Trump administration considered using “heat ray” microwave weapon on migrants crossing the US-Mexico border

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Last week, the *New York Times* reported that in a 2018 meeting with top leaders of the Department of Homeland Security, officials suggested deploying a “heat ray” microwave weapon along the border region with Mexico, to stop and deter incoming immigrants; the suggested weapon is capable of burning the skin of its victims.

What was originally developed as a crowd dispersal device by the US military, and eventually deemed too inhumane to be deployed and utilized in war, has been actively discussed in the highest circles of the US government for use as an anti-immigrant weapon.

Although officials claim implementing the Active Denial System was “never considered,” the fact that such a thing would be suggested under Trump’s administration is not surprising. The needless cruelty of this weapon should not come as a particular surprise, given the general inhumanity that has shaped the anti-immigrant policies of Trump and his predecessors, which have turned the Southwestern deserts of the US into a vast graveyard.

According to the US Border Patrol, more than 8,000 undocumented immigrants have died trying to cross the Sonoran Desert—which straddles the border between northwestern Mexico and the states of Arizona and California—into the United States since 1998. This amounts to one death every day for more than two decades.

These official numbers are only the tip of the iceberg. The real number of those who die trying to cross the Southwestern border of the United States is much higher, as immigration and humanitarian activists working in the field have long maintained. A Texas sheriff told the *New York Times* in 2017 that “For every one [body] we find, we’re probably missing five,” meaning that the total death toll is likely in the tens of thousands.

The prospect of death is a very real one faced by immigrants when they embark on their journey north to cross the border. The reason why workers risk their lives is not hard to understand given the prevailing socio-economic conditions in their home countries—material conditions for which the imperialist interests of the United States bear much responsibility.

However, far from seeking to ameliorate those situations, the US government and the Trump administration, in particular, have ramped up the demonization and criminalization of immigrants, and ramped up border security.

It is the ever-increasing border security measures—walls, fencing, surveillance cameras and drones—especially along the main urban centers of the border, implemented by Democrats and Republicans alike, which have forced immigrants to take more remote and risker routes to enter the US, like the Sonoran Desert.

Immigrants, especially those coming from Central America, are extremely vulnerable all throughout their journey, not just when attempting to cross, since they have to deal with the southern Mexican border as well as with myriad checkpoints and government officials.

When individuals decide to start the long, hazardous road north, they have to contact smugglers—known as “coyotes”—who charge amounts as high as $10,000. Often families have to mortgage their homes or sell their lands to be able to afford such fees. During the course of the trip, given the networks that connect coyotes to organized crime, immigrants are often the

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targets of kidnapping, sexual assault and murder. But many take this risk because traveling without the questionable protection of coyotes to the northern cities of Mexico is even more dangerous in regions with significant drug cartel presence.

The cartels have absorbed the underground business of human smuggling for the most part; they capture newly arrived immigrants in northern Mexico and make them a deal they can't refuse—they either have to cross being a drug mule or die where they stand. Between the cartels, the unforgiving deadly terrain, and US border security forces, the chances of death are perilously high.

The Mexican government under President Andres Manuel Lopez Obrador has utilized these desperate immigrants as a bargaining chip with the Trump administration, and in the process has endangered the lives of thousands of vulnerable members of the working class. The Mexican bourgeoisie, always at the beck and call of its northern neighbor, has fallen in line with Trump's demands and implemented a stronger immigration crackdown in its southern border.

Trotsky said in May 1940 that the bourgeoise had turned the world into a "foul prison," and in 2020 it continues to be an apt description of present conditions.

"The world of decaying capitalism is overcrowded. The question of admitting a few hundred extra refugees becomes a major problem for such a world power as the United States. In an era of aviation, telegraph, telephone, radio and television, travel from country to country is paralyzed by passports and visas. The period of the wasting away of foreign trade and the decline of domestic trade is at the same time the period of the monstrous intensification of chauvinism, and especially of anti-Semitism. … Amid the vast expanse of land and the marvels of technology, which has also conquered the skies for man as well as the earth, the bourgeoisie has managed to convert our planet into a foul prison."

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