

Trump administration exploits coronavirus to block all asylum seekers from entering US

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On Tuesday, four Trump administration officials told the *New York Times* that the government would begin turning back all asylum seekers at both the northern and southern borders of the US, ostensibly over concerns regarding the coronavirus pandemic.

Under the new policy, migrants crossing the border at points of entry will be transported back to Mexico if they are crossing the southern border and will not be held for any time in the US.

The policy will apply to asylum seekers and those crossing the border illegally. However, the border will remain open to American citizens, green card holders and other documented foreigners, as well as to commercial traffic.

While the change in policy was announced as a measure to combat the spread of the COVID-19 pandemic, the Trump administration is, in fact, utilizing the crisis to escalate its attack on immigrants and democratic rights more broadly. Travel restrictions and quarantine measures are necessary to contain the spread of the deadly disease, but Trump has made a point of utilizing such emergency actions to promote his fascistic, anti-immigrant and nationalist agenda, and to appeal to far-right forces.

He has made a point of calling the coronavirus a “foreign” or “Chinese” virus, in an effort to stoke up racist and xenophobic sentiment within the US.

The blanket rejection of asylum seekers is the latest in a series of steps aimed at abrogating the right to asylum, which is protected by both international and US law. Refugees fleeing violence and oppression in their home countries—ever-present realities in Central American nations that have been oppressed and plundered by US imperialism for more than a century—have a basic democratic right to enter the country where they seek asylum and apply for the right

to remain. They are not, under the law, guilty of any illegal or criminal action.

With his agreements with Mexico and Central American nations to block asylum seekers from remaining in the US while their claims are processed, Trump and his counterparts south of the US border have condemned thousands of working people to subsist in crowded and unsanitary detention camps in Mexico and other countries where they wait, under military guard, for months or years for a ruling by US immigration officials. The vast majority of claims are routinely denied.

Within the US, the government has built a gulag of immigrant concentration camps that detain undocumented workers, including asylum seekers.

The US has thereby created the very breeding grounds for the spread of COVID-19 both north and south of the US border that Trump now cites as an excuse for turning back all refugees. The official administration line is that the ban on asylum seekers is necessitated by the existence of already overcrowded detention centers on US territory.

The White House has also announced an agreement with Canada to suspend non-essential travel between the two countries.

President Trump told CNN he was not planning on closing the southern border, but that “we are invoking a certain provision that will allow us great latitude as to what we do.” This was a reference to a US code that allows the surgeon general to deny entry to people who risk carrying an infectious disease into the US.

A Customs and Border Protection (CBP) official told CNN, “The logistics are nearly impossible. If Mexico agrees to take everyone back, there is no issue,” otherwise, the “logistics become very, very difficult.”

The CBP official added that the US could use a

policy of “voluntary return” to send Mexican nationals back, but it was not made clear how other nationalities could be deported without agreement with Mexico. The official said it would be more feasible to deny entry at land ports along the southern border since asylum seekers are not yet on US soil.

The Mexican Foreign Ministry denied receiving any formal request from the US government regarding the return of migrants to Mexico as a result of the coronavirus outbreak.

The consequences of the administration’s policies were spelled out in a *New York Times* interview with a Guatemalan immigrant who escaped from his country after gang members killed his brother. After traveling to the US to seek asylum with his family, Yovani was shuttled back to Guatemala.

Since last November, more than 900 Central American immigrants have been sent to Guatemala, but only 20 have applied for sanctuary there.

Until the most recent changes, immigrants would be sent back to their country of origin, where they at least had families and support networks that Guatemala does not provide. Many immigrant rights advocates have argued that Guatemala is just as dangerous as other countries where the same criminal gangs operate.

American officials have reached similar deals with El Salvador and Honduras, though neither government has put those plans into effect.

On Tuesday, Guatemalan officials announced that they would be temporarily suspending flights carrying refugees due to the coronavirus.



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