

# Fall 2014 U.S. Immigration Alert!

A Newsletter from National Immigrant Solidarity Network

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## National Religious Leaders Send One-Sentence Letter to Obama: Don't Trade Kids' Lives in Immigration Action!

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## 9/3: National Religious Leaders Send One-Sentence Letter to Obama: Don't Trade Kids' Lives in Immigration Action

**National faith leaders urge Administration to preserve protections for children in any upcoming executive actions on immigration**

**WASHINGTON** – Forty national religious leaders have delivered a succinct, one-sentence message to President Barack Obama urging him not to compromise the lives of children fleeing violence in Central America as the Administration considers its next steps on immigration.

With new reports of Honduran children being killed following their deportation from the US and Mexico, this incredibly short message underscores the critical importance of protecting children and families seeking safety. The full letter reads:

*While we celebrate the potential of executive action to alleviate the suffering caused by our nation's broken immigration system – particularly in light of political inaction in Congress – it must not come at the cost of due process and access to humanitarian protection for children and families fleeing violence in Central America.*

Following the sending of the letter, national leaders spoke on a press teleconference to stress the urgency of their message and why the Administration must not compromise on critical protections for children in any executive actions.

**Rev. John L. McCullough**, the President and CEO of Church World Service, shared, "Our unique and diverse voices – Protestants, Evangelicals, Catholics, Muslims, Jews – are united in sending a clear message on immigration to the President: Don't trade the lives of kids. Central American children and families are fleeing for their lives. As a father, I can't imagine the pain and burden that parents feel as they make the difficult decision to send their children away – because they know they will be safer on the journey despite how dangerous it is."

**Sister Simone Campbell**, SSS, the Executive Director of NETWORK, A National Catholic Social Justice Lobby, shared, "Given the failure of Congress, we have a broken immigration system that needs to be addressed as much as possible administratively, but we shouldn't make trade-offs. These are two different realities: refugees fleeing for their lives and the undocumented in our nation who are contributing to our society. Both need to be protected. Both need the President's action. The best would be for Congress to act, but absent this, the President needs to provide the leadership."

**Rev. Jim Wallis**, the President of Sojourners, shared, "Jesus said 'Suffer the little children to come unto me, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven.' Children should be the metric of our politics and they haven't been in an immigration debate that has become increasingly politicized. President Obama knows that in God's eyes borders matter much less than children. Changing laws that enjoy bipartisan support and have proven effective in protecting kids being trafficked is something that cannot be tolerated."

**Shaina Aber**, Policy Director for the Jesuit Conference, shared, "The reason the faith community is particularly concerned about negative action from the Administration is because President Obama's first intervention in this policy debate was to ask Congress in June to roll back critical protections for unaccompanied children. We're already seeing kids put on rocket docket, expanded family detention, and other actions that undermine due process. These kids are not a problem to solve, but have been entrusted to our care to be protected."

**Nancy Kaufman**, the CEO, of the National Council of Jewish Women, shared, "As people with a long history of being rejected in times of crisis from many lands, we know how devastating such rejection can be. When the doors of almost every country (including the US) were closed to us in the 1940s we lost millions of our people. The most vivid reminder of that time was when hundreds of people on the St. Louis ship were turned away from our shores and sent back to Europe where the result was certain death. Every Passover we tell the story of liberation and remember when we were strangers in a strange land. This history and our biblical mandate to welcome the stranger, clothe the naked, and feed the hungry makes us forceful advocates for assisting children and families at the border."

**Rev. Dr. Sharon E. Watkins**, the General Minister and President of the Christian Church (Disciples of Christ), shared, "A detention center is no place for a child. As a nation, we have historically protected and offered due process to children who have endured such horrific conditions, and have united them with family members to promote healing as they await the opportunity for a judge to hear their case and story."

**Melanie Nezer**, the VP of Advocacy and Policy for HIAS, shared, "There is no reason our government cannot come up with a process that ensures that children who arrive at our borders receive proper care and are not returned to countries where they face the risk of serious harm. In dealing with the surge of migrants at our border, we call on our leaders to respect the core American values that people should not be returned to countries where they face persecution, children should be protected, and families should be together."

#### **LIST OF SIGNATORIES:**

**Sister Simone Campbell**, SSS, Executive Director, NETWORK, A National Catholic Social Justice Lobby

**Rev. John L. McCullough**, President and CEO, Church World Service

**Rev. David Beckmann**, President, Bread for the World

**Very Rev. Timothy P. Kesicki**, S.J., President, Jesuit Conference of the United States

**Rev. Dr. A. Roy Medley**, General Secretary, American Baptist Churches

**Nancy K. Kaufman**, CEO, National Council of Jewish Women

**Rev. Dr. Sharon Watkins**, General Minister and President, Christian Church (Disciples of Christ)

**The Reverend Grady Parsons**, Stated Clerk of the General Assembly, Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.)

**Mark Hetfield**, President and CEO, HIAS

**Bishop Minerva Carcaño**, Los Angeles Resident Bishop, United Methodist Church

**Rev. Geoffrey A. Black**, General Minister and President, United Church of Christ

**Rev. Susan Henry-Crowe**, General Secretary, United Methodist Board of Church and Society

**Jim Wallis**, President, Sojourners

**Rabbi Dr. Shmuly Yanklowitz**, Founder & President, Uri L'Tzedek, Jewish Orthodox Social Justice

**Linda Hartke**, President and CEO, Lutheran Immigration and Refugee Service

**Minister Leslie Watson Malachi**, Director, African American Ministers In Action

**Rev. Jim Winkler**, General Secretary, National Council of Churches

**Jared Feldman**, Vice President and Washington Director, Jewish Council for Public Affairs

**Sister Patt McDermott**, RSM, President, Institute of the Sisters of Mercy

**Sister Janet Mock**, CSJ, Executive Director, Leadership Conference of Women Religious

**Rev. Jennifer Butler**, CEO, Faith in Public Life

**Very Rev. James Greenfield**, OSFS, President, Conference of Major Superiors of Men

**Rev. Paula Clayton Dempsey**, Director of Partnership Relations, Alliance of Baptists

**Sister Margaret Magee**, OSF, President, Franciscan Action Network

**Sister Louise Gallahue**, DC, Provincial, Daughters of Charity  
**Imam Abdullah T. Antepi**, Founder, Muslim Chaplains Association  
**Rev. Tim Mulroy**, SSC, U.S.A Regional Director, Missionary Society of St. Columban  
**Sr. Patricia Chappell**, Executive Director, Pax Christi USA  
**Elizabeth Soto Albrecht**, Moderator, Mennonite Church USA  
**J Ron Byler**, U.S. Executive Director, Mennonite Central Committee  
**Bishop Fred W. Washington**, Jurisdictional Prelate Minnesota Ecclesiastical, Jurisdiction, Church of God in Christ  
**Stanley J. Noffsinger**, General Secretary, Church of the Brethren  
**Rev. Canon Peg Chamberlin**, Former General Secretary, National Council of Churches  
**Alexander D. Baumgarten**, Director of Government Relations, The Episcopal Church  
**Katharine Henderson**, President, Auburn Seminary  
**Rob Rutland-Brown**, Executive Director, National Justice for Our Neighbors  
**Sara Dwyer**, ASC, Office of Justice and Peace Coordinator, Adorers of the Blood of Christ, U.S. Region  
**Rev. Donald H. Ashmall**, Council Minister, International Council of Community Churches  
**Linda Jaramillo**, Executive Minister, Justice & Witness Ministries, United Church of Christ  
**Rev. Dr. Dale E. Luffman**, Ecumenical & Interfaith Officer, Community of Christ  
**Rev. Dr. Ron Degges**, President, Disciples Home Missions

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## **The U.S. Is Deporting Cambodian Refugees and Orphaning Their Children**

**In the United States, whose bombing of Cambodia paved the way for the Khmer Rouge, many refugees now face the prospect of deportation under a draconian U.S. immigration regime.**

**Justine Drennan - Foreign Policy In Focus  
August 19, 20144**

Hundreds of legal U.S. residents have been deported to Cambodia--including many who left Cambodia as infants or have never been there at all. As these residents leave behind children, yet another generation of kids is growing up without a parent.

When a tribunal in Cambodia found two aging former leaders guilty of crimes against humanity earlier this month, many Cambodian and international observers' verdict on the trial itself was: "Too little, too late."

The conviction of Nuon Chea and Khieu Samphan, both in their eighties, came nearly four decades after their Khmer Rouge regime emptied Cambodia's cities in 1975 and forced the country's whole population into hard labor in rural collectives. The regime aimed to transform Cambodia into a socialist utopia. But instead, an estimated 1.7 million Cambodians died from overwork, starvation, and disease in the fields--or torture and execution as suspected dissenters.

By the time Vietnamese forces toppled the Khmer Rouge in 1979, families had been torn apart across the country, leaving generations traumatized. Partly due to the lasting toll those years had on Cambodia's economic and political development, the UN-backed Khmer Rouge tribunal didn't get underway until 2006.

The recent verdict against the regime's two surviving leaders was only the tribunal's second, following the conviction of a former prison director in 2010. The court will start trying the two leaders on additional charges in the fall, in what may be the cash-strapped tribunal's last case. Others died before they could be brought to justice, and many question whether life imprisonment for these two old men can really bring much closure for survivors.

As Cambodia struggles to reckon with its traumatic past, Cambodian refugees across the sea are trying to cope with a fresh trauma.

In the United States, whose bombing of Cambodia paved the way for the rise of the Khmer Rouge, many refugees from the Killing Fields now face the prospect of deportation under a draconian U.S. immigration regime. Already hundreds of legal U.S. residents have been deported to Cambodia--including many who left Cambodia as infants or have never been there at all. As these residents leave behind children, yet another generation of kids is growing up without a parent thanks to the U.S. government.

Many parties bear some responsibility for the carnage of the Khmer Rouge's Killing Fields, and it's doubtful that any tribunal or policy could really bring justice to the families of the victims. But given the U.S. role in the tragedies Cambodia has

experienced, an end to these deportations would be a small but fitting step.

#### Casualties of the Vietnam War

The United States played a significant role in bringing Cambodia to the state of chaos that allowed the Khmer Rouge to come to power. Between 1965 and 1973, American planes dropped more than 2.7 million tons of bombs on Cambodia, with the aim of destroying the bases and supply lines of Vietnamese communists operating out of the country. The bombings caused widespread dislocations across the countryside and encouraged some Cambodians to join the Khmer Rouge, then a guerrilla movement fighting the right-wing, U.S.-backed government based in Cambodia's capital, Phnom Penh.

When the Khmer Rouge finally captured Phnom Penh in 1975, soldiers misled residents into thinking they had to evacuate the city because the United States was going to bomb it. About 2 million Cambodians left their homes with few belongings, many believing they'd be allowed to return in a few days, only to face years of forced relocations and constant fear of punishment for even the smallest of mistakes.

Vietnamese forces eventually ousted the Khmer Rouge in 1979, putting an end to its reign of terror. Yet throughout the 1980s, the United States cynically backed the fallen Khmer Rouge government still clinging to the country's periphery as part of its Cold War strategy to undermine communist Vietnam.

The United States took some responsibility for the chaos it had helped cause when it accepted about 120,000 Cambodian refugees in the late 1970s and early 1980s, along with many thousands of others from Vietnam and Laos. But it offered little in the way of help once these refugees reached the United States, traumatized and penniless. Most Cambodian immigrants--who arrived in the 1980s to Reaganomics, a recession, and assistance agencies overwhelmed by the flood of Southeast Asian exiles--were left to their own devices.

Many suffered from PTSD and other mental health issues due to the nightmare they'd lived through under the Khmer Rouge. Parents struggling to make ends meet had little energy or time to spend with their children, who faced social isolation and discrimination in their new neighborhoods. Many found their sense of community in gangs, leading to brushes with the law.

#### Another Uprooting

Lacking resources and support to help them thrive in the United States, many Cambodian refugees didn't realize the limitations of their rights as legal permanent residents. Some learned the precariousness of their resident status only when immigration officials informed them out of nowhere that they were going to be deported to Cambodia.

Harsh 1996 immigration laws greatly expanded the list of crimes that could lead to the deportation of non-citizens. Hundreds of permanent U.S. residents from Cambodia with past criminal charges have found themselves returning in shackles to Cambodia--sometimes due to years-old nonviolent crimes for which they have already served their time. Crimes for which Cambodian refugees have been deported have included the possession of marijuana and buying stolen computer chips.

Some "returnees" have actually never set foot in Cambodia and speak no Khmer, having been born in Thai refugee camps. Most consider themselves fully American. When they arrive, even those who do speak Khmer are seen as outsiders due to their accents, tattoos, or style of dress, and face cultural dislocation in Cambodia just as they did growing up in the United States. Due to these compounding traumas, many suffer from mental health problems, which Cambodia has almost no services to address. Some returnees fall into crime again and spend time in Cambodian prisons.

Since pressuring Cambodia into signing a repatriation agreement amid post-9/11 xenophobia, the U.S. government has deported more than 400 people to Cambodia, separating them from their families and telling them they can never return to America. Because the U.S. government does not consider deportation hearings to be criminal proceedings--even when deportation has been triggered by past crimes--deportees are not guaranteed lawyers or other due process measures mandated in U.S. criminal law.

Moreover, the 1996 laws eliminated judicial discretion to consider mitigating circumstances, such as economic and emotional impact on the deportee's family, clearing the way for the separation of spouses from each other and parents from their children. And immigration officials have interpreted the law to apply retroactively, making residents eligible for deportation for crimes committed even before 1996.

Many of the same injustices that plague undocumented immigrants afflict these legal residents, including detention for long periods of time while their cases are processed, with no information about the timeline for their deportations.

An estimated 2,000 Cambodian U.S. residents have been identified as eligible for deportation in the U.S. Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE) agency's drive to meet deportation quotas. These residents wait in constant fear that they could at any time be taken from their families and the country they call home. Many others could join them on ICE's list in the future.

## Echoing Injustice

While Cambodian U.S. residents are far from the only "criminal aliens" and refugees losing out under harsh U.S. immigration policies, their deportation is particularly shameful because of the U.S. government's role in the devastation that forced them to flee in the first place.

What these refugees suffer is of course in no way comparable in scale to what their parents experienced under the Khmer Rouge, but many elements are similar: life in fear of the repercussions of even small infractions, seemingly arbitrary imprisonment, deep uncertainty about the future, little to no notice prior to forced relocation, and separation from their families. That should be enough to make the United States, a financial backer of the Khmer Rouge tribunal, ashamed.

A 2010 report by Fordham Law School's Leitner Center for International Law and Justice highlighted the case of one such child of the Killing Fields, Jorani, who was separated from her nine-year-old son when the United States deported her for drug possession in 2009. "Although Jorani tries to call as much as she can," the report said, "she does not have consistent access to a phone and has little money to make long-distance calls. The only connection she has with her child is the handful of pictures she carries with her at all times."

The report also found that as of 2010, six deportees to Cambodia had committed suicide.

The children of deportees are becoming yet another generation that, due to U.S. government policies, must grow up without a parent. Money that could have been devoted to social services and helped immigrants avoid deportable crimes in the first place is instead being spent on detention, deportation, and welfare for families left destitute by the loss of their primary breadwinners. And deportations have only increased under the Obama administration.

Given its own role in setting the stage for the horrors of the Khmer Rouge, the U.S. government should offer those it committed to take in as refugees some small part of the justice they deserve. As the tribunal in Cambodia moves forward with its slow and imperfect brand of justice, the opportunity for the U.S. government to provide more tangible recourse for these Cambodians is just one more reason to reform America's overly punitive and rigid immigration policies.

## **New Report Details Prejudice and Pretext in Georgia's Hyper Immigration Enforcement**

### **Federal ICE Access Programs and GA HB87 Driving Unprecedented Targeting and Deportation in the State**

Atlanta, GA - July 31, 2014: Today advocacy organizations publish a new report based on data made available through FOIA litigation with the state and federal Immigration and Customs Enforcement that both outline the metastasizing growth of local police's involvement in immigration enforcement and the resulting patterns of prejudice and collateral deportation in local practice with little to no evidence of any relation to actual public safety efforts.

The data reveals that the federal agency's practice of requesting the extended incarceration of an individual because of the suspicion of the immigration status known as **ICE detainees rose 17,169% from 2007 to 2013 with 96% of those targeted being of "dark or medium complexion."**

In addition to the racial implications of the newly released statistics, the study identifies that at least **54% of those taken into ICE custody were long-time Georgia residents who had called this country home since at least 2003** resulting in the separation of families where **48,135 US citizen children in Georgia had a parent taken by ICE and 17,497 Georgia residents had a spouse taken by ICE in the four years between 2007 and June of 2013.**

Finally the exaggerated emphasis on immigration status in local law enforcement resoundingly counters the public safety pretext of police-ICE collaboration noting that **immigration officials do not even record a "Detainer Criminal Offense Level" in nearly half of records available and in those where it is recording, 40% are identified as "level three,"** having been convicted of traffic or other minor offenses.

**Azadeh Shahshahani** of the ACLU of Georgia explains, "The numbers revealed today are both damning of what has happened to law enforcement in Georgia and heartbreaking for what it has done to Georgia communities. One can feel the chilling effect this has had with confidence in police and the risk to all of our safety when so many Georgia residents have been harmed and live in fear of the deportation apparatus that the police have lent themselves to. Contained in the report is the human cost, erosion of rights, and the rise of a culture of suspicion in our state that must be addressed."

"No one should be afraid to call 9-1-1," explains **Adelina Nicholls**, Executive Director of the Georgia Latino Alliance for Human Rights. "But that is exactly what has happened since police became involved in filling federal deportation quotas. We all want to live in safe communities but the well known threat of your neighbor being torn from his or her family makes that an impossibility. Sheriffs who want to focus on policing and not on persecuting Georgians for the color of their skin should join

the 165 plus jurisdictions around the country that are cutting their ties with ICE in order to rebuild them with the community."

"The data shows that the exponential growth of hyper-immigration enforcement has torn apart thousands of Georgia families," said **Alina Das**, Assistant Professor of Clinical Law and Co-Director of the Immigrant Rights Clinic at New York University Law School. "Georgia officials have an opportunity and an obligation to protect families by ending state and local involvement in programs that funnel parents and longtime residents into the broken immigration system."

*The Report "Prejudice, Policing, and Public Safety: The Impact of Immigration Hyper-Enforcement in Georgia" was produced by the ACLU of Georgia, GLAHR, the National Day Laborer Organizing Network, and the Immigrant Rights Clinic at the NYU School of Law*

*The Georgia #Not1More Campaign is urging the Dekalb and Fulton County Sheriffs to follow the example of more than 165 other jurisdictions who have limited or eliminated submission to the unjust and burdensome ICE hold requests in the wake of recent court rulings finding their violation of 4th amendment rights.*

## Unaccompanied Minors: Their Arduous Journey and Their Unknown Fate

**At Large - San Diego Free Press  
August 3, 2014**

While the current wave of unaccompanied minors is primarily made up of Central Americans, the U.S. has welcomed minors from many more countries in the past. In early 2009 I began working at Southwest Key Programs, an unaccompanied minors shelter here in San Diego.

I met children from Somalia, China, Brazil, Ghana, Guatemala, Honduras, El Salvador, Nicaragua, Mexico, and Venezuela. Some eager to tell their story, others were hesitant to share the details of their journey or past due to fear.

Based on some of their stories I was able to understand that most of the Central Americans traveled on *la bestia* and by bus until they were able to reach the U.S.-Mexico border. Regardless of where these children were coming from, they were all faced with countless dangers and situations where they were at risk of losing their lives.

Mohammed, a 17-year-old from Somalia, shared with me various details of his journey. His father sent him to the U.S. after his mother and brother were murdered in the ongoing Somali civil war.

Mohammed's father feared that his son would be forced to be a soldier or that he would be murdered. So Mohammed left his father and younger sister in Somalia with the dream of making it to the U.S. and studying to become a doctor. He had to travel to Eastern Europe to make his way to Latin America, trekked through Panama and made it to Mexico, then finally to the U.S.

He waited in line at the San Ysidro, CA pedestrian port of entry and claimed asylum when he reached the front of the line. Mohammed was screened by Customs and Border Protection and then transferred to Southwest Key (CBP must transfer minors to a shelter within 72 hours).

When he arrived at the shelter, he could speak some English, but felt more comfortable speaking in Somali or Arabic. Since most of the other kids in the shelter at the time were Spanish speaking, Mohammed quickly picked up basic Spanish. Every day Mohammed would practice his writing skills and demonstrated his determination to learn English well. He was respectful and would share stories about the homecountry that he longed to go back to.

I have yet to cross paths with a teenager who possessed wisdom and life experiences way past his years. Mohammed remained in the shelter for almost a year, but was eventually released. I believe he was transferred into foster care, but am not certain since I was no longer working there by the time he was released.

The Office of Refugee Resettlement (ORR) has been responsible for the Unaccompanied Alien Children's program (UAC) since March 2003 after the responsibility was transferred over from the Commissioner of the Immigration and Naturalization Services (INS). The ORR has had approximately 92,000 UACs in its custody since 2003.

Yes, the government has been providing funding for unaccompanied children for quite some time and UAC shelters have existed throughout the U.S. for years, it's just that they weren't making headlines. The number of UACs increased after 2011,

going from 6,775 (FY 2011) to 24,668 in 2013. It is estimated that the number of unaccompanied minors can reach at least 60,000 by the end of the 2014 fiscal year.

State licensed shelters that are being funded by the ORR are required to provide the minors with education, mental health services, opportunities for recreation and socialization, family reunification, case management services, and medical treatment.

Staff is responsible for maintaining the children's safety and for screening incoming phone calls. While the children are allowed to receive phone calls, they have to be authorized callers as determined by the case manager. This, as I learned, protects the children, as there are attempts by smugglers to locate the children if they are owed money.

One of the goals of the facilities is to ensure that minors are reunified with family members or other sponsors (i.e. family friends) that can provide full care. Family members and sponsors are required to submit a reunification packet and pass a background check.

The Obama Administration did not initiate policies that protect unaccompanied minors, victims of human trafficking and violent crimes. Congress first signed the Trafficking Victims Protection Act (TVPA) in 2000 when Clinton was in power. Various reauthorizations were issued in 2003, 2005, 2008 and 2013.

TVPA and its reauthorizations were developed as a way to protect trafficking victims, which do include unaccompanied minors in some cases. Not all unaccompanied minors are victims of trafficking or of violent crimes, but they are fleeing violence, poverty, civil war, religious or ethnic persecution, or in many cases, some combination of the aforementioned. Central American countries are experiencing drastic increases in violence, a major push factor in the surge of unaccompanied minors.

Some of unaccompanied minors do qualify for certain immigration benefits, such as T or U Visas, or Special Immigrant Juveniles Status (SIJS). T-Visas are for victims of human trafficking and U-Visas are for victims of certain crimes. The SIJS is for minors who have been abused, abandoned or neglected.

I cannot stress the importance of providing unaccompanied minors with the appropriate support, with Know Your Rights trainings (*CASA Cornelia provides these sessions for UAC shelters in San Diego*), and with the opportunity to have an immigration court hearing. Expediting deportation proceedings for minors does not solve the root of the problem; it places vulnerable children back in an unsafe environment.

The current influx of unaccompanied minors *and* families arriving at the U.S-Mexico border has placed the spotlight on an already vulnerable population. Conservatives, members of the Tea Party and Republicans have come forth with absurd reasons to explain why these minors and families should be immediately returned back to their country.

According to some, these Central American migrants will put our public health at risk, strain our public resources, steal our jobs and eventually take away the freedom that makes us "American". In addition, they are being labeled as criminals, radical Islamists, terrorists, Communists, part of the MS-13 (a notorious Salvadoran gang); the list goes on and on. It is every conservative excuse in the book.

The idea that the border needs to be *more* secure continues to appear in discussions and in policy proposals. Before the influx of unaccompanied minors, the number of apprehensions at the border had decreased. It is important to keep in mind that the unaccompanied minors and families are presenting themselves to agents at the border. They are not entering the country unauthorized. The border is secure and border communities can attest to this.

Republicans are blaming the Deferred Action for Childhood Arrivals (DACA) program as one of the main reasons for the surge of minors to the border. According to them, DACA has made Central Americans believe that if the children can get on U.S. soil, they will be allowed to stay.

I highly doubt that the thousands of minors that have arrived since October 2013 think that they will be granted DACA. There are strict requirements for DACA eligibility, which includes being able to prove (with documentation) that one was *physically present* in the U.S. on June 15, 2012. So, minors that have recently entered the U.S. are not eligible for deferred action.

This past Friday (August 1) the House of Representatives voted to not provide the unaccompanied minors with the due process that they deserve (HR 5230) and to end the DACA program (HRES 710). Their "DEPORT THEM ALL" policy disregards children who might be victims of human trafficking or that have legitimate fear of returning back to their country of origin. HR5230 and HRES 710 illustrate insensitivity to the current humanitarian crisis and once again criminalize immigrants.

My experience at Southwest Key broadened my scope of immigration and kick started my interest in unaccompanied minors programs. I remember having so many questions about how the children arrived to the borders, especially the younger ones that I met; one in particular was eight years old. I didn't understand complexity of the issue at the time.

It is a multilayered dilemma that involves children trying to reunify with parents they have not seen years.

It is about children escaping from violence or from being forced into gangs.

It is about children who do not have family either in their country or in the U.S. and who do not want a life of crime to be their only option for survival.

These children are choosing to have an opportunity at *life*. They all have dreams that they want to accomplish. They want to study, to have a career, to start a business, to travel. They want to just be children without worrying about the possibility of being killed or of having the burden of financially contributing to their household's income.

If policies that protect the rights of unaccompanied minors are dissolved, children like Mohammed will not be given a chance. If you empathize with the current humanitarian crisis, then I ask you to contact your representatives asking them to support a humane resolution to this situation. Educate those around you. Share *factual* information. Do not let people buy into the biased reports some media outlets put out there.

*Vanessa Ceceña is a native San Diegan who grew up on the U.S.-Mexico border. She received her Master of Social Work from the University of Southern California and her Bachelor's degree in International Development Studies from the University of California, Los Angeles. Her focus has been on immigration and Mexican indigenous communities from Oaxaca. She can be contacted at [cecena.vn@gmail.com](mailto:cecena.vn@gmail.com) or on Facebook.*

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## **As Migrant Children Face Backlash, Communities Mobilize to Drown Out Hate**

**Laurie Smolenski - Waging Nonviolence  
August 11, 2014**

Some of the nearly 100 pro-immigration protesters arrested for blocking the sidewalk in front of the White House await handcuffing, in Washington, July 31, 2014. (Photo: Stephen Crowley / The New York Times)

On a Saturday morning earlier this summer, I joined a group of immigrant rights activists under a canopy of tall trees in Lower Manhattan. We were preparing to form a human chain around a federal immigration courthouse to protest the unbridled deportations tearing immigrant families apart. Our action was held in tandem with coordinated efforts occurring that day around the nation.

Hundreds of people began to amass: Latino families with their children, workers still in uniform from the night shift, Korean grandmothers with matching visors, youth activists known as "Dreamers," and a church group. The organizers were from Palestine, Mexico and Sri Lanka. I saw many familiar faces. Together, members of this group had taken caravans of buses together to march with tens of thousands of supporters in Washington, D.C.; we had faced arrest at civil disobedience actions; we had canvassed New York's five boroughs; and we had fasted for weeks in the shadow of the Capital. There were many members of the press and few police.

We all understood what was at stake: It was June 28, one year and a day since the Senate had passed an immigration reform bill that Congress had since failed to act upon. The window for potential reform was growing narrower by the day.

The sun filtered through the branches and shined on our faces, and despite heavy hearts and two broken megaphones, we sang and chanted, waving signs showing the outlines of hands to symbolize the separation of families. Some children held enlarged photographs of their parents who had been deported, often for crimes like driving with a broken headlight. Under the Obama administration, more immigrants have been deported than under any other president — an average of nearly 400,000 people each year. The policy leaves thousands of children in the hands of the state, many of whom are United States citizens.

Watching these children, I was reminded of the tens of thousands of unaccompanied minors who have traversed the border from Central America to the United States — an estimated 52,000 since October of 2013. The events organized across the United States that day also sought to shed light on their plight. Kids as young as seven and eight — fleeing violence and poverty, human trafficking and coercion to join gangs — have been coming in droves, most of them making the journey on top of trains and crossing on foot.

Suddenly, very incongruent sounds cut through the sky. “Ill-e-gals, Ill-e-gals,” angry voices screamed. At the far end of the mobilization, a group of counter protesters had gathered. They wielded their own homemade signs reading: “No Amnesty,” “Illegals go home,” and “Get out of my country.” We were familiar with this group of bigots, who were mostly middle-aged men wearing American flag T-shirts. One woman carried a sign reading, “Hispanos against immigration.” They were well-organized, monitoring our events and showing up regularly, but they were never willing to engage.

As the derisive cries grew louder, some of our organizers moved between them, forming a sort of human shield. With so many children present, it wasn’t safe for us to expose ourselves by forming a chain where individuals could be singled out. Thus, we shifted and congregated more tightly, with a black female choir group keeping the momentum in the middle.

Despite my reverence for freedom of speech, I was repulsed by the deep displays of hate that day. The whole event took on an almost surreal quality. This group had joined under the arms of these great trees to yell slurs at singing families and stab their American flags in the air like weapons as double-decker buses of tourists slowed on Broadway to take it all in. It made my stomach turn. What begets such hatred? What does it feel like to scream in the face of a stranger who merely turns a shoulder to shield his or her children from your contempt? This was a person whom you don’t know a single thing about except that he or she had been born on the other side of a man-made line.

A few days later, I would learn about a similar protest in Murrieta, Calif., which would also make my head hang in shame. Detention facilities along the U.S.-Mexico border had become overcrowded by the influx of newly arrived immigrants, many of whom were children. As images of holding cells packed with small bodies rocketed through the media, the migrants began to be transferred to other states, including California. On July 1, some of these migrants were being bused to Murrieta to be processed at a Border Patrol facility there when they encountered an angry mob of both local residents and others. They had gathered to oppose the plan for the city of Murrieta to receive these immigrants, even though the migrants were only to be housed in facilities there as they awaited deportation proceedings. As the buses approached, the protesters, bearing many of the same hateful signs we’d seen in New York, blocked their way. “Not our children, not our problem!” they cried, waving flags and shouting slurs.

Enrique Morones, director of Border Angels, an organization that provides water to migrants crossing the deadly desert border, was present at the protest as an observer, and he recalled the events in an interview with Democracy Now! “It was horrific to see, because the children inside the bus and their moms were crying. They don’t speak English, but they understand hate,” he said. “What we witnessed that day was the worst of the American spirit.”

This account evokes another struggle — not over borders but over skin color. I recall the Freedom Rides of the early 1960s, when black and white civil rights activists rode interstate buses together into the deeply segregated south. They wanted to test the Supreme Court’s rulings that segregation of public buses and rail stations was unconstitutional. In Birmingham and Montgomery, Ala., these riders were met by mobs that included Ku Klux Klan members, who descended upon the bus. While the police looked on, Klansmen beat the riders with chains and pipes and clubs. Have we evolved so little since May 14, 1961, when one of these buses was firebombed in Anniston, Ala., with the Freedom Riders trapped inside?

The bus carrying those children never made it to the detention facility in Murrieta, and similar events have unfolded across the country. There have been coordinated national actions to protest the migrants. On July 8, the Texas town of League City passed an ordinance that would ban undocumented children from being processed and detained in its municipality. A Republican state legislator in Arizona proudly turned away a bus of kids on July 15, only to learn they were YMCA campers.

Again I ask: What does it feel like to bear such hatred? What compels a person to bang against the windows of a bus carrying children? What did those people feel as they saw the faces of young immigrants on the other side of the glass? Did they know most of the kids hadn’t seen their parents in months, perhaps longer? That they had clung atop a moving train, gone without food and water and walked across a desert to traverse the border alone because back home children were being murdered? The United States, the young boys and girls must have believed, was a nation with a respect for human rights.

It is important to place this border surge into historical context, considering the role of U.S. foreign policy — namely military and economic intervention — in directly contributing to today’s violence and unrest in Central America, especially in Honduras. The U.S. government has a long history of destabilizing democratically elected governments in the region, having heavily funded bloody right-wing dictatorships throughout the 1980s. In fact, some of Central America’s most murderous gangs, including the infamous Mara Salvatrucha, formed in Los Angeles among men displaced by those civil wars. Many gang members were eventually deported back to Central America, where the gangs flourished. Then the 2004 Dominican Republic-Central America-United States Free Trade Agreement restructured trade relations in the region, passing off unprecedented power to U.S. corporations, shrinking the Central American job market and crippling local economies. More recently, the U.S.-backed 2009 Honduran coup that ousted democratically elected President Manuel Zelaya opened the doors to further corruption and violence.

As a result of these interventions, the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees has been reporting extreme violence and abuse in the Central American countries of Honduras — widely considered the murder capital of the world — Guatemala and El Salvador, the three countries from where the majority of the children are fleeing. In the United States, asylum claims from those countries have increased exponentially, though the United States is not the only country experiencing this spike. Mexico, Panama, Nicaragua, Costa Rica and Belize combined have documented a more than 400 percent increase in asylum applications by individuals from these three countries.

The numbers fully undermine attempts of some opponents to blame the influx on Obama's administrative relief policy Deferred Action for Childhood Arrivals, which they say has been a magnet for young people to travel to the United States. In reality, as United Nations' interviews with the minors reveal, these kids are fleeing sexual abuse, violence, hunger and coercion to join gangs. They were faced with a decision no child should ever have to face, and they chose to escape, knowingly risking their lives because whatever they were fleeing was worse. The United Nations has underscored that many of these migrants qualify for refugee status, but the U.S. government has been failing to provide legal representation to minors, some as young as 10, who are facing deportation. How can we expect children — many of whom speak only indigenous languages and may not read or write, and who have not received support services for the trauma they have undergone — to stand alone in a courtroom and mount their own defense as to why their lives are worth protecting?

Just as the eyes of the international community turned with horror to Anniston, Ala., the world is now watching. America: These days will be remembered in infamy.

In New York City that morning, as the anti-immigrant group's chants continued, a black female pastor moved to the middle of our group. She was a slim but stately woman with angular features and a booming voice. In a most oracular moment, she began to sing "We Shall Overcome," the protest anthem of the civil rights movement. The gospel choir began to sing with her, and their voices soon reached the edges of our crowd. We all joined them, the hymn ringing beautifully in the voices of many different tongues. The hateful taunts were drowned out, and songs of freedom resonated high toward the skyscrapers overhead.

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NISN is a coalition of community, immigrant, labor, human rights and student activist groups, founded in 2002 in response to the urgent needs for the national coalition to fight immigrant bashing, support immigrant rights, no to the sweatshops exploitation and end to the racism on the community. Please visit our website: <http://www.ImmigrantSolidarity.org>

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