US Border Patrol raids “No More Deaths” humanitarian aid camp in southern Arizona

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On Thursday, US Border Patrol (USBP) agents raided a camp set up by the migrant aid group No More Deaths (NMD) near the ranching community of Arivaca, Arizona, approximately 11 miles north of the US-Mexico border. The raid resulted in the arrest of one person and the setting up of ongoing surveillance and enforcement operations at the campsite.

The actions of the USBP agents have been justified by Tucson Sector Chief Roy Villareal as part of a regular law enforcement operation in a “key smuggling route for both undocumented immigrants and drug traffickers.” However, this seems to be a vindictive retaliatory action by the agency against NMD for having further exposed the expanding role of BORTAC—the shadowy, highly trained special operations force—in USBP’s policing actions.

NMD is a faith-based group that has been providing humanitarian assistance to migrants making the deadly crossing across the southwestern border of the United States. Its main operations have involved providing water, food and medical assistance to those who desperately need them by placing them in various parts of the inhospitable terrain, and having some outposts, which perform a similar function. One such outpost is Byrd Camp—a collection of military-style tents—that was the focus of the raid this past week.

The official account put forth by Villareal makes it appear as though there were a large number of undocumented migrants who were tracked by USBP agents right up to the camp. In this narrative, it is the agents who appear in a humanitarian guise, helping a woman they encountered outside the camp, and having her taken to a nearby hospital for medical assistance. NMD reports a somewhat different version of the incident.

According to volunteers at the camp, the raid began with a USBP agent on horseback riding in at 9:00 a.m. on Thursday, without a warrant. The agent proceeded to detain a migrant, who was then taken into custody. While this was going on, other agents in ATVs and regular patrol vehicles circled the camp, and continued their enforcement operations through Friday. They also set up a checkpoint on one of the roads leading to the camp, while flying surveillance drones above the campsite.

The obvious aim of these kinds of actions is to intimidate both those who do humanitarian work as well those who are driven by the circumstances to seek such help. The cruelty and inhumanity underlying such moves cannot be over-emphasized, given the inhospitable terrain and the specific horrors of the summer in the southwestern border region. Arivaca is expected to see temperatures reach as high as 115 degrees Fahrenheit in the coming week.

However, what makes the timing and location of this particular raid interesting is that it comes in the wake of NMD’s publication of internal USBP emails concerning another raid on the camp three years ago. The emails, obtained by NMD after filing a Freedom of Information Act request in April 2019, reveal the pressures exerted by the president of the National Border Patrol Council on the agency to target the humanitarian aid camp, as well as the role of BORTAC, the agency’s highly-trained paramilitary unit, in the 2017 raid.

The intra-agency emails exposed by NMD show that BORTAC agents were part of the raid against Byrd camp in June 2017, which saw 30 armed agents entering the camp and arresting four migrants after a three-day showdown. NMD has maintained that the migrants were in desperate need of medical help, and that the raid was a signal that the Trump administration

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and its agencies intended their “war against immigrants” to include humanitarian aid groups in the US. Given what has happened since, this claim seems to be a mere statement of fact.

Over the past three years, NMD has been systematically targeted by various federal agencies. Soon after the Byrd camp raid, nine volunteers from the group were cited for entering Cabeza Prieta National Wildlife Refuge without a permit and leaving behind water and canned food for migrants. Federal prosecutors initially tried to pursue criminal charges against them, but ultimately failed.

The most blatant attempt to intimidate the group came when one of the nine, Scott Warren, faced felony charges for supposedly harboring two undocumented immigrants. However, after two trials, Warren was acquitted of all charges last November.

The escalation of attacks against NMD follows a well-established pattern of the current administration, which involves vindictive retaliation against any exposure of its crimes. The first attempts at criminal prosecutions of volunteers came on the heels of widespread condemnation of the 2017 raid; the upping of the ante by filing felony charges against Warren came after NMD’s exposure of USBP agents tampering with water containers left in the desert; and now, a second raid—and this one, warrantless—with ongoing surveillance of the same camp after new information about BORTAC is made public by NMD.

These highly trained, special ops-like forces, functioning within a federal agency, have more or less remained a shadowy presence until the recent protests in Portland. Deployed as part of the shock troops of the Trump administration, BORTAC’s appearance in a city far from the border, as well as its agents’ seeming lack of qualms in using force against civilians, however, has drawn attention to the expansive and intensified militarization of Border Patrol. If nothing else, the use of these specialized troops against protesting citizens reveals the ways in which the war against immigrants has served as an essential front in the attack on the democratic rights of the entire working class.

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