

Rights Now

FALL 2020

The newsletter of the Unitarian Universalist Service Committee



THE MEANING OF HOME

The events of this past year have caused a shift in the meaning of home for many as COVID-19 continues to alter our day-to-day lives. For our grassroots partners and the communities they serve around the world, the sense of safety afforded by home is increasingly under attack, not just by the pandemic, but by the oppressive policies of the Trump administration and the continued effects of the climate crisis. Learn more about the work our partners are doing to defend their rights and how you can join hands with them to support their fight for justice.

THE CRITICAL INFRASTRUCTURE OF THE CARRIZO/COMECRUDO TRIBE

The Carrizo/Comecrudo Tribe of South Texas has been fighting for years to protect the land, the water, the people – their home – from threats of militarization and environmental racism. In one pointed example, they are defending tribal lands against the construction of a “border wall” through a local cemetery. On top of this, the Tribe faces another potentially disastrous threat. Texas LNG, a fracked gas company, has introduced plans to build an export terminal on the Garcia Pasture, a site that is a source of connection for the Tribe and their lifeways. Land that was once home to the Tribe for generations is now completely fenced off, with early signs of environmental degradation already apparent.

This Texas Tribe is one of many UUSC partners fighting back against injustices like these in a tireless effort to defend their home. Yet in recent years, their efforts are being further challenged by state legislation drafted in an attempt to criminalize peaceful protest. Largely targeting Black, Indigenous, and People of Color activists, these bills



are making it increasingly difficult for communities to push back against the violence and racism threatening their way of life. For the Carrizo/Comecrudo in particular, they must contend with a critical infrastructure bill related to oil and gas infrastructure that levies criminal penalties and heavy fines on peaceful protesters. Legislation like this has cropped up across the country, resulting in more than 20 states passing bills similar to the one in Texas. It has become clear that the right to resist injustice is under attack.

But for those defending their land, critical infrastructure is defined

differently. In the Tribe's own words, “Our land, our air, our water, our climate, and our people are the critical infrastructure – not LNG.” And despite the legislative limitations put in place, the Carrizo/Comecrudo Tribe has worked tirelessly to bring national and global attention to what's happening on the Garcia Pasture. A recent Tribunal for Human Rights held by the Tribe engaged hundreds of participants worldwide, centering the experiences of Indigenous communities and highlighting the harms caused by extractive industries. In an effort to lift up this work, UUSC is collaborating with the Carrizo/Commecrudo Tribe to provide a series of webinars highlighting the need for environmental justice, the fight for self-determination, and the ways non-tribal members can engage in acts of solidarity. To learn more about this work and sign on to UUSC's solidarity pledge, please visit UUSC.ORG/CCT.



Photos credit: Lori Simmons & Carrizo/Comecrudo Tribe of South Texas' Facebook.

THE TRUE CRUELTY OF “MIGRANT PROTECTION PROTOCOLS”

Home is often a place filled with loved ones and a welcome respite from the uncertainties of the outside world, offering a sense of safety and security when it's needed most. But with the introduction of the Trump Administration's "Remain in Mexico" policy at the beginning of 2019, people seeking asylum at the Southern border have experienced anything but the comforts of home. Under this policy, more formally known as "Migrant Protection Protocols," or MPP, Central American families seeking asylum are forced to await their immigration court hearings in some of the most dangerous parts of Mexico. More recent arrivals have been turned away with even

less due process under COVID-19 restrictions (a process known as "Title 42" expulsions). They join the growing backlog of MPP cases trapped in Mexico with makeshift tents, violence, and the all-too-real threat of a continued policy of family separation.

Drafted under the guise of public health and safety, these policies are putting families in harm's way. Those arriving at the border seeking protection are swiftly deported to danger, and at real risk of torture, kidnapping, and extortion. As of May 2020, there have been over 1,000 publicly reported cases of murder and other violent assaults. What's more, this policy is only

furthering the spread of COVID-19 to countries with healthcare systems already buckling under current demand. UUSC and its partners are advocating that families seeking asylum should be afforded the right to shelter-in-place with family members or sponsors already residing in the United States. Families must be able to seek protection together without the constant threat of violence or illness.

Yet the most transparent attack on those seeking a sense of home is the systematic separation of families under MPP. Publicly, the Trump Administration ended the policy of family separation in the summer of 2018, but the change in policy only applies to parents traveling with biological children. With the introduction of MPP, adult family members, such as grandparents and adult siblings, are regularly separated from the children with whom they

“The right to seek asylum is under attack because the system in which asylum seekers must operate is a system designed to deport, not to protect. It is a system run by white supremacists, not those who would welcome the tired huddled masses yearning to be free.”

— Nicole Ramos, Program Director
at *Al Otro Lado*

have traveled. The adults are sent back to Mexico while the children are brought to shelters, often with no means of reconnecting with their family members. For adults and children that are sent back to Mexico together, the conditions in the makeshift tent cities are so dire that parents and adult family members have begun sending their children to the border alone, in hopes of saving their lives.



A group photo of UUSC's partner FM4 Paso Libre at their shelter in western Mexico.

TAKE ACTION

With a recorded 65,000 asylum-seekers having been pushed back to Mexico since the implementation of MPP, and thousands more summarily expelled under "Title 42," the Trump administration is placing thousands of people in vulnerable situations amidst a global pandemic. It's imperative that we stop the government from dismantling the asylum system and continue to provide protection to those seeking it. Along with additional funding to partner organizations providing virtual support throughout the asylum process, UUSC has also been pushing hard for change at the Congressional level. Join with us in calling on legislators to completely and permanently defund the "Remain in Mexico" program at UUSC.ORG/SaveAsylum.

RADICAL ACTS OF RESISTANCE IN THE FACE OF CLIMATE CHANGE

By Salote Soqo, Senior Partnership Officer for Climate Justice and Crisis Response

Earlier this year, just before the global shutdown due to COVID-19, I traveled to the Pacific to meet with UUSC's partners in the region. My infant son accompanied me on my trip to Fiji. It was his maiden trip home, a journey connecting his body and spirit with his ancestral lands. My mother wrapped my son with masi, a traditional Fijian cloth, and laid him on an arrangement of ancestral mats to welcome him home. This profound cultural practice, unique to the region, is not only a demonstration of unwavering love, but a radical act of resistance and survival as the Pacific recovers her people and land. As I reflect on that experience, I think of what will become of our homeland as the effects of climate change continue to erode our lands, destroy our oceans, and threaten our survival. Will the next generation have the opportunity to experience the homecoming my son had?

This is something that our partners in the region think about daily. Because home is not simply a structure, it is the land, the language, and

the culture that connects people to their kin and to their ancestors. Climate change is threatening all of those connections to home.

One partner I was able to spend time with in Fiji, Social Empowerment Education Program (SEEP), is working to bring communities together who are in different stages of the relocation process. Those who have already been forced to relocate are able to share their wisdom and lessons-learned with those who are just beginning to plan for a relocation of their communities. The first to relocate have learned that proximity to water supplies, the type of soil and landscape, and discussions around land ownership are all important considerations in relocation. And they know the difficulty of leaving behind the only home they've ever known only to feel like a guest in a new location.

SEEP is facilitating a process that is critical in recording traditional knowledge and mapping losses these communities have and will sustain.

The challenges our partners are facing are enormous and the loss that they feel is incalculable. They receive very little support from government agencies and even less support from the international community. That is why I am more convinced than ever that the most impactful things any of us can do as supporters of human rights and social justice are get resources to the grassroots, trust the expertise of the communities on the frontlines, and listen to and center their voices. Perhaps if we do, fewer communities will have to leave their homes behind.



Leaders and community members who have been displaced or relocated gather together at a SEEP meeting.

“We were able to convene the first ever meeting of representatives from climate displaced communities including those who have been relocated (Tukuraki and Vunidogoloa) or partially relocated (Narikoso). This enabled the participants to share their stories and lessons learnt in the ‘before, during and after’ phases of displacement and relocation.”

— Makereta Waqavonovono, Project Coordinator

JOIN US FOR GUEST AT YOUR TABLE!

Please join us for this year's Guest at Your Table program – focused on ***The Meaning of Home*** – to learn more about UUSC partners fighting to protect their homes against climate change and other existential threats.



LEARN MORE AT [UUSC.ORG/GUEST](https://uusc.org/guest)

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Unitarian Universalist Service Committee
689 Massachusetts Avenue
Cambridge, MA 02139-3302

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