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2019 Year Ends: US Detains Record Number of Child Migrants, Surpassing Crisis Under Obama

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10/29: US Detains Record Number of Child Migrants, Surpassing Crisis Under Obama

Detentions have surged as the Trump administration's aggressive policy toward migrants has collided with an exodus of children fleeing Central America

[Paulina Villegas - New York Times) TENOSIQUE, Mexico — The United States has detained more children trying to cross the nation's southwest border on their own over the last year than during any other period on record, surpassing the surge of unaccompanied minors that set off a crisis during the Obama administration, according to new figures released Tuesday.

American immigration authorities apprehended 76,020 minors, most of them from Central America, traveling without their parents in the fiscal year that ended in September — 52 percent more than during the last fiscal year, according to United States Customs and Border Protection.

Mexico is experiencing the same surge. Under pressure from the Trump administration, President Andrés Manuel López Obrador stepped up immigration enforcement and detained about 40,500 underage migrants traveling north without their parents in the same period — pushing the total number of these children taken into custody in the region to more than 115,000.

In interviews, nearly two dozen children who were heading toward the United States said they knew the trip was dangerous — and that if they were caught they could end up in overcrowded, dirty facilities on both sides of the border, without adequate food, water or health care. But they took their chances anyway, looking to escape dead-end poverty, violence and a lack of opportunities to study or work, despite President Trump's aggressive efforts to block immigration through the southwest border.

The young migrants came alongside a historic wave of families traveling together, also largely from Central America. They travel by foot, hitch rides or climb onto trains, carrying only what they can fit in tattered backpacks, and face a staggering array of threats, from thieves and rapists to hunger, loneliness and death.

Marvel, a 16-year-old Honduran boy, said he had been on the road for weeks when, somewhere in Guatemala, he came upon a cluster of roadside graves: the final resting place of other migrants who had died on their journey north. He was alone and far from home. Fear crawled up his spine. But he thought of the gang threats he faced — and he pressed on.

“Quitting was not an option,” Marvel said, giving only his first name for fear of gang retribution. “You wipe your tears and carry on.”

For the young migrants, the risks at home outweigh the potential dangers of the road. Most are teenage boys, though girls and children also attempt the trip. For Marvel, the decision to leave came when a gang in his hometown, Olancho, told him that if he didn’t join their ranks, they’d kill him and his family. There was no doubt they were serious, Marvel said. Gang members had already murdered his older brother.

His parents encouraged him to leave, Marvel said. “We can’t bear losing another son,” they told him. “You have to go.”

He left home in the spring, with \$40 dollars in his pocket and no plan except to find work in a safer place.

As for most underage migrants traveling without their parents, his trip north has been a feat of improvisation and courage. He walked and hitchhiked through Honduras and Guatemala. He slept in churches, under trees or wherever he found himself when night fell.

Along the way, he gathered crucial bits of information from fellow migrants: the best route to take, locations of shelters up ahead, places to avoid, where to forage for food.

As huge numbers of young migrants from Central America began arriving at the United States’ southern border in 2014, the Obama administration scrambled to house them until they could be released to sponsors — adults who applied to care for them. The shelter system grew dramatically as a result.

The Trump administration experienced similar backups at the border just a few years later — this time because of new, more stringent policies that made the sponsors themselves, who are often undocumented, vulnerable to immigration authorities. This discouraged people from coming forward, leaving thousands of children to languish in the system.

The Trump administration has also sought to deter migration by separating thousands of children from their relatives, again driving up the number of children in federally contracted shelters.

On the road, while trying to avoid detention, fear and hunger are constant companions for many young migrants.

With little or no money in their pockets, they relied on strangers for snacks or meals. They pawed through garbage and scanned drifts of debris on the roadside, hoping to spot an edible morsel.

Wilson, a 17-year-old Honduran, said he had feasted on rotten mangos discarded by street vendors.

“I used to drink water from potholes when I was too thirsty,” interjected Mario Leonel, 16, who left home in San Pedro Sula, Honduras, several weeks ago without notifying his parents. “That is the hardest part of it all: the hunger.”

When he arrived at the shelter in Tenosique, a small Mexican town near the Guatemala border, he called his parents in Honduras, who burst into tears and pleaded for him to return. He said no. He was tired of all the violence in his country, and wanted to get asylum in the United States.

After Marvel slipped across the Guatemala-Mexico border in May, he found room at a shelter in Tenosique, which serves as a transit point for many migrants. He quickly made new friends among other teenage migrants who had made it this far, mainly from Honduras, but also from Guatemala and El Salvador.

On a recent afternoon, several of them gathered in a two-story building that had been reserved for minors, its walls painted with colorful animal murals. The boys cracked jokes, roughhoused and argued about who was the cutest girl in the shelter.

Outside, Dulce, a 16-year-old transgender migrant from Guatemala, sat alone on train tracks pining for a boy she had met at the shelter. He had left without explanation and she was lovesick.

"I just can't get him out of my mind," she said. She left her hometown four months earlier to escape abuse from her family and strangers, including a sexual assault by gang members when she was 12. She made it as far as central Mexico before being detained and deported. Five days after returning home, she set off again.

"I left because I had nothing there and no one to protect me," she said. "At least here I am safe."

Though the United States remains the destination of choice for most unaccompanied minors, an increasing number are setting their sights no farther than Mexico, advocates and migrants say.

Sometimes they have no choice: Mexico's increased enforcement measures have made it more difficult for migrants to make it to the border with the United States. And even if they reach the United States, recent policies have drastically lowered the possibilities of getting asylum. In Mexico, when unaccompanied minors are detained, the law mandates that they be released right away into the custody of the national child protection agency, which finds them accommodation in shelters designed for children.

10/31: GitHub is trying to quell employee anger over its ICE contract. It's not going well

[Johana Bhuiyan-LA Times] When GitHub Chief Executive Nat Friedman announced on Oct. 9 his company would donate half a million dollars to nonprofits helping communities affected by the Trump administration's immigration policies, it was a peace offering of sorts.

Employees had recently learned that the Microsoft-owned software development platform had renewed its 2016 contract with the U.S. Immigration and Customs Enforcement Agency.

In donating the money and making clear his personal disagreement with harsh immigration law enforcement, Friedman appeared intent on averting an internal protest of the sort that has roiled other technology firms whose software powers controversial government policies.

It didn't work.

In the weeks since, frustration has risen among some within GitHub. After promising to address questions on the ICE relationship at a Q&A session scheduled for Oct. 11, executives canceled the meeting, blaming the cancellation on employee leaks, according to an email reviewed by The Times. At an all-hands meeting held Oct. 24, executives did not discuss the results of a quarterly survey showing negative sentiment toward GitHub's leadership as planned, according to two employees.

With the issue refusing to go away, GitHub executives have changed their internal messaging, including a memo to employees saying that barring ICE from "access to GitHub could actually hurt the very people we all want to help," in the words of Chief Operating Officer Erica Brescia.

"We have learned from a number of nonprofits and refugee advocates that one of the greatest challenges facing immigrants is a lack of technology at ICE and related agencies, resulting in lost case files, court date notifications not being delivered, or the wrong people being charged or deported," read a companywide posting sent Oct. 22, signed by Brescia and the leadership team.

Brescia's letter was a second response to an Oct. 9 open letter from employees calling on GitHub to cancel its contract with ICE. The employees behind it said continuing to work with ICE would make the San Francisco-based company "complicit in widespread human rights abuses." In the company's initial response, Friedman said that though he disagreed with the immigration policies ICE is enforcing, canceling the contract would not convince the Trump administration to change them. Friedman also said the revenue from the contract — about \$200,000 — was not financially material for the company.

In response to requests for comment, GitHub referred The Times back to Friedman's Oct. 9 blog post.

GitHub is just the latest tech company to face employee resistance to government contracts, particularly those with the Department of Homeland Security. In June 2018, Google, facing employee opposition, said it would not

renew its contract to develop artificial intelligence systems for the Pentagon. In the same month, 500 Amazon workers called on executives to stop selling facial recognition to the government, without result. Employees of the e-commerce brand Wayfair walked out of their offices in June 2019 to protest the sale of beds to immigration detention centers.

The results of GitHub's quarterly anonymous employee survey — which showed a decline in trust of leadership — were originally slated to be presented to employees on Oct. 10, according to documents and a schedule reviewed by The Times. There was no meeting on Oct. 10, however, and a companywide Q&A session scheduled for Oct. 11 was canceled. After GitHub canceled that meeting, Brescia admonished employees not to speak with outsiders about company matters. "We are all responsible for respecting and protecting internal, non-public information from being disclosed and protecting the privacy of fellow Hubbers as we engage in open dialogue on sensitive issues," she wrote in an email explaining the cancellation.

Employees were then told the survey results would be shared at the Oct. 24 all-hands meeting, according to internal Slack messages The Times reviewed. However, executives leading the meeting did a sales recap and previewed an upcoming conference, among other agenda items, without discussing the survey, two employees said. (The company said it did share the results of the survey with employees on the day of the meeting, just not at the meeting.) They also did not respond to questions employees posed in a dedicated Slack channel. Executives typically respond to the questions in Slack during these meetings, the two employees said.

One of those employees, staff engineer Sophie Haskins, resigned Monday, stating in her resignation letter that she was leaving because the company did not cancel its contract with ICE and "shows no indication of canceling the contract," which she wrote was "morally unacceptable."

"I decided early on after the execs' letter that my 'line in the sand' was that we must cancel the contract by the end of the month," Haskins said. In his original memo, Friedman indicated that GitHub's work with ICE was through a reseller and that the company didn't know what projects its platform was being used for. In her Oct. 22 letter, Brescia said GitHub's servers were being used by Homeland Security Investigations and the Enforcement and Removal Operations division, among others. The ERO division is tasked with deporting and detaining immigrants.

"ICE is a large organization with many divisions, and we believe through Support interactions, that ICE has set up instances within the Homeland Security Investigations arm, M&A, and ERO divisions," she wrote. Brescia cited the "other important work ICE does, such as stopping child exploitation, human trafficking, money laundering and disrupting terrorist networks." Brescia added she was not defending ICE, simply sharing facts.

In a fact sheet circulating within GitHub, employees opposing the ICE contract wrote that the GitHub sales team actively pursued the contract renewal with ICE. The Times reviewed screenshots of an internal Slack channel after the contract was renewed on Sept. 4 that appear to show sales employees celebrating a \$56,000 upgrade of the contract with ICE. The message, which congratulated four employees for the sale and was accompanied by emojis of a siren, bald eagle and American flag, read "stay out of their way. \$56k upgrade at DHS ICE." Five people responded with an American flag emoji.

The company did not respond directly to questions about whether the sales team actively pursued this contract.

GitHub parent company Microsoft — which has contracts with ICE worth more than \$8 million, according to Recode — has also resisted giving in to employee demands to stop working with the agency. Raices, a Texas-based nonprofit that provides legal services to immigrants and refugees, on Thursday responded on Twitter to Brescia's claim that nonprofits want ICE to have better technology. "We can assure you that's not the case," the group tweeted.

11/20 Not guilty: Jurors acquit border aid volunteer Scott Warren on harboring charges

[Henry Brean-Arizona Daily Star] Federal court jurors in Tucson found border aid volunteer Scott Warren not

guilty of harboring charges after just two and a half hours of deliberation Wednesday.

The case hinged on the difference between helping and harboring.

In closing arguments earlier Wednesday, defense lawyer Gregory Kuykendall said Warren only provided humanitarian aid to two Central American men who crossed the border illegally in January 2018.

"Being a good Samaritan is not against the law. Practicing the Golden Rule is not a felony," Kuykendall told the jury.

But federal prosecutors argued that Warren actually hid the men for four days at an Ajo migrant aid station known as the Barn — then gave them directions to skirt a nearby checkpoint and continue their journey north — solely to help them evade capture by the Border Patrol.

"He gave them a place to stay with four walls that law enforcement couldn't see through. It's the literal definition of harboring," said prosecutor Nathaniel Walters. "They never needed medical attention. What they needed was a place to hide, and that's exactly what the defendant gave them."

Warren's fate was in the hands of a jury for the second time this year.

In June, jurors deadlocked on charges that Warren was part of a conspiracy to smuggle the migrants across the border.

This time around, prosecutors decided to drop the conspiracy charge and retry Warren on the two harboring charges. The second trial began last week. Warren was the final witness to testify.

He told the jury on Tuesday that he provided basic medical care and food to Honduran Jose Sacaria Goday, 21, and Salvadoran Kristian Perez Villanueva, 23, after they showed up at the Barn on Jan. 14, 2018.

Four days later, when the men told Warren they planned to leave, he said he took them outside and pointed out landmarks they could use to orient themselves and avoid potentially deadly expanses of open desert.

Warren is a volunteer with the Tucson-based humanitarian aid group No More Deaths, which leaves water and food for migrants in the harsh deserts near Ajo and elsewhere along the border.

The group also searches for migrants in distress and helps recover bodies believed to belong to border-crossers.

Since 2001, the Pima County Office of the Medical Examiner has identified more than 3,000 sets of human remains suspected of belonging to migrants who died in the deserts of Southern Arizona.

Warren's first trial marked the first time in more than a decade that a Southern Arizona border aid worker faced felony human-smuggling charges. The proceedings drew national news attention and a condemnation from United Nations human-rights experts over his arrest.

So far his second trial has received less outside attention, though Warren's supporters and fellow aid workers packed the courtroom gallery and hung banners at informational booths across the street from the downtown Tucson courthouse. Many of the people in the gallery Wednesday wore collars and stoles usually reserved for ordained members of the clergy.

Closing arguments came after U.S. District Court Judge Raner C. Collins denied a last-minute bid by prosecutors to call border aid nurse Susannah Brown to the witness stand or introduce her previous testimony into the record.

Brown testified during Warren's first trial, then sat in the courtroom gallery during closing arguments as prosecutors accused her of being part of the smuggling conspiracy jurors ultimately deadlocked on.

Prosecutors said in court Tuesday that they received permission from the Justice Department to offer Brown

immunity for her testimony in the current trial, but efforts to serve her with a subpoena were unsuccessful.

Brown was on the defense witness list, but Warren's attorneys opted not to call her to the stand.

Warren had faced up to a decade in prison if convicted on both felony harboring charges, but such a long sentence would be highly unusual in Tucson's federal court. An Arizona Daily Star analysis of about 360 human-smuggling cases in 2018 showed sentences of probation were common for first-time offenders. The longest sentence was less than four years in prison.

10/7: APAPA Joins Leading Chinese Americans to Highlight Concerns Amid Rising U.S. - China Tensions

SACRAMENTO, CA – On October 3, 2019, Asian Pacific Islander American Public Affairs (APAPA) joined a group of leading policy makers, legal experts, educators, business leaders and scientists in Silicon Valley to tackle the impact of rising U.S. – China tensions on the Chinese American community and American society as a whole. Brought together by the Committee of 100 (C100), a non-profit American organization of prominent and extraordinary Chinese Americans, the group detailed a heightened rise in scrutiny of Chinese Americans and people of Chinese descent, especially those who work in science and technology, and the chilling effect on civil liberties, as well as American science, technology and research initiatives.

At the conference, speakers detailed the negative impact of a climate of fear and suspicion on individual scientists and researchers, as well as on a wide range of industries, universities, research institutions and businesses critical to U.S. innovation and economic leadership.

"We are a nation built on immigrants, and we must not allow our fears to create an environment that erodes America's talent pool nor its values of equal opportunity for all, freedom of inquiry, scientific integrity, and openness," noted H. Roger Wang, Chairman of C100.

C100's research from 2017 shows that the percentage of people of Chinese heritage charged under the Economic Espionage Act (EEA) tripled from 2009 to 2017, and that defendants of Asian heritage convicted of espionage received sentences over twice as severe as those of other ethnicities. As an output of the conference, C100 will generate recommendations to share with congressional leaders, the scientific and educational communities, law-enforcement, business, and civic organizations and communities.

"It is our hope to come together and find balanced solutions that protect national security, uphold the civil liberties of all Americans, and continue to foster the welcoming environment for the development of science, technology and research that America has always been known for," said Charlie Woo, Conference Chair and Acting Vice Chair of C100.

10/28: US Extends Protected Status For Salvadorans By at Least a Year

[Telesur English] TPS was awarded to Salvadorans after two devastating earthquakes affected the Central American country in 2001.

The United States government has extended temporary protection (TPS) for Salvadorans living in the U.S. for another year, U.S. Ambassador to El Salvador Ronald Johnson said Monday. In a joint video statement with Salvadoran President Nayib Bukele, the U.S. ambassador said that "today in Washington, we signed an agreement that extends TPS for Salvadorans in the United States for another year."

For his part, the Salvadoran President declared on Monday that the TPS could be extended for a second year, until January 2022, as long as the lawsuits in the U.S. federal court do not invalidate President Donald Trump's decision to end the program.

TPS was awarded to citizens of the Central American country after two devastating earthquakes affected El Salvador in 2001 leaving hundreds of thousands homeless.

In a statement, the U.S. Embassy in El Salvador said that work permits for Salvadorans registered with TPS on the same dates will also be extended.

The TPS program offers protection from deportation to migrants already in the country, including those who entered illegally, from countries affected by natural disasters, civil strife, and other problems.

However, U.S. President Donald Trump has shown considerable skepticism toward the protection program and has asked to revoke the special status granted to thousands of migrants from a number of countries including El Salvador. El Salvador, along with Guatemala and Honduras, are the countries of origin for the majority of migrants attempting to illegally cross into the United States through Mexico.

9/21: New agreement gives US plenty, Salvadoran migrants nothing

[El Salvador Perspectives] El Salvador's Foreign Minister, Alexandra Hill, was in Washington, D.C. yesterday to sign an agreement with the US Department of Homeland Security. In the agreement Hill signed, El Salvador pledges to work with the US to become a country where refugees from third countries can seek asylum. Reuters reported on the joint press conference announcing the agreement:

"The core of this is recognizing El Salvador's development of their own asylum system and committing to help them build that capacity," Acting Department of Homeland Security Secretary Kevin McAleenan told reporters in Washington after signing documents with El Salvador's minister of foreign affairs, Alexandra Hill.

"Individuals crossing through El Salvador should be able to seek protections" in the Central American country even if they were intending to apply for asylum in the United States, he added.

Neither official said when the arrangement would take effect or provide details on how it would be administered. It was unclear how such a deal would work, given that most migrants from other countries take routes that avoid crossing the small, poverty-stricken El Salvador.

"We are going to work out operational details. This is just a broad agreement," Hill told Reuters upon leaving the signing ceremony. There should be no doubt that this agreement is not part of some humanitarian interest by the US in creating a region-wide system of humanitarian protection for refugees. Instead, this agreement is a piece in a Trump administration agenda to make asylum claims impossible in the US with a legal argument that refugees who pass through Mexico, Guatemala, El Salvador or Honduras can and should have applied for asylum in those countries and thus are not entitled to asylum in the US.

Hill started her remarks by stating "My president, president Bukele, since day 1, has changed policy 180 degrees. We are now allies of the United States after a decade of a government that was pro-Chavez." Then, Hill talked about two subjects which are not advanced by this agreement at all. First, she described as "the main issue" the plight of Salvadorans who have fled as migrants because of violence or economic necessity. And yet the agreement she signed appears to have done nothing for such migrants.

This agreement does not contain measures for Salvadorans who might currently be on the migrant journey, stuck at the Mexican border by metering policies, imprisoned in immigration detention centers, or dumped back in Mexico under the Migrant Protection Protocols to wait out their immigration court proceedings. While Hill invoked the images of Óscar Alberto Martínez Ramírez, 26, and his toddler daughter Valeria who drowned in the Rio Grande as she spoke about the predicament of Salvadoran migrants, this agreement does nothing to change the Trump administration policies which force migrants to attempt dangerous journeys across the Rio Grande or through barren deserts.

Hill also talked passionately about the 195,000 Salvadorans in the US on Temporary Protected Status ("TPS") which the Trump administration is attempting to cancel and force them to return home. Hill stated that these TPS holders have deep roots in the US and put their hands over their hearts for the US national anthem and also for the national anthem of El Salvador. She made it clear that the Salvadoran government was advocating for a path which would allow TPS holders to remain in the US.

However, Jonathan Blitzer of the New Yorker magazine tweeted that Hill was having no success on this point: According to a senior Trump Administration official, gov't of El Salvador asked U.S. to extend T.P.S. for 200K+ Salvadorans living in the U.S. in exchange for signing asylum deal announced today. And was told that T.P.S. was a non-starter for US. Salvadorans signed anyway.

El Salvador would almost be starting from scratch in creating a system to accept refugees. Although El Salvador passed a refugee law in 2002, I searched in vain across current Salvadoran government websites to find any information about current activities of "CODER," the commission which is established under the law to accept refugee applications. The only mention was a press event in 2016 where then foreign minister Hugo Martinez stated that 49 persons "in recent years" had been accepted as refugees in El Salvador.

One also has to question whether El Salvador seriously plans to accept any quantity of refugees from other countries like Venezuela or Cuba in the future, given its need to devote resources to the needs of thousands of Salvadorans being deported from the US and Mexico each year.

So what does El Salvador get out of signing this agreement? There is probably some additional security funding which will make its way to El Salvador to fight gang violence on the grounds that such violence is a push factor for migration. El Salvador also looks to see progress on agricultural guest worker visas for legal migration. Finally, the agreement pushes Nayib Bukele's argument that he is the best partner for the US in the region, as he continues to seek investment and backing for his other ambitious initiatives in the country. But for the Salvadoran migrant outside of the country, despite the words of Foreign Minister Hill, this agreement offers nothing.

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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:
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