

Administration preparing to hold immigrants in tent camps

Outcry mounts against Trump policy of forced separation of refugee children and parents

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There is growing public outrage over the impact of the Trump administration's new "zero tolerance" policy, announced last month. Under this policy, all undocumented adults encountered by the Border Patrol or Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE) are being arrested and jailed, while their children are turned over to the Office of Refugee Resettlement (ORR), an agency of the federal Department of Health and Human Services (HHS).

This policy is in flagrant violation of international law, which requires that governments accept asylum petitions as legitimate and impose no penalties on asylum seekers while their requests are reviewed and adjudicated. Instead, under the Trump policy announced May 7, all asylum seekers are treated as criminals, with the adults jailed and the children turned over to ORR.

The administration does not have the facilities to keep up with its brutal rates of detention, and a report by McClatchy News this week revealed the administration plans to deal with the overflow by warehousing children in tent camps on military bases.

The HHS plans to tour four bases in Texas and Arkansas in the coming weeks to determine where a tent city will be established to hold between 1,000 and 5,000 children, with many immigration advocates protesting planned facilities akin to the Japanese internment camps in the American West from 1942 to 1945.

Major newspapers and the main US television networks have suddenly begun reporting on the appalling conditions facing thousands of immigrant and refugee children detained along the US-Mexico border.

Driving the media coverage Thursday was a tour given the previous day to a small group of journalists through

the largest single detention facility for children, the 1,500-bed Casa Padre in McAllen, Texas, near Brownsville, where boys between 10 and 17 are held. The facility is a former Wal-Mart superstore, now run by Southwest Key, a "non-profit" which has raked in more than \$1 billion in federal contracts to run detention centers in the region.

At Casa Padre, an estimated 95 percent of the children came as unaccompanied refugees, seeking asylum from the violence-ridden countries of El Salvador, Guatemala and Honduras. But a significant number, 5 percent and growing, were separated from their parents under the new Trump policy.

In other detention facilities along the US-Mexico border, the proportion of children separated from their parents by the Trump policy is now 10 percent. The ORR oversees nearly 11,000 youth in an estimated 100 shelters across 17 states, with Southwest Key operating 26 shelters in Texas, Arizona and California.

Casa Padre was chosen as the site for a controlled and heavily "facilitated" media tour following a slew of public scrutiny last week when Senator Jeff Merkley (D-OR) was denied access to the facility. Officials threatened to call the police after he arrived at the front door and asked to come in.

Reporters were taken on a 90-minute tour Wednesday. They were not allowed to take photos or speak to the children. Despite reporting that the facilities were clean, and that the children had three meals a day, classroom instruction, staff physicians and video games, many of the journalists conveyed a sense of the oppressive conditions within the facilities and the unimaginable trauma faced by these youth.

“You may want to smile, the kids feel a little like animals in a cage being looked at,” Southwest Key executive Alexia Rodriguez told the visitors. Spokesmen revealed that children are kept indoors for 22 hours a day, with only two hours out of doors, one of which is structured physical education. Youth are allowed to make only two phone calls a week, with some attempting for months to track down relatives in the United States.

As NBC correspondent Jacob Soboroff acknowledged, in a report in which he appeared shaken by the tour, whatever the amenities claimed by the government and its private subcontractor, “these children are imprisoned.”

While each boy is limited to two t-shirts, one pair of jeans, one polo shirt, three pairs of socks and three pairs of underwear, the top executives at Southwest Key are not so constrained. Juan Sanchez, the founder of the “non-profit,” made \$786,222 in 2015, while his wife Jennifer was paid \$280,819 as a vice-president, bringing the combined Sanchez family income that year to more than a million dollars. Juan Sanchez saw his total compensation nearly double in 2016 to \$1.48 million, although he told the press that this reflected a retirement contribution, not a salary increase.

Casa Padre was licensed by the state to hold 1,186 children, but it has been granted permission to boost its capacity to its current 1,500. Business is booming for Southwest Key in light of the surge of unaccompanied minors crossing the US-Mexico border. Since 2014, the organization received over \$1.1 billion to shelter youth, which includes \$310 million in the current fiscal year.

There are similar profit bonanzas for other operators of detention facilities, as well as the array of private companies circling like sharks around the billions to be made as contractors in building Trump’s wall along the US-Mexico border and providing arms and high-tech gear to the Border Patrol, ICE and the military.

Greed combines with militarism and racism as the driving forces for an orgy of brutality and abuse faced by youth and adults in the detention facilities. A May 2018 American Civil Liberties Union report detailed horrific conditions including physical endangerment, withholding medical attention, beatings, and mental and sexual abuse by Customs and Border Protection (CBP) agents.

A vocational and English teacher at a Tucson, Arizona, Southwest Key facility, Antar Davidson, recently resigned due to the appalling conditions and described to the press the traumatic reality of life inside the centers. Davidson noted the daily cases of attempted runaways, screaming, throwing, crying, self-harm and attempted suicide he had

witnessed, describing the conditions as increasingly “prison-like.”

Secretary of Homeland Security Kirstjen Nielsen boasted to Congress in May that “word is getting out,” and the news of the administration’s punitive “zero tolerance” policy—to arrest and prosecute all who cross illegally and separate them from their children—would act as a deterrent to future border crossers. Nielsen said that the number of families apprehended at the border has increased by 600 percent compared to spring of last year.

The number of minors in custody has spiked by 20 percent between April and May of this year in light of last month’s pledge by Attorney General Jeff Sessions to criminally prosecute all adults who have crossed the border illegally, and officials report that facilities are 95 percent full.

The revelation of the horrific conditions of refugees and the plans for military tent camps has justifiably produced public outcry, and the Democratic Party is seeking to exploit the widespread public support for immigrants. Senator Merkley, for example, did not show up on the Rio Grande for publicity stunts at immigration detention centers during the Obama administration.

The Democrats, however, raised no objection to Obama’s 2.7 million deportations or his Justice Department’s defense of indefinite detention before the Supreme Court, in response to lawsuits filed by detainees who spent over three years in ICE facilities.

Whatever their meek and hypocritical protests, the Democrats have facilitated Trump’s increasingly fascistic attack on immigrants, seeking to divert widespread popular hostility to these measures behind the factional conflicts within the ruling elite over foreign policy, centered on the Democrats’ anti-Russia campaign.



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