

We Must Remember the History

Monday, June 25, 2018

In the U.S. the Palestinian struggle for justice for their children is beginning to be seen as a part of the broader struggle for justice for Latino immigrant families, African American, and Native American families, all of whom have had their children torn from them - on the auction block, to schools where they were forbidden to speak their native tongue, more recently to detention centers and prisons. In occupied Palestine as well, 700 children are arrested every year and held in Israeli prisons, usually without legal defense or the right to see their families.

One week ago the Chief of the U.N. Human Rights Council criticized the United States calling its Zero Tolerance policy “government-sanctioned child abuse” which may cause “irreparable harm” with “lifelong consequences”. The next day U.S. Ambassador to the U.N. Nikki Haley announced U.S. withdrawal of the from the Council. The reasons given centered mainly around the Council’s ongoing criticism of Israel’s human rights record and the 50 plus years of illegal occupation of Palestine. But we know the U.S. itself continues to abuse human rights here and abroad. We have for example the world’s highest proportion of incarceration, there is torture in our jails and our military, and ongoing “collateral damage” is inflicted during our participation in undeclared wars worldwide. I believe the U.S. withdrew from the Council last week because the it does not want to be held accountable for its own abuses, and so the Administration de-legitimizes (to use a favorite Zionist trope) the internationally accepted bodies who would judge us. The pictures of ICE tearing young children from their families horrifies us – but should it? The U.S. is the *only* country in the entire world that has not signed the Convention on the Rights of the Child. The U.S. also refuses to be part of the International Criminal Court to avoid potential prosecution for various war crimes. We’ll make our own rules, put America First, certainly before the human rights of those we don’t care about, including their children.

But what has struck me the most about this heartless and illegal policy, is the way in which the increased numbers of unaccompanied children and families is reported in the mainstream news, as a phenomenon without a cause – and *how similar* it is to the reporting on Gaza’s Great March of Return in which more than 140 have just died, and more than 13,000 have been wounded, half of them so seriously that they will suffer lifelong disabilities.

It is as if tens of thousands of Latino immigrants, families, mothers, babies, young children, have appeared on our southern borders for no reason other than to take advantage of America’s bounty and generosity. As if young Palestinian families and children marched to Israel’s border fence to willingly give up their lives to Israeli snipers. Why would anyone do these things?? Why the arduous, extremely dangerous journeys from El Salvador, Honduras, Guatemala and Mexico, in which many die along the way? The reasons why, the root causes, are hardly addressed, except to say almost in passing, that there is gang violence, rape, corruption and poverty – those issues that make these countries in our President’s words “shit-hole countries.” And for Palestinians in Gaza it’s the timeworn and unsubstantiated answer that Hamas forced them, or paid them, to risk their lives.

The dark, and not-so-long past history of the U.S. in these countries is left untouched. The group that is VTJP is today was started more than 20 years ago in Burlington Vermont by Sister Miriam Ward, of the Sisters of Mercy. As a relentless fighter against injustice until the day she died, she led many trips to the Holy Land. But every year of her adult life she also participated in the annual vigil in Fort Benning, Georgia against the School of the Americas - and the gross human rights abuses committed by its graduates, the Central American military leaders trained there, including countless rapes, murders and torture and disappearances in Central America. She saw early on, as many are beginning to realize now, that the injustices perpetrated in Central America and against Palestinians spring from one and the same source – a militarist, capitalist government ruled by the few who enrich themselves at the expense of the rest of us.

In the 1980s in El Salvador, leftist revolutionaries were fighting a civil war against oppressive generals and oligarchs keeping farmers illiterate and impoverished. 75,000 workers, farmers, union and student leaders were killed, many in summary executions and outright massacres. President Reagan sent *billions* in military aid to this tiny country during this time. Salvadoran military were trained at Fort Benning and supported by U.S. military in Salvador. The country was saturated with modern weaponry. After major earthquakes and because of the war, Salvadoran refugees were granted temporary protected status in the U.S. but Bill Clinton allowed it to expire, and thousands of young men returned to a country devastated by natural disaster, war, poverty and overrun with US supplied guns.

Neighboring Honduras today has one of the highest murder rates in the world. It was the training base in the 1980s for the CIA funded Contra rebels fighting the leftist Nicaraguan government that also fought a long war against oppression by a U.S. supported dictator, Somoza. The Contras bombed newly constructed rural clinics, day care centers, and schools. We still have 600 troops in Honduras, arm the police and military thru arms sales and aid, and a program of economic deregulation has resulted in mass de-stabilization for poor farmers.

American meddling in Central America goes back more than a century. Building up a repressive Honduran military ruling class protected American business interests which were threatened when the people elected liberal reformist president Manuel Zelaya - he was forcibly removed by a military coup in 2009, but Secretary of State Hilary Clinton refused to call it a coup so that hefty American military aid could legally continue. Honduras today has a government that colludes with criminals, police and drug traffickers that make the lives of many ordinary people a living hell. And the U.S. supports that government.

In Mexico, the consequences of the demand for drugs, the U.S. financed war on drugs, and the disastrous program called "Fast and Furious" which sells large

numbers of U.S. guns to Mexicans on our southern borders, have contributed directly to arming cartels and gangs that terrorize ordinary Mexican citizens.

We cannot forget that the US has played a defining role in the horrors that plague these countries today, just as it continues to play a defining role in the oppression of the Palestinian people by defending Israel no matter what crimes it commits, and by giving it \$4 billion dollars *every year* in military aid.

We must remember, teach and talk about the history of U.S. involvement in the horrors pushing people to our borders today. Not only should our government grant asylum to the current Central American and Mexican victims of these policies, it should take full responsibility and apologize for the decades of exploitation to which our Latino brothers and sisters have been exposed by putting America first, to be specific, American business interests first. We must insist that the U.S. government begin to put people first, human rights first, and children first and get them and their families out of detention, those who are in the U.S. and those in Israeli prisons with our support. Otherwise we will be judged and found guilty by our children and the world, whether or not we turn our backs on the U.N.