

Florida governor ships refugees like cattle to Massachusetts island

Patrick Martin
16 September 2022

In an action that combines gratuitous cruelty and a deliberate appeal to fascistic elements in the Republican Party, Florida Governor Ron DeSantis ordered two plane-loads of desperate migrants flown to the Massachusetts offshore island of Martha's Vineyard, where they were abandoned Wednesday with only the clothes on their backs.

DeSantis gave no notice of the move either to Massachusetts state officials, the local authorities on Martha's Vineyard or any charity which serves migrants, leaving the 50 migrants to fend for themselves. They included numerous children, including one three-year-old in need of medical attention.

Most of the migrants were refugees from Venezuela who had made the long trek of more than 1,000 miles, up through the Isthmus of Panama, all of Central America and then the length of Mexico, before they turned themselves in at the US-Mexico border seeking asylum.

All had been processed by US immigration authorities and then released after being given dates to report for hearings on their asylum claims. None were "illegal" border crossers or "invaders," as the fascist Republicans and Trump supporters term them.

Removing the migrants from Texas served to disrupt many of their asylum claims. "This cowardly political stunt has placed our clients in peril," the Lawyers for Civil Rights group said in a news release Friday. "Some now have immigration hearings as early as Monday thousands of miles away."

The political purpose of the action—an effective kidnapping of 50 people, for which DeSantis and his aides should be arrested and prosecuted—was evident in the arrangements made by the Florida governor, who is running for reelection in November and widely touted as a candidate for the Republican presidential nomination in 2024.

Fox News was brought in as a virtual partner in the operation, given exclusive access to the migrants. Fox cameras met the flights at the airport in Martha's Vineyard and the spectacle was featured on the network's evening news presentation.

The asylum seekers were not even removed from Florida. They had begun the morning in San Antonio, Texas, after their release by US immigration authorities, who had registered their asylum claims. They were then approached by an agent of DeSantis, who told them that flights were available to take them to Boston, a major metropolitan area with a large population of immigrants.

The agent, a woman who gave her name only as Perla, paid at least one migrant \$200 to identify other migrants who might be willing to travel. She claimed to be acting on behalf of an anonymous benefactor who was paying for the flight.

After they accepted this false promise, the migrants were flown in two private planes to Crestview, west of Tallahassee, the Florida state capital, where they landed, and then flew on to Martha's Vineyard, a small island with a population of 20,000, with connections to the mainland only by ferry or airplane.

In contrast to the brutality and cynicism of the Florida state officials, the population of Martha's Vineyard quickly supplied food, shelter and other items to the migrants. All were given COVID-19 tests, while children had access to a play area. They were housed in a local church for the next two nights.

On Friday morning they were bused to the ferry and taken to the mainland, where a reception center and housing had been arranged at a military base on Cape Cod. All the refugees left Martha's Vineyard voluntarily, although they expressed great appreciation for the warm reception they had received there.

One immigrant, identified only as Leonel, told the *New York Times* he "had never seen anything like" the generosity of the island residents. He was given a pair of shoes. "I haven't slept well in three months," he said. "It's been three months since I put on a new pair of pants. Or shoes."

Political and press aides for DeSantis exulted in the supposed success of their criminal operation, gloating that Democratic-controlled states and cities would now "share the burden" experienced by Texas, Arizona and Florida in

the influx of cross-border migrants.

“States like Massachusetts, New York and California will better facilitate the care of these individuals who they have invited into our country by incentivizing illegal immigration through their designation as ‘sanctuary states’ and support for the Biden administration’s open border policies,” said Taryn Fenske, DeSantis’ communications director.

“Welcome to being a state on the Southern border, Massachusetts,” tweeted Jeremy Redfern, another DeSantis spokesman.

DeSantis was particularly proud of choosing the island of Martha’s Vineyard for the operation, because of its role as a summer playground for wealthy Democrats, including former President Barack Obama. Most of the year-round residents, however, are working-class, and it was their response that the stranded immigrants appreciated.

The Florida legislature approved a budget that included \$12 million for such immigrant “exports,” with the funds designated for contracting with private companies to ship migrants to other parts of the country.

“If you have folks that are inclined to think Florida’s a good place, our message to them is we are not a sanctuary state, and it’s better to be able to go to a sanctuary jurisdiction. And yes, we will help facilitate that transport for you to be able to go to greener pastures,” DeSantis declared.

DeSantis is competing with Donald Trump for the allegiance of the fascists who comprise a large portion of the Republican Party’s base. While Trump demonizes immigrants in speech after speech, condemning them as criminals who threaten the American people, DeSantis is using his powers as governor to demonstrate to the racists and anti-immigrant bigots that he can actually take action.

Republican governors in Texas and Arizona continue to ship migrants to cities like New York, Washington D.C. and Chicago, although by bus rather than airplane. The most politically provocative of these actions this week came Thursday morning, when two buses sent by Texas Governor Greg Abbott, carrying more than 100 migrants from Central America, Colombia, Venezuela, Cuba and Guyana, arrived outside the residence of Vice President Kamala Harris at the US Naval Observatory in Washington D.C.

“The Biden-Harris administration continues ignoring and denying the historic crisis at our southern border, which has endangered and overwhelmed Texas communities for almost two years,” Abbott said in a statement to the press.

Other busloads arrived in Chicago, and Illinois Governor J. B. Pritzker called out the National Guard and declared a state of emergency, deploying 70 soldiers to set up shelter and camp kitchens to feed the new arrivals.

In New York City, which has received 11,000 migrants

from Texas and Arizona in recent months, Democratic Mayor Eric Adams hinted Wednesday that he might seek to rescind the city’s “right to shelter” because of the “new and unforeseen reality.” After a backlash from charitable organizations, Adams seemed to pull back from the idea, but the suggestion has been made, and it foreshadows a policy shift at some point.

Much of the Democratic Party commentary on the migrant shipments has been to attack DeSantis from the right, because the migrants were largely from Venezuela, which has been the target of a vicious campaign by the State Department and the American media, aimed at demonizing the government of President Nicolás Maduro and building public support for a US-led destabilization operation.

White House press secretary Karine Jean-Pierre said Thursday that DeSantis’ action was “a cruel, inhumane way to treat people who are fleeing communism.”

Florida state Sen. Annette Taddeo, who is running against incumbent Republican Rep. Maria Elvira Salazar for a Miami congressional seat, told *The Hill*, “You can’t be talking about anti-communism and be talking about freedom in Venezuela, Nicaragua, Cuba and all these other countries if you’re going to do this: mistreat people when they come here fleeing oppressive regimes.”

Sen. Tim Kaine (D-Va.), said the Venezuelan refugees had escaped from “one of the most brutal dictatorships in the world,” adding, “That DeSantis would go to Texas to round up Venezuelans to drop them off in Martha’s Vineyard, the guy has not the shadow of a heart or a conscience. It’s outrageous.”



To contact the WSWS and the
Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact