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Migration

Desperate Journeys. Sick System!

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THE CONVERGING CATASTROPHES of global capitalism have landed on multiple communities, peoples and nations — but nowhere harder than on displaced populations, refugees and asylum seekers. There are by now an estimated 100 million people globally who have fled their homelands or become internally displaced by war, political repression or ethnic violence; by environmental destruction or economic collapse; or in many cases, by lethal combinations of these modern plagues.

In just very recent incidents, here are only a few of the horrific stories that made headlines:

Forty-nine asylum seekers from multiple Latin American and Asian countries, in detention in Ciudad Juarez, Mexico because of the U.S. border shutdown, burned to death when guards left them locked in their cells — apparently on orders from the government of “progressive” president Andres Manuel Lopez Obrador.

Two families including young children, reportedly from India and Romania, drowned when their boat capsized in the St. Lawrence River attempting a deadly dangerous crossing from Canada to the United States. The Romanian family was seeking to join relatives in New York to avoid imminent deportation. This comes in the wake of refugees freezing to death trying to cross into the U.S. in a Manitoba border wasteland — AGAIN, hoping to reach relatives living in the United States.

Meanwhile, U.S. President Biden and Canadian Prime Minister Justin Trudeau have cemented their friendship summit by closing an “unofficial crossing” into Quebec at a place called Roxham Road used by hundreds of asylum seekers whose cases have little or no chance in the nightmarish U.S. immigration system.

The Biden administration has resumed the unspeakable practice of deporting Haitians back to the collapsing country virtually destroyed as result of more than a century of imperialist exploitation and interventions. Notoriously, it was U.S. insistence on getting rid of the popular Haitian president Jean-Bertrand Aristide (not once but twice!) that contributed directly to the chaos over the past 20 years.

We don't even know the numbers who have perished in the Darien Gap wilderness between Colombia and Panama as they made their northward journey. In the first three months of 2023 alone, an astounding 87,000 migrants have braved the Darien Gap crossing. (AP New, April 12, 2023)

The Mexican-U.S. Sonoran desert in recent years has become increasingly treacherous. According to [Latino USA](#): “Over the last two decades, more than 4,000 remains of people believed to have died attempting to cross the border have been recovered from this region. And many more people have disappeared. Last year, 225 deaths were recorded in this stretch of southern Arizona. The actual death toll is unknown, but experts say it is likely much higher than has been reported.”

Behind the death count, it's important to try to grasp the extreme daily misery that makes these incredible treks, and the enormous risks, a rational calculation. That's a window not only onto the cynicism of government policies, but the systemic collapse that gives rise to them.

Gross Statistics

During the past decade, reports the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees, the global refugee crisis more

than doubled. In 2022, the UNHCR announced that the world had surpassed the 100 million mark for total displacement, meaning that over 1.2% of the global population have been forced to leave their homes. This includes some 70 million internally displaced, an often overlooked dimension of the disaster.

The deadliest of all the desperate refugee journeys are [the Mediterranean crossings from North Africa to Europe](#), where 25,000 people are believed to have died during the past decade, according to Human Rights Watch. The response? The government of Italy criminalizes the rescue ships that pull survivors from the water or from sinking rafts.

European states subsidize the government of Morocco and Libya to accept refugees who are forced back. Those who do reach European shores are often warehoused indefinitely on islands or detention camps. Australia's policy toward refugees has been equally brutal.

Even with the cruelty of government immigration policies in the richer countries, racist and rightwing backlash politics are rising in response to the influx of refugee populations. Even when the refugees are white and European, as in the case of millions of Ukrainians who fled early in the Russian invasion, the warm initial welcomes are wearing thin in neighboring eastern European countries — let alone the travails faced across Europe by Middle Eastern and African refugees subjected to racist abuse as less “desirable” arrivals.

As in the United States, conservative and far-right parties exploit the fear of immigrants to promote their racist agendas. It's contributed significantly to the Brexit movement, the growth of the Le Pen “National Rally” party in France and *Alternativ fur Deutschland* in Germany, the ascendance of Viktor Orban's self-described “illiberal democracy” (white-supremacist Christian nationalism) in Hungary, the Polish government acclaiming Ukrainian refugees as “people like us” while those from Africa are distinctly unwelcome, bans in Switzerland on construction of minarets, and other expressions of xenophobic illness.

We shouldn't imagine that Europe or the United States have any monopoly on reactionary prejudices. In [the case of Tunisia](#), *The Legal Agenda* (March 21, 2023) notes the growth of a “great replacement” conspiracy theory — targeting what the Tunisian president calls “hordes of irregular migrants” from sub-Saharan Africa, committing alleged crimes and “unacceptable practices.”

Not only Black foreigners but also Black Tunisians (10-15% of the population) have subsequently been subjected to “violence, arbitrary arrests based on skin color, humiliation, vandalism, workplace dismissals, evictions, and incitement to violence...in a climate reminiscent of the White man's colonial paranoia about Black people.”

The crisis is international, and systemic, and only marginally ameliorated by those countries that have relatively liberal, or at least less blatantly cruel and sadistic, policies. To understand the deep roots of a global dilemma, it helps to look at one set of circumstances — those closest to home in the western hemisphere.

North American Case Study

Think of an agricultural village in central Mexico, for example, where young and not-so-young people are considering their future. Are they hoping to make it to the USA and find work, let's say, in a meatpacking plant, because they've heard that midwestern winters are really the best?

Probably not. More likely, the village is already hollowing out because its native agriculture has been gutted by

heavily subsidized U.S. agribusiness exports, facilitated by North American “free trade” agreements since the 1990s.

The impact on Mexican agriculture is not accidental or unintended. It was planned, under the free-market doctrine of “comparative advantage,” whereby agriculture in Mexico would shift to specialty produce for the U.S. market, with its labor force largely moving onto *maquiladora* factories — for production taken away from the U.S. industrial belt, driving down wages and labor rights all around.

That project didn’t really work out, as U.S. capital quite logically used global “free trade” to find even lower-wage sites in the Global South.

But the wreckage perpetrated by imperialist policies extends beyond the ravages of the market alone. Through the genocidal counter-revolutionary wars waged by U.S.-allied regimes in Central America, the societies of Guatemala, El Salvador and Honduras were ripped apart, with the greatest impact on Indigenous and peasant communities.

While hundreds of thousands fled the military death squads, even worse devastation has been wrought by the truly insane U.S. “war on drugs” since the 1980s. The entirely predictable result is that drug production — ever more potent and deadly, precisely because it’s unregulated — and circulation and smuggling into the U.S. market on industrial scale is in the hands of criminal syndicates.

Wars among the gangs, their forced recruitment of youth, violent and arbitrary police crackdowns, prison overcrowding, riots and murders, have made parts of Mexico, El Salvador and other countries so deadly that flight becomes the sensible strategy. It’s a big part of the reason why parents send their children northward, unaccompanied — an otherwise incomprehensible option.

The quadruple whammy is completed by the ravages of climate change, which destroys for example coffee production in parts of Central America and contributes to increasingly deadly hurricanes, flooding and droughts. All these factors of “free trade” economics, U.S.-sponsored repression, drug-war politics and natural disasters interact to produce an intractable crisis of population displacement on this continent.

One can point to the cruelty and opportunism, of immigration policies of all U.S. administrations — “stay in Mexico,” Title 42, family separation, mass detention and all the rest — more overtly racist and sadistic under a Donald Trump, somewhat less so and better disguised under a Biden or “deporter-in-chief” Obama. These are significant but secondary differences. Under Biden, many children taken from their families under Trump remain separated or missing.

What’s done every day to immigrants and asylum seekers at the U.S. border, and the terror experienced by undocumented people and their families living in U.S. cities under constant fear of deportation, are crimes against humanity. The atrocities of policy, however, are really symptoms of a dysfunctional and destructive world system. Humane and comprehensive immigration reform is desperately needed, but even that is way short of a fundamental solution.

Destructive Global Disorder

This synopsis of what’s happening on the North American continent opens a window on the broader crises of displacement around the world. We sometimes forget, unfortunately, that there are disasters of wars and economic ruin on a scale equal to the horrors facing Ukraine.

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Such calamities in the Middle East and North Africa have brought hundreds of thousands of people attempting to reach safe haven in Europe — whether going from Syria to Turkey to the Greek islands, from the Libyan coast toward Italy, from Morocco toward Spain. The countries from which people are fleeing extend from Afghanistan and Burma to Somalia, South Sudan and Ethiopia to Mali.

In one year alone, the United Nations Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs (UNOCHA) reported: “Some 40.5 million new people became internally displaced by conflict and disasters worldwide during the course of 2020. Of these people, 30.7 million were displaced by violence and conflict, and 9.8 million by natural disasters.” That’s two years before Russia invaded Ukraine, setting off further upheaval in global food and fertilizer supply.

So long as a world system persists that drives people by the tens of millions [to undertake desperate journeys](#) with all the deadly risks, progressive movements must demand the rights of people to move across borders to save their lives. The immediate demand must be: Let them in!

But a world without borders, without cruel immigrant policies, and cynical manipulation by racist politicians of all stripes (including centrist and liberal ones), will only become possible in a fundamentally transformed system. Bland statements by U.S vice-president Kamala Harris about programs to help people stay in their home countries are meaningless in present conditions — particularly when the programs are mainly about corporations like Pepsi-Cola setting up shop in the Global South!

The first step toward the necessary transformation must include *reparations* and debt cancellation for the destruction brought by imperialism and colonialism. There can be no more burning example right now than Haiti — where the U.S. administration wants to prod Canada into leading the kind of military intervention that’s been so disastrous for Haiti’s people on every previous occasion.

If Ukraine is quite rightly demanding reparations for the colossal destruction of Putin’s criminal invasion, what do western imperialist powers owe for the damage inflicted on the African, Asian and American continents?

We’re not only talking here about moral obligations, but about beginning a sustainable, ecosocialist restructuring of economy in both the Global South and the rich, but brutally unequal, societies of the capitalist North. Until that is undertaken, the crises of displacement and refugee flight — which themselves are a symptom of capitalism’s threat to the survival of civilization and humanity — will only grow.

Source [Against the Current May-June 2023, 224](#)

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