

Fall 2018



Rights Now

The newsletter of the Unitarian Universalist Service Committee



**A Letter from Our President
by Rev. Mary Katherine Morn**

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A Letter from Our President

Dear Friends,

I am delighted to be writing to you today as UUSC's new President and CEO, and I would like to share my deepest thanks for the warm welcome you all have given me.

As some of you may know, prior to entering this role, I spent four years at the Unitarian Universalist Association, and before that, served UU congregations as a minister for over 30 years. Coming from a background in parish ministry, I often think about how Unitarian Universalism and human rights go hand in hand. It is unsurprising, then, that this thought remained with me while I was in Ajo, Arizona for UUSC's recent action "Faith Floods the Desert."

In Arizona, I met with faith leaders and advocates from across the nation to drop off gallons of life-saving water for migrants traveling through the Sonoran desert. This is the desert where many Central Americans – who are fleeing traumatizing violence in their homes – die of thirst and put their lives at further risk to seek asylum in the United States. This is where migrants are detained for weeks, Border Patrol officers destroy humanitarian aid, and civil society organizations are charged with criminal offenses.

During this trip, I heard stories of death and disappearance,

of suffering and separation. Just one day before I arrived, an undocumented immigrant, who had lived in Arizona for 30 years and was recently deported, died on the migrant trail. He was on his way home to see his wife – pregnant with their second child – and daughter.

While feeling heartbroken for migrants experiencing this type of tragedy, I was also moved by their bravery and strength. I was inspired by the spirit of cooperation between UUSC staff and volunteers from our Arizona-based partner, No More Deaths, who collaborated to organize the action. These volunteers work day and night to end the death of migrants on the borderlands.

All of my experiences, thoughts, and emotions from the action brought me back to two UU principles that I spent most of my life learning, and later, living and sharing: *The inherent worth and dignity of every person. Respect for the interdependent web of all existence of which we are a part.*

Because everyone deserves to live their rights. Because it feels impossible to rest while so many people are living in distress.

Together, with 60 other faith leaders, volunteers, and activists, we were able to drop off 125 gallons of water in the desert in two hours. It is amazing how much is possible when a small group of people comes together to uphold their values.

UUSC has been doing this for years – partnering with grassroots groups to lift their ideas and strengthen local efforts to advance social change. I am truly grateful, and ready, to be a part of that change.

With gratitude,



Rev. Mary Katherine Morn

THE U.S. FOLLOWS HUNGARY'S PATH TO DISMANTLE ASYLUM

The Syrian civil war – now in its seventh year – has led over five million Syrians to flee the country and more than six million Syrians to be internally displaced. Often referred to as the “Syrian Refugee Crisis” because about one-half of the refugees are from Syria, the other half of the refugee population is from Afghanistan, Iraq, and elsewhere in the Middle East.

The first wave of refugees arrived in Europe in 2015, with many traveling through the eastern part of the continent in hopes of seeking asylum further west. A year later, this migration route closed, stranding thousands of refugees mid-journey. Regions that had originally been “transit” countries – such as Hungary, Serbia, and Croatia – became end destinations that encountered substantial refugee populations for the first time.

Among European nations, Hungary's response has been the most punishing and explicitly xenophobic. In an attempt to dismantle any access to an asylum system, it enacts policies aimed to intimidate refugees and deter them from seeking to enter the country at all. Unfortunately, similar iterations of Hungary's practices are being utilized at our own southern border. The U.S. has



seen a recent influx of migrants fleeing violence in Central America and, as epitomized by the Trump administration's family separation policy, our government's response has been ruthlessly cruel.

In our latest report, *A Cautionary Tale: The United States Follows Hungary's Dangerous Path to Dismantling Asylum*, UUSC highlights the four major ways in which Hungary and the U.S. are similarly dismantling their asylum systems, as well as recommended next steps to rebuild them. Being a small human rights organization among a multitude of tireless citizens, activists, and movements, UUSC hopes that our fellow allies will use our report to inform their own grassroots efforts. Because together, no matter where we are in the world, our goal is to uplift the inherent worth and dignity of every person.

SEEKING ASYLUM IN HUNGARY AND THE UNITED STATES: A SIDE-BY-SIDE COMPARISON

ONLY 48
“LEGAL” POINTS
OF ENTRY

2,000 MILES

Denying Access Into The Country

In 2015, Hungary built a 325-mile-long fence along its Serbian border and established authorized entry points. Police patrol the fence and push back asylum-seekers who attempt to cross the border at undesignated points. Out of the 4,000-5,000 asylum-seekers waiting to enter Hungary daily, only two are permitted to apply for asylum each day.

Beginning in May 2018, the Trump administration prosecuted, deported, and separated families who did not enter the country at one of the 48 areas deemed “legal” entry points. Within six weeks, the government took more than 2,000 children away from their parents without sharing – or perhaps, even possessing – any information on the children's whereabouts or care.

Implementing Hostile Conditions Upon Arrival

Asylum-seekers are immediately detained when they arrive at Hungary's border. In detention, police officers escort pregnant women to hospitals and stay during examinations. Psychosocial support is deficient despite the high number of torture and trauma survivors. Even children between the ages of 14 to 18 are detained in transit zones – in violation of international law.

U.S. Customs and Border Protection agents employ deadly chase tactics, destroy humanitarian aid, and arrest immigrants attempting to cross the border. Afterwards, immigrants are often detained in dirty cells (known as “hieleras” or “iceboxes” due to their frigid temperatures), where they face sexual abuse, medical neglect, and labor exploitation.

Removing Safeguards

In order to turn away more asylum-seekers, Hungary designated Serbia a “safe third country,” meaning that people who pass through Serbia could be returned there to seek asylum. This resulted in the rejection of more than 99% of asylum claims.

The U.S. and Mexico are discussing an agreement that would designate Mexico a safe third country. This would allow the U.S. to deny asylum to those arriving through Mexico, despite well-documented cases of kidnapping, sexual assault, and other grave threats along the migration route through Mexico.

Obstructing Integration

Hungary withdrew all funding from refugee integration services, so NGOs alone are left responsible for providing housing and employment assistance, language services, and family reunification help. Yet, anyone accused of “assisting illegal immigration” will face imprisonment, and an impending tax law imposes a 25% tax on any foreign funding that appears to support migration.

Among many cases of NGOs being punished for assisting immigrants in the U.S., in June 2018, volunteers of UUSC partner No More Deaths were charged with federal offenses and jailed for providing water and humanitarian aid to immigrants in the Arizona desert.

OUR WORK

In 2015, UUSC launched the Refugee Crisis Relief Fund in response to what had become the largest human migration crisis to date. Thanks to the generosity of our donors, UUSC was able to raise \$800,000 and partner with 18 grassroots organizations in 8 countries. Today, our partners continue to provide humanitarian aid, legal and psychosocial services, and family reunification support, while also advocating for improved asylum policies.

Email development@uus.org to receive a recording of UUSC Program Leader Mayuri Anupindi speaking about our Syrian Refugee Response Program.

Read the full report at uus.org/protectasylum.

TESTIMONIALS FROM HONDURAS

Ely Castro Rosales, a member of UUSC partner Radio Progreso, visited our Cambridge, Mass. headquarters this past summer. UUSC began our partnership with Radio Progreso, an independent radio station, in response to deep political unrest following the November 2017 election in Honduras. The election ended with a power outage and a sudden change in poll results to unlawfully re-elect President Juan Orlando Hernandez. Since then, peaceful protests have been met with violence.

In our cozy sunny conference room, Ely recounted horror

scenes that he personally witnessed. Security forces aim tear gas directly at protestors and fire live ammunition. Peaceful protestors and innocent bystanders are arrested in targeted sweeps. So far, government forces have killed at least 30 people.

Ely explained how Radio Progreso is one of the few alternatives to state-sponsored propaganda in the country. Its journalists and interviewees share critical information with more than 700,000 daily listeners in an effort to improve government accountability, free political prisoners, and

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STORIES OF INJUSTICE FROM HONDURAS

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demilitarize security forces. One of its latest goals is for more people in the United States to be made aware of these issues, in part, because the U.S. government has given the Honduran police force millions of dollars in aid over the past few years.

UUSC staff traveled to Honduras to see and hear, firsthand, the

conflict and its consequences. We met with seven political prisoners who were arrested during a targeted sweep in late December, some of whom were involved in peaceful protests, and others who were merely bystanders. All were held in inhumane conditions for multiple weeks. Here are their stories:

FRANCISCO MIGUEL GÓMEZ ORTEGA



"They took our clothes off, shaved our heads, placed us into solitary confinement... In cells meant for one person, they put seven people. We didn't have any light for 16 days. We couldn't shower. It was very cold, and we were sleeping on the floor, no

blanket or mattress. They were trying to get to us mentally, psychologically every day. Because we could not see the light of day in the morning, the guards would say "good evening," and in the night they would say "good morning."

UUSC is responding to the Central American migrant crisis hand-in-hand with nearly a dozen grassroots organizations to provide direct aid along the migration route, ensure due process upon arrival in the United States, and address the root causes of injustices to eliminate the need to flee in the first place. Email development@uus.org to receive a special edition of *Rights Now* that highlights our migrant justice program.

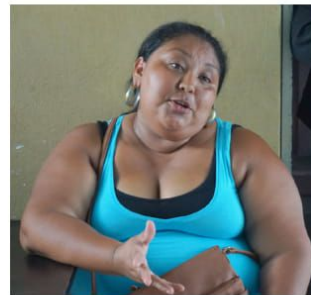
ROQUE JACINTO ALVARENGA COREA



"They read me my rights while beating me with the butt of a gun. They beat my hands. They said they would throw me in jail for 30 years because I had committed the crime of "terrorism" and "kidnapping" and "attempts to kill a police officer."

And of course I never did any of those things... We were segregated in a punishment cell for 16 days. They didn't give us access to showers. Nothing in terms of personal hygiene... And they would threaten us that they would kill us. They would spray pepper spray into the cell. They would give us electric shocks. They said we were scourge of society and we didn't deserve to live."

LOURDES JOHANA GÓMEZ NUÑEZ



"That pattern happened... The police have been beating young people. They've been taking the kids other places and beating them, wanting them to say things that never happened."

Read all seven stories by visiting uus.org/USHonduras. Learn more about Radio Progreso by participating in this year's Guest at Your Table Program at uus.org/gayt.

Rights Now
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