bradley Jr. of Clearwater, Florida. Bradley was charged under a federal law for knowingly transporting people who are in the country illegally—a law that provides for an unlimited prison term or capital punishment, if the crime results in a death. Bradley's claim that he did not know he was transporting migrants is highly unlikely. Passengers

report they were banging on the walls and shouting for help for hours, even after the truck had stopped.

The official criminal complaint filed by the State of Texas against Bradley contains an accounting of the events from one of the immigrants. Referred to by the initials J-M-M-J, he left his home in Aguascalientes, Mexico for Nuevo Laredo, closer to the border, to be smuggled into the US with the final destination of San Antonio, Texas. Upon arrival in Texas, he was expected to pay the smugglers \$5,500.

According to the report, J-M-M-J was taken across the Rio Grande with 28 other people. He was told by a smuggler that people linked to the drug cartel *Las Zetas* would charge 11,000 Mexican pesos for protection and 1,500 Mexican pesos to cross by raft. After the money was paid and the trip was completed across the river, the group walked through the night and into the morning of the next day.

At 9:00 A.M., they were picked up by smugglers and taken to the trailer in which they later traveled. He estimated there were about 70 people already inside. The smugglers closed the door, leaving the trailer pitch black. They were not provided with any food or water and it was already hot inside. At about 9:00 P.M., someone came in and provided each group with a different color tape to identify to the waiting smugglers which group they would be picking up at each destination. He was promised that the truck was refrigerated.

J-M-M-J said that soon after the trip began, people started having trouble breathing and some were passing out. The driver never stopped despite the fact that passengers banging on the walls and yelling. The report states, "Upon arriving, the driver braked hard and people inside the trailer fell over because they were so weak. The rear doors were opened and people started to

swarm out. Six black SUVs were waiting to pick up the people. The SUV's were full in a matter of minutes and left right away." Those slated for destinations further along the road remained in the trailer which was locked-up once again.

The horrific scene which unfolded in the parking lot of the Walmart last Sunday morning is difficult to imagine. The tractor trailer doors opened and over a hundred people stumbled out for relief from the stifling heat. According to the driver's account, the bodies of the dead immigrants were lying on the trailer floor, "like meat."

Local organizations dedicated to protecting immigrant rights spoke to WSWS reporters on some of the broader issues surrounding the incident in San Antonio.

Jesus Romero, who directs the immigration service project ISAAC, explained the enormity of the smuggling operations:

"The immigrants that I work with have told me that there is quite a sophisticated smuggling system in place. It is at the point where there are smuggling packages which they sell immigrants, like any business would have. If you want to be transported the rough way for less money they bring you walking sometimes all the way from Central America. Then the price increases if you want to be more comfortable. You can pay enormous amounts of money and be smuggled by plane for example."

The smuggling business has grown immensely as the US-Mexico border has been increasingly militarized. Migrants often enter the country in small groups on foot with a leader called a "coyote." Once over the border, they do not travel north immediately. Instead, smugglers organize them into larger groups in what are known as "stash houses." These houses are infamous for their cramped and dangerous conditions and are rife with crime and sexual abuse. Those involved in the smuggling, including individuals like Bradley on the American side, represent the dregs of society.

Stash houses are located in cities and towns between the border and a network of Border Patrol traffic checkpoints, which are difficult to get through.

Ruben Garcia, who runs the immigration service Annunciation House in El Paso, Texas told the WSWS, "I've been at this for forty years and I can tell you this is not the first time that something like this has

happened. There were other instances where people have been transported by train boxcar. One of the real tragedies of those boxcars is that they lock from the outside. Entire groups of people were smuggled and the same thing happened. The temperature became so high and people died. Immigrants dying this way is not new.

"Over the last couple of years enforcement has been the primary way to deal with immigration," Garcia explained. "Migrants and refugees have been pushed and forced to turn to the smuggling industry. They are releasing 25 people to us today, mostly families. As we speak to them, almost 100% of them were all brought up to the border by smugglers. Whether it's starting in Guatemala, Brazil, El Salvador, they are all using smugglers. It is so dangerous to try and do it any other way. There is this huge, huge operation and it is the consequence of policies which see enforcement as the only way to deal with immigration."

Amy Fischer with RAICES told the WSWS, "The increased militarization of the border, the increased criminalization of immigrants is what forces individuals to risk their lives in order to save their lives. We cannot talk about the tragic events of the last few days in a silo.

"This is not something that has started in the last 5 or 6 months. It started years ago. Asylum seekers are regularly denied entry into the US which disregards US and international law. That is a practice we started seeing prior to the transition of the Trump Administration. What we have found since the transition is that the Trump administration has only exacerbated and worsened the already poor and unjust immigration policies under the Obama administration.

"We look at the long history of US intervention in Latin America that has resulted in instability, that has resulted in rise of these gangs which are causing so much of the violence in the Northern Triangle. We have to look at this issue long term...and recognize that the US international policy, and prior US deportation policy are some of the root causes."



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