



DJPC SUMMER 2020 NEWSLETTER

The Denver Justice and Peace Committee (DJPC) is a grassroots organization, which promotes human rights, economic, and environmental justice through education and nonviolent activism to support communities seeking justice for all people. We stand in solidarity with peoples in the Americas, particularly with oppressed communities in Latin America.

El Comité de Justicia y Paz es una organización de base que promueve los derechos humanos, económicos, y la justicia ambiental a través de la educación y el activismo no violento para apoyar a las comunidades que buscan la justicia para sus pueblos. Nos solidarizamos con los pueblos de las américas, en particular con aquellas comunidades que viven día a día la opresión.

Covid-19 in Latin America: New Challenges in the World's Most Unequal Region

BY RAFAEL R. IORIS

Finally confirming what many scientists had been saying for the last 20 or so years, a new global pandemic has brought the entire world to a halt in the last five months. The rapid spreading of a new form of coronavirus, called Covid-19, stalled global commercial chains among countries and forced societies to find new ways to run business, educational systems, and even the very operations of political deliberation. Teleconferencing, online education, and zoom-based legislative sessions became the new normal and no one is certain of when things can go back to normal. Mirroring global events, Latin America has now become the epicenter of the spreading of the new virus, especially in its largest countries, Brazil and Mexico, where contagion rates and death tolls are on the rise.

A continent historically defined by weak and non-democratic political institutions and entrenched huge socio-economic inequalities, Latin America's experiences with the pandemic have been largely defined, very much along the experiences unfolding in the US, by political inability and ideological polarization. And even though local variations exist, these factors have mired the region's ability to cope with the new challenges brought up by the rapid spread of the virus.

In a general sense, size has mattered in the ways infection rates were manifested in Latin America. Smaller countries, like Uruguay and Paraguay managed to almost stop contagion with rigid border controls, something which tragically hardened nationalist feelings present across the region prior to the arrival of Covid-19. Counterintuitively, larger countries, which usually possess better public health resources have fared more poorly though it is likely that things would have even worse were not for institutions such as the Unified Public Health System (SUS) of Brazil.

Conversely to what has happened in Argentina, country with the region's fourth largest population and where rigid stay-at-home policies were successfully implemented, and echoing events that also hindered the decision-making process in the US, Brazilian and Mexican political leaders (Jair Bolsonaro and Andre Manuel Lopez Obrador, respectively) either denied the very threat or continued to undermine efforts promoted by their country's important scientific, academic and public health professionals. Also in tandem with experiences of the United States, Brazil's federalist constitutional framework has minimized the impact of Covid-19 in the country as it allowed local governors to act more assertively in mandating stay-at-home policies notwithstanding Bolsonaro's efforts to sustain business as usual and maintain commercial activities open or reverse the closing of those that had been mandated to close by local authorities.

In any event, Brazil faces today its most challenging public health crisis. The country has recorded at least 2 million coronavirus cases, registered a death toll around 82,000, and displays today the steepest curve of ascending cases in the world. Country where cases have taken a bit longer to gain momentum, Mexico now sees a rapid worsening of cases, having recorded its worst week since the outbreak, both in confirmed cases (around 350,000) and deaths (around 40,000).

As mentioned before, Covid-19 has exacerbated existing regional dynamics and realities, such as its deep socio-economic inequalities. And even though any nation with the social stratification existing in Latin America would equally face tremendous hurdles to attend to massive sanitary crises as the one created by the new coronavirus, the lack of efficient, coherent leadership and inclusive decision-making processes present in Latin American has certainly made things much worse.



TOPSHOT - Aerial picture showing a burial taking place at an area where new graves have been dug up at the Nossa Senhora Aparecida cemetery in Manaus, in the Amazon forest in Brazil, on April 22, 2020. - The new grave area hosts suspected and confirmed victims of the COVID-19 coronavirus pandemic. More than 180,000 people in the world have died from the novel coronavirus since it emerged in China last December, according to an AFP tally based on official sources. (Photo by Michael DANTAS / AFP)

For one, stay-at-home policies could not be put in place in efficient ways since significant portions of workers simply could not afford to stop working in the streets since their very livelihood would thus be denied. Regionally the informal sector employs from a third to half of each country's workforce and, especially where government economic aid was not forthcoming or was otherwise insufficient, it became extremely challenging to many not to venture outside in search of some form of remuneration or gain. Much in the same way, the halting of in-classroom education and its replacement for online education, though present across the region, impacted people differently depending on their socio-economic position.

The manifestation and especially the impacts of Covid-19 in Latin America varied according to people's zip codes and racial composition. In effect, facing the new challenges presented by the coronavirus depended largely on one's socio-economic reality, i.e. one's economic means, type of employment, educational background, place and type of residence, etc. In short, being able to have access to online education, managing social or physical distancing, and following stay-at-home policies, all depended on one's place in the entrenched stratified societies of Latin America. These challenges have been intensified by both the political fragmentation and economic slowdown most countries in region faced prior to the arrival of this new coronavirus

Latin America's political party fragmentation is today at its highest degree since the dawn of the 21st century and their most of the region's domestic political arenas are largely defined by intense political polarization, which means that the anti-Covid-19 policies have been, in most places, mired in ideological disputes and conflicts.

Similarly, coronavirus has already, and will likely continue to, deepen the mediocre economic growth most countries in the region have seen in the last five years, thus also intensifying existing regional economic disparities.

Adding to the many existing and growing challenges each country in the region faces, regional political coordination, such as the sharing of successful policies put in place in one country, has become a more difficult, though still a potentially important line of action. In fact, even though Latin America, particularly South America, has experienced its most promising period of regional cooperation in the first two decades of the 21st century, regional multilateralism has rapidly eroded in the last two years, particularly after the arrival to power of Jair Bolsonaro in Brazil, in January, 2019. Deepening this approach of xenophobic isolationism, and mimicking Trump's views and policies, the Brazilian president has recently accused the World Health Organization of being an ideologically driven organization, from which Brazil could possibly withdraw in the near future.

Overall, Latin America's landscape in the context of the regional dissemination of Covid-19 is one defined by growing economic, social, sanitary, and political challenges. It is to be expected that heightened short-sighted nationalist views, deep political polarization, and entrenched economic inequalities will harden across the region, impacting more sharply and painfully historically marginalized social segments, such as afro-descendants and indigenous communities. Reversing these disheartening trends will take continued and asserted mobilization of broad sectors of all regional democratic forces. And it would be very positive and much welcome if these efforts could count on the support and solidarity from progressive activists based in the United States today and for many years to come.

TAKE ACTION: GARIFUNA LAND DEFENDERS FORCIBLY DISAPPEARED

by Brigitte Gynther from the Staff Collective at the School of the Americas Watch

At 5 a.m. on Saturday, July 18th, Alberth Sneider Centeno, Suami Aparicio Mejía García, Gerardo Rochez Cálix, and Milton Joel Martínez Álvarez, all from the Garifuna community of Triunfo de la Cruz in Honduras, as well as a fifth person from Belize, were forcibly removed from their homes by more than ten heavily armed men. Sneider Centeno, pictured above in the yellow shirt, was the elected President of the Garifuna community of Triunfo de la Cruz in Honduras and a leader with the Black Fraternal Organization of Honduras (OFRANEH).



Eyewitnesses report that some of the armed men were wearing Honduran Investigative Police (DPI) vests and others wore Honduran Military Police uniforms. The DPI has been trained by the United States and while the U.S. tries to distance itself from the Military Police — which are notorious for political crimes such as murdering opposition protesters — the Military Police have been trained by U.S.-trained military personnel, including Mariano Diaz, who was repeatedly trained by the U.S. before being convicted for the murder of Berta Cáceres.

The community of Triunfo de la Cruz is organized as part of OFRANEH, which defends the rights of the Garifuna people, especially their land and territory rights, which are constantly under attack by powerful interests who want their coastal territory for multinational and elite-run tourism projects, drug trafficking, and other economic projects.

In 2015, the Garifuna community of Triunfo de la Cruz won an important case in the Inter-American Court of Human Rights (IACHR) against the state of Honduras for violating their territorial rights; the sentence ordered the Honduran government to clearly demarcate the land of the Garifuna community of Triunfo de la Cruz.

Sneider Centeno, as elected President of Triunfo de la Cruz, was active in pressuring the Honduran government to comply with the IACHR sentence, which it has repeatedly failed to do. OFRANEH holds the U.S.-backed Honduran government responsible for the forced disappearances of the four Garifuna men, given that the government has sided with powerful interests that have taken Garifuna land and refused to return the land to the Garifuna people. Additionally, in a press conference, OFRANEH leader Miriam Miranda stressed that the Garifuna men were kidnapped and disappeared on a Saturday, a day when Honduras was in total lockdown due to the pandemic and only the police, military and others authorized by the state were permitted to circulate. Yet the perpetrators were able to travel in multiple vehicles without plates to the homes of Sneider Centeno and the others, forcibly remove them, and then take them to wherever they went without being stopped. They have not been heard from since. Additionally, OFRANEH denounced this week that they had received information that the Honduran government was planning to free the only suspect in custody.

Miriam Miranda of OFRANEH denounced that the forced disappearance of Sneider Centeno and the other Garifuna men is part of the systematic persecution of the Garifuna people. Just last month, Antonio Bernandez, 71 years old, was disappeared and found murdered 6 days later. Bernandez was from the Garifuna community Punta Piedra, which also won an IACHR case against the Honduran state, and where the state has also refused to implement the sentence to ensure the Garifuna the right to their ancestral land. Just a month before that, on May 20, 2020, Edwin Fernández was murdered in front of his kids while he manned the security checkpoint of the Rio Tinto Garifuna community.



OFRANEH has repeatedly denounced the powerful economic interests that displace or threaten to displace the Garifuna from their land and territory. This includes Honduran elites, international tourism and tourism projects, charter cities, drug traffickers, massive African palm oil plantations, and more. The stealing of Garifuna land is facilitated by the Honduran state's failure to ensure Garifuna communities the right to their land and territory when powerful economic interests are involved, even when ordered to do so by the IACHR.

Take action: Call on the U.S. Embassy and your elected officials to speak out to publicly call for the return of the Garifuna leaders and to urge the Honduran government to implement the IACHR sentences for the Garifuna communities of Triunfo de la Cruz and Punta Piedra.

In Solidarity,

SOA Watch

FREE THEM ALL

by: Alice Garcia

"IT IS NO MORE OR LESS THAN A CONCENTRATION CAMP. IT IS A STAIN ON OUR MORAL CONSCIOUSNESS AS A SOCIETY. [DETENTION CENTERS] NEED TO BE SHUT DOWN."

— HUMAN RIGHTS ACTIVIST ISA VILLALON

Protestors have been camping outside of ICE detention center in Aurora to call for the immediate release of all detainees amidst the deadly outbreak of COVID-19. Since March 30, twenty-one detainees, two ICE employees, and ten GEO employees have been confirmed to be infected by COVID-19. The Aurora ICE Processing Center is currently on the list of sites of outbreaks occurring in Colorado with an active investigation since May 30th, and Rep. Jason Crow's office has been requesting data from ICE.

While the overall goal is to close the detention center down and release all detainees, protestors are asking for every detainee to be screened for COVID and to release people who are immunocompromised and/or elderly. Only two facilities in the U.S. are screening detainees for COVID, and according to detainees, only a few people were screened. ICE detention centers do not have the capacity to deal with a COVID outbreak.

The majority of the people detained come from Colorado, Utah, and Wyoming, but there are still others from across the nation being transferred. This poses a risk of exposure for detainees and other members of the community.

Even as the US fails to contain the virus in detention centers, we export the sickness to Guatemala. Guatemala originally closed its borders to deportations, due to COVID-19, but reopening has spread the virus even to distant rural Guatemalan towns.

The spread of the virus is one more offense associated with the deportations. An agreement between the United States and Guatemala, known as the US-Guatemala Asylum Cooperative Agreement, allows the U.S. to deport non-Guatemalan asylum seekers to Guatemala without a court hearing in the United States. The United States promotes Guatemala as a "safe third country," even as Guatemalans flee their country to escape violence, corruption, and persecution. In the context of COVID, the policy is even more inhumane. The United States is effectively pushing its border to Guatemala while exporting a pandemic.

Isa Villalon of Aurora, CO was a human rights accompanier for Network in Solidarity with the People of Guatemala (NISGUA) in Guatemala for 7 months. As a human rights accompanier, she helps prevent violence during protests and if violence were to occur, takes on the role of alerting the international community. Accompaniers also provide support to individuals or organizations involved in legal cases. During her time there she was able to see how the United States-Guatemala Asylum Cooperative Agreement was harming the community and the asylum seekers being deported to Guatemala. Non-Guatemalan people are being dropped off in rural areas of the country without giving them the information and resources they need to return to their home country, or the opportunity to apply for asylum in Guatemala. They are also being discriminated against for being immigrants, in a country already expelling its citizens due to violence and government corruption.

Due to the COVID-19 outbreak Isa had to return home, but she immediately connected her work in Guatemala to the struggles against detention centers in the US.



Photo by Lynn Holland

She joined the encampment outside the Aurora ICE processing center to demand freedom for all detainees on account of COVID-19..

Kesha Davalos-Grijalva, whose husband is detained in the Aurora detention center, has been camped in front of the detention center since May 23 when the protest began. Kesha and other protestors take turns monitoring the comings and goings at the facility in an attempt at gaining information about the detainees. Neither ICE nor GEO has been willing to share this information.

As the protestors have learned, Tuesdays are deportation days. On Tuesday, June 30, Kesha, who was keeping watch that day, heard from her husband's lawyer that he was unable to reach her husband. Right away, Kesha called the facility and was told by a GEO officer that her husband was no longer there. Soon after, Kesha caught sight of a group of detainees as they were boarded onto buses to be deported. She and the other protestors then rushed to the airport in an attempt to intervene. Once at the airport, they found that the police had blocked off the road, even though it was public property, and were refusing to let anyone pass through. A journalist at the site was also prevented from passing through. Afterward, Kesha contacted the lawyer and was told that her husband had not been deported and was still at the facility.

These measures taken by ICE are misguided and abusive for a number of reasons. In the first place, ICE attempted to deport Kesha's husband in the middle of his court case. At the time, the facility did not inform the family of his potential deportation and no legal documents were signed to authorize it. In the end, Kesha's husband was not deported simply because he refused to leave the facility without talking to his lawyer. Kesha's family believes that he has been targeted by GEO officers because he has regularly relayed what is going on inside the detention center to his family and supporters on the outside.

In addition, we have to question the use of on-duty police officers acting as security for a private company. Nor should they have been closing off public property to journalists and peaceful protestors. Let us also consider the psychological toll these events have taken on Kesha and her family. Blocking her husband's ability to communicate with his family and lawyer placed her in a state of bewilderment and fear for his safety. Isa Villalon reminds us that these abusive actions are going on in detention centers throughout the country and constitute violations of fundamental human rights. Most detainees are incarcerated for years before they are deported, when the majority have done nothing wrong other than attempting to flee violence, hardship, and oppression in their countries. As she puts it, "It is no more or less than a concentration camp. It is a stain on our moral consciousness as a society. [Detention centers] need to be shut down."

**This article was written early in the month of August. The encampment has since been shut down at the Detention Center.*

MORE PHOTOS FROM THE ICE ENCAMPMENT

By Lynn Holland & Rebeca Zuniga



A crowd of over 60 protestors including the families of detainees at the center, assembles on the bridge. Note the helicopter overhead.



Teach-in organized by DJPC with Abolish ICE.



"The DJPC is badass. They devote a lot of time and energy to meeting with people and communities where the work is happening and activism is needed." -- Author Monterey Buchanan

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