

Migrants continue to drown off San Diego, California coast

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3 June 2021

On Tuesday, the Biden administration formally ended the “Remain in Mexico” program, known formally as the Migrant Protection Protocols (MPP), which forced asylum seekers to stay in Mexico while their cases played out in US immigration courts. The move was celebrated by some immigrant advocates despite the fact that many Trump-era policies remain in place, including Title 42, which bans immigrants from entering the US under the pretext of stopping the spread of COVID-19.

The inhumane living conditions throughout the world, which are the product of capitalist exploitation and imperialist intervention, and drive immigrants to make the dangerous journey into the United States to seek asylum and a better life, have, of course, not gone away. While Biden promised to roll back the worst of the Trump administration’s policies, immigrants continue to die every day and countless numbers languish in detention camps under his watch.

This reality has been underscored by the recent drownings of immigrants off the coast of San Diego, California this year. On May 2 a smuggling boat carrying immigrants desperate to reach the US crashed near Point Loma, killing three and injuring dozens.

The tragedy, which occurred near a popular tourist destination, made international headlines but was not to be the only migrant death in the area last month. On May 20, the US Border Patrol and San Diego Fire-Rescue lifeguards spotted a boat which had sought to disembark migrants near the Children’s Pool Beach in La Jolla.

Ten people were rescued from “rough water conditions,” another person was found submerged a mile north, in an area called Wipeout Beach, but was pronounced dead at the scene.

In another incident in the same month, a panga boat was caught up in the surf line with 23 migrants on board who were then apprehended by Border Patrol and taken into custody.

The number of apprehensions at sea by San Diego Border Patrol agents was a record 1,273 incidents in fiscal 2019. So far this fiscal year, which will end after September, there have been almost 1,100 apprehensions. Border Patrol Agent Jacob MacIsaac told reporters, “We’re on pace to break that record again.”

The smuggling boats have been described by authorities as being “grossly overladen” with people and gas cans, with little or no safety devices on board.

Meanwhile, the man accused of captaining the boat that crashed into Point Loma on May 2 was arraigned on a federal grand jury indictment on Tuesday with two dozen criminal counts. Antonio Hurtado, a 39-year-old US citizen, was accused of carrying 31 Mexican nationals and a Guatemalan in a 40-foot trawler-style vessel.

Hurtado has been charged with attempting to bring in immigrants resulting in death and attempting to make financial gain. He is also being charged with assaulting a federal officer for allegedly hitting a Border Patrol agent with his knee after he was arrested. He has pleaded not guilty.

The affidavit stated that migrants paid between \$15,000 and \$18,500 to be brought into the United States by boat.

While the media coverage has focused on demonizing the alleged captain of the smuggling operation, the larger social and political questions have been ignored. Moreover, the tragedy will be used by the federal government and anti-immigrant organizations as an argument for more surveillance and more powers to crack down on “illegal aliens” entering the country.

The three people who drowned in the incident were identified as 41-year-old Maria Eugenia Chavez-Segovia, 29-year-old Victor Perez Degollado and 35-year-old Maricela Hernandez Sanchez, all Mexican nationals.

A recent profile in the *Los Angeles Times* sheds some light on the life and death of one of the drowned, Maria Eugenia Chavez-Segovia.

Chavez-Segovia had already been caught twice trying to enter the United States and sent back to Mexico under Title 42, where she lived for months in Tijuana. She had been hoping to enter the US to join her siblings for seasonal agricultural work in the fields of the San Joaquin Valley in Central California.

The 41-year-old single mother told her youngest son she would be returning to Mexico City, and then back to the village in south Querétaro, but she never arrived.

Her family spent weeks hoping that the news reports of her drowning were mistaken. Her son José told the *Los Angeles Times*, “She was always afraid of the water. I don’t know how it occurred to her or who got her involved in trying to cross that way because she didn’t know how to swim. ... Maybe it was just a very desperate decision.”

Chavez-Segovia’s sister, Gabriela, was afraid to disclose the details of her sister’s situation, fearing for her sons’ safety in Mexico. She said Chavez-Segovia was unable to plead her case to a US court because the bar of legal proof needed to make an asylum case was too high.

“What are you going to do?” Gabriela told the *Los Angeles Times*, “Wait until someone sits down and writes you a letter that says ‘I am threatening you’? No, of course not, you’re going to go at the first opportunity.”

Chavez-Segovia’s sisters in the US were unable to travel to Mexico to attend the funeral because of their undocumented status. She was buried in the small town of El Rincón de San Ildefonso, about 100 miles northwest of Mexico City, where she lived most of her life.

Opportunities were scarce as the only jobs in the area were in construction or working in a rock quarry which paid \$7.50 (US) a day. Chavez-Segovia left town at age 12 to live as a domestic servant in Mexico City where she worked all day and into the night for a wealthy household.

The only options beyond that for many workers like Chavez-Segovia, was to head north to toil in the agricultural fields of the US, where workers, mostly immigrants, are exposed to toxins, pesticides, excessive heat and the constant threat of deportation.

Family members at her burial expressed relief that at least they were able to recover her body and bury her, unlike the thousands who have perished in the deserts of the southern US, never to be seen again.

Under the Biden administration, an arbitrary system of who gets to enter and stay in the US and who is deported after reaching the border has now been established, and it has little or nothing to do with an immigrant’s asylum claims. On certain days immigrants are allowed to stay,

not because of any generosity or humanity on the part of US authorities, but simply because Mexico refuses to accept any more.

In the Texas sector of the US-Mexico Border, Rio Grande Valley Border Patrol Sector Chief Brian Hastings told NBC News that 17 percent of all families and single adults caught by agents this year have been released into the US, the exact same share as under the Trump administration before Title 42 was invoked to deny access to all asylum seekers in 2020.

According to Customs and Border Protection data from April, about 15 percent of single adults and 65 percent of families were released into the US all along the border. Hastings said they were released only because the Mexican government will only take back a certain number every day.

This was confirmed by a Department of Homeland Security official who said their ability to ship immigrants back was limited by “Mexico’s ability and capacity to receive those individuals.” They added, in language no different from Trump, “The Biden Administration has made it clear that our borders are not open, people should not make the dangerous journey, and individuals and families are subject to border restrictions, including expulsion.”

The Biden White House has not made any commitment to ending Title 42, forcing migrants to make more dangerous journeys to avoid being apprehended at all, while the policy of accepting unaccompanied minors forces migrant families to separate at the border in the hopes of securing asylum for at least their children.

As Lee Gelernt, deputy director of the ACLU’s immigrants’ rights project and a lead plaintiffs’ lawyer in a lawsuit challenging Title 42, explained to NBC News, “The Biden administration’s retention of Title 42 and refusal to open the legal ports of entry is having the perverse effect of forcing desperate asylum seekers fleeing danger to cross between the ports, which is to nobody’s benefit.”



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