Guatemalan establishment indifferent to deaths of US incarcerated migrant children

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Guatemala's government and its entire ruling establishment have responded to the recent deaths of two Guatemalan children under US custody with an indifference that not only reflects their disdain for the country's impoverished masses, but also their efforts to demonstrate loyal submission to the Trump administration.

Jakelin Caal, 7, died on December 8, and Felipe Gómez Alonzo, 8, on December 24, after crossing the border into the US and being taken into custody by the border patrol.

Along with much of the media, Guatemalan authorities have remained silent about the case of Yazmín Juárez, a 20-year-old Guatemalan migrant, who filed a suit last month against the US federal government over the death of her 19-month-old daughter, Mariee, after contracting a respiratory infection and being inadequately treated at an ICE family detention center in Arizona earlier last year.

While Hondurans and Salvadorans comprised the bulk of the caravans that gained widespread media attention and sympathy internationally last year, the US Customs and Border Protection (CBP) reported that, for the first time on record, it arrested more Guatemalans crossing the border than any other nationality during the 2018 fiscal year, which ended in September. A total of 50,401 Guatemalan migrants were detained, twice as many as in the previous fiscal year.

On December 25, the US Secretary of Homeland Security Kirstjen Nielsen provided data showing that six people died during fiscal year 2018 (ending in September) in CBP custody, while CBP commissioner Kevin McAleenan told CBS that Jakelin was the first child to die in more than a decade.

The deaths of Jakelin and Felipe attest to the ruthless detention regime imposed on migrants by the Trump administration. While investigations are underway into the deaths, it is known that Felipe became ill after being sent to the temporary detention facilities known as *hieleras* or "ice boxes", and that Jakelin collapsed after she was ripped away from her father by officials claiming their relationship could not be confirmed.

Many more migrants die while crossing the Sonoran Desert into the US, where CBP officials are known to destroy water and provisions left for migrants by volunteers.

Jakelin's body was received by a group of saddened neighbors of San Antonio Secortez and nearby towns of the Raxruhá municipality. Dozens gave money and food baskets to the family. Felipe's body has not been returned to his hometown due to continued examinations.

Jose Manuel Caal, Jakelin's uncle, told reporters that the girl and her father were escaping hunger. "The poverty we live in, the crops we grow aren't enough to support a family," he noted.

In Nentón, Huehuetenango, Felipe's uncle and one of his cousins had no time to mourn or wait for the body and are already planning on attempting the trip to the United States. "I have no land, I have nothing for my children to live better," he commented to *Prensa Libre* shortly after the news came of Felipe's death.

The outrage over these deaths among workers in the US and the popular anger and grief in Guatemala are anathema to both governments.

The Guatemalan government of President Jimmy Morales has not protested the deaths or the brutal treatment of migrants by US authorities and has instead reproduced the threats by the Trump administration. In fact, the death of Jakelin Caal was temporarily covered up by the Guatemalan authorities despite reports that the consulate at Del Río, Texas was informed on December 8 at 6 a.m. It wasn't until December 13, five days after her death, that the CBP acknowledged the incident.

Guatemalan Foreign Minister Sandra Jove released the following statement shortly after revealing the identity of the girl: "The government of Guatemala regrets that a citizen has lost her life in this journey and points out that places where migrants cross now are more dangerous and distances they travel are longer."

On December 25, after the death of Felipe, the Foreign Ministry published a new communiqué stating: "we requested a clear investigation that respects the proper process that US authorities assign to this case." That day, the Guatemalan government's Human Rights Ombudsman made the following pronouncement: "The efforts by the US authorities must not center only on controlling migratory flows, but also on the integrity of the migrants, since two children have died in the custody of the border patrol in less than 15 days."

The Guatemalan consul in Del Río, Tekandi Paniagua, was asked whether the death of Caal, reportedly a healthy 7-year-old girl, could have been avoided. He refused to respond until the autopsy.

After Nielsen and Trump blamed the families directly for the children's deaths, the Guatemalan government made no protest.

Trump has continued his bullying unbothered. On December 28, for instance, he tweeted:

"Honduras Guatemala and El Salvador are doing nothing for the United States but [are] taking our money. Word is that a new Caravan is forming in Honduras and they are doing nothing about it. We will be cutting off all aid to these 3 countries-taking advantage of U.S. for years!"

On January 1, the CBP attacked migrants seeking to cross the border near Tijuana with tear gas and arrested at least 25 of them. Again, there was no protest by Guatemala or other regional governments.

On June 18, at the height of popular rage against Trump's "zero tolerance" policy against migrants characterized by the separation of children from their parents, the Guatemalan government made no protest but instead declared that it "respects US foreign policy in migration matters." President Morales again failed to protest the deployment of US troops and violent threats against caravan members by Trump in October, or the shooting of rubber bullets and tear gas canisters to disperse caravan members, including women and young children, inside Tijuana in November.

Such subservience has angered workers, peasants and wider layers of the population. "The imperviousness of the US government and the security forces killed her; the Jimmy Morales administration killed her; the ineptitude and subservience of foreign minister Sandra Jovel killed

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her; the Congress that legislates for the rich killed her; the greedy elites killed her; the depriving transnational corporations killed her; indifference killed her; we all killed her," wrote historian María Aguilar in an op-ed on Jakelin's death for *El Periódico*.

The hostility to the masses by the Guatemalan ruling class has in turn become useful to mouthpieces of the US imperialist foreign policy, setting the tone for the response by most of the media and political opposition in Guatemala.

The *New York Times*, in a December 28 article titled "Guatemala cautious on Young Migrants' Deaths, Wary of Angering US," sought to shift the blame for the deaths onto the Guatemalan government. It attributes its "solicitous approach" toward Trump's anti-immigrant offensive to President Morales bid to secure Trump's backing for the expulsion of a UN-sponsored "anti-impunity" commission, the CICIG (International Commission Against Impunity in Guatemala).

Foreign Minister Jovel issued an ultimatum on Monday giving the UN body 24 hours to leave the country.

Undoubtedly, Morales wants Trump's blessings regarding the CICIG, which had been investigating him for illicit campaign financing and several of his family members and political associates in other corruption cases. But in making this argument, the *Times* and many others in Guatemala and elsewhere are seeking to channel social opposition over the migrant deaths behind support for the CICIG.

Far from seeking to "combat the corruption that has crippled Guatemala's political and economic development—and, in part, fueled the migration of its citizens," as the *Times* claims, the CICIG is fully controlled by the US State Department and has functioned as a lever of imperialist domination. It has been used to pressure the ruling National Convergence Front to adopt policies that are even more subordinate to US capital and its geopolitical interests—policies that are chiefly responsible for the desperate social conditions forcing migrants to leave.

These policies include the imposition of social austerity and attacks on democratic rights with the aim of keeping Guatemala as a source of cheap labor and natural resources. At the same time, Washington has sought further US militarization of the region, the timely servicing of the public debt to Wall Street and the cutting of economic and political ties with US rivals, chiefly China.

A government report presented in August indicates that 59.3 percent of the population lives under poverty, 8.1 percentage points more than in 2006. The official poverty rates of the municipalities where Felipe and Jakelin lived exceed 80 percent. Decent-paying jobs, health care, sanitation facilities, secondary education, electricity, internet, cable and other basic needs are largely inaccessible. Guatemala collects the smallest share of tax revenues relative to its GDP in the world.

Agricultural workers make on average 40 to 60 quetzales ($5-8) per day, below the paltry minimum wage for the sector of 90 quetzales ($11.6) daily.

At the same time, Guatemala is the world's fifth main exporter of palm oil and the fourth of sugar. After agricultural products, textiles constitute the second largest export sector, followed by chemicals, minerals and metals.

What maintains the intolerable levels of poverty for workers and peasants is the drive for profits by major transnational corporations and local landowners that continue bleeding Guatemala's soil and labor.

Almost one of every two children in Guatemala suffers chronic malnourishment, with thousands of children under five dying each year from preventable conditions (13,000 in 2015 according to UNICEF). Youth seeking to escape desperate poverty, domestic abuse or gang violence also face the possible nightmare of being locked up, beaten, and sexually abused in the shelters controlled by the Social Welfare Secretariat (SBS). In 2017, 41 girls died in a fire at a shelter after they set fire to mattresses as part of a failed attempt to escape their "refuge." The treatment meted out by US authorities to the 15,000 migrant children held in custody is not that different.

The opposition parties in Guatemala were also largely silent on the deaths of Jakelin and Felipe, and their few statements were toothless. For instance, the only official statement by the ex-guerrilla URNG-Maiz, signed by its only legislator, Walter Félix, attacked Trump's "zero tolerance" policy but made no further demand than calling on the Morales government to "elucidate the case."

A June analysis by the CELAG think tank (Latin American Strategic Center on Geopolitics) warned that there is no political "left" in Guatemala, citing the lack of political support for the ex-guerrilla URNG-Maiz and the Indian nationalist Winaq Party, adding that "flexible and informal labor hamper the development of trade unions."

Back in May, the Washington-based think-tank Stratfor expressed confidently that any social explosion in the country would fall "once again under the auspices of CICIG's Guatemalan defenders," referring to the channeling of mass protests in 2015 against the Otto Pérez Molina administration behind the CICIG's corruption case against him, culminating in his resignation that year and replacement by the fascistic Vice-President Alejandro Baltazar Maldonado. Shortly thereafter came the election of the ex-comedian Morales, an even more pliable defender of the interests of US imperialism and the local oligarchy.

The entire establishment opposition has based its criticisms of Morales on defending the CICIG and its corruption cases against the ruling coalition. The CELAG piece reflects concerns among ruling circles in Latin America that the alignment of the pseudo-left behind the CICIG and its other right-wing backers could eventually render them useless as instruments for channeling social unrest behind the bourgeois politics.

Their unpopularity, however, runs much deeper. It is the result of their abandonment of the class struggle after the guerrillas, along with the student and indigenous protest organizations became the left flank of the UNE (National Union of Hope party) faction of the ruling elite following the "peace process" in the late-1990s, while the living conditions of peasants and workers continued to worsen. This was in turn the inevitable result of the nationalist politics advanced by the petty-bourgeois leaderships of the Maoist and Castroite guerrillas and Stalinist Guatemalan Workers Party (PGT), which actively undermined the struggle to develop a Marxist revolutionary party based on the international working class to fight for socialism.

Only such a party, a section of the ICFI, in the Guatemalan working class, leading behind it all toiling masses, can provide a viable leadership for the struggle against imperialism and social inequality by fighting in unison with workers in the US and across the region to overthrow capitalism, expropriate the wealth of the financial elite and local oligarchy and crush all exploitation, hunger and violence.

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