

U.S.A. : From posting bail to legal aid: migrant rights NGOs go into overdrive at border

Wednesday 12 December 2018, by [EERTEN Jurriaan van](#) (Date first published: 6 December 2018).

Rights groups ramp up efforts to aid migrants, refugees as they face new hurdles due to Trump's 'zero-tolerance' policy.

1. **San Diego, California** - Victor* first came to the [United States](#) in 2006. He left his village in the mountains of [Peru](#) during the country's civil war in the 1990s after his family's cow was stolen at gunpoint.

As a farmer, his family's entire livelihood relied on that cow and the loss of it forced Victor to flee. First to the capital Lima, and later to [Mexico](#).

He eventually crossed the border into the US, where he worked his way up to being a restaurant manager, and then got a job for a construction company.

But in January, Victor's mother became gravely ill and he left the US to take care of her in Peru. When she recovered, Victor made his way back to the [US border](#), but things had changed significantly since he last crossed more than five years earlier.

The border was better fortified and Border Patrol agents seemed more abundant.

When he arrived at the border with the smugglers he paid to take him across, border agents could be seen in the distance.

"It was a tense situation," Victor recalled. The smugglers told him to go anyway. Moments later, he was apprehended and detained.

A judge set a bail at \$7,000 - money his family did not have.

But he received help from an organisation specifically conceived to help low-income individuals pay their bail.

The organisation, dubbed the Bail Project, is one of many ways groups and individuals are supporting migrants and refugees at the border. The projects have gone into overdrive in the past two years, seeking to combat President Donald Trump's "zero-tolerance" policy and anti-immigrant rhetoric.

The Bail Project

The Bail Project grew out of The Bronx Freedom Fund, which was started about a decade ago

to “combat racial disparities and mass incarceration”. Last year, it started to expand to other high-need sites, such as San Diego.

Since August, the organisation has bailed out about 750 undocumented individuals who were arrested in and around the San Diego area. The organisation hit a new hurdle in October when a judge started to require that individuals have a “third-party custodian” to take responsibility for the defendant while he or she was out on bail.

“You can directly support the #MigrantCaravan and get people out of detention,” the Bail Project tweeted last month. “By serving as a ‘custodian’ for someone charged under the Trump admin’s ‘zero-tolerance’ policy, you can ensure someone’s release & give them a fighting chance at asylum,” the tweet read.

So far, the Bail Project has signed up at least 20 people to act as third-party custodians, according to Patrick Sullivan, the San Diego coordinator for the project.

Victor was released prior to the third-party custodian requirement.

He has appeared at all of his hearings, just like 95 percent of the cases in San Diego the Bail Project is involved in, Sullivan said.

“The migrants are coming to the border for help from violence,” Sullivan told Al Jazeera. “Instead of sending out troops, the government should send humanitarian workers.”

‘People can resist’

Elsewhere in San Diego and on the other side of the border in Tijuana, people are showing their support for migrants and refugees hoping to make it to the US.

Most recently, groups have organised in solidarity with thousands of mainly Central Americans who have arrived in Tijuana in recent weeks as part of a mass exodus, initially dubbed the Central American caravan.

More than 6,000 migrants and refugees have arrived in the Mexican border city, the majority hoping to apply for asylum. Asylum seekers have been told it may be two months before they are able to enter the US to submit their asylum claims.

Last month, hundreds of people from San Diego [rallied at the border](#) in solidarity with the migrants arriving at the border.

Looking at them separating kids from their families, I couldn’t help but think of the Second World War and fascism. What is happening now is a well-known cycle. But the people can resist. We just have to be aware of what is happening.

KATHERINE PETTUS, PROTESTER

One of the protesters, 62-year-old Katherine Pettus, who used to teach political science at Columbia University, said she came out in protest against the current government.

“Looking at them separating kids from their families, I couldn’t help but think of the Second

World War and fascism,” Pettus told Al Jazeera. “What is happening now is a well-known cycle. But the people can resist. We just have to be aware of what is happening.”

Other groups have filed lawsuits on behalf of the asylum seekers. Al Otro Lado, a southern California-based organisation, filed a complaint against high-level government officials, including the Secretary of Homeland Security Kirstjen Nielsen.

The [lawsuit](#) accuses the government and Homeland Security of actively turning back asylum seekers who are at risk of violence in their home country. US Customs and Border Protection maintains it processes asylum seekers as “expeditiously as possible”.

Several other organisations, such as BorderClick and the Otay Mesa Detention Resistance, have put out calls on social media for donations for the migrants in Tijuana. They have asked for blankets, diapers, general hygiene products and food.

‘I only need toilet paper’

The Border Angels, a group that has been active since the 1980s, supports asylum seekers with legal advice. They also try to coordinate donations from people in the community and bring it to shelters on the other side of the border.

Hugo Castro, who works with the Border Angels, said the group has been increasing the number of donation runs it makes. Before the Central American exodus arrived in Tijuana, the group would go once or twice a week. Now, it goes twice a day.

“We get a lot of donations now from everywhere,” Castro told Al Jazeera as he loaded his minivan with donations. “People come here and give us stuff, they send it over by FedEx from all over the nation or they just contact us via social media to ask what they can do to help.”

In Tijuana, Castro handed out blankets, diapers and hygiene products to refugees and migrants at the stadium where most of the Central Americans were being housed prior to its closure earlier this month.

Maria-Elena, a Honduran woman carrying her young daughter Genesis on her shoulders, told Al Jazeera she was happy so many people donated products they wouldn’t be able to get themselves. She was hoping for deodorant and a blanket.

Somewhere from the crowd, a young child called out, “Toilet paper, toilet paper. I only need toilet paper.”

“A lot of people in Tijuana were pro-migrant,” Castro told Al Jazeera while driving back to the port of entry. “But now they are scared. You can see it happening. There have also been Mexicans who threatened me through social media, telling me to stop helping the migrants.”

A year and a half ago, Castro got into trouble in Tijuana. He was kidnapped and severely beaten by people he doesn’t know. He suspects it is due to the years of work the Border Angels have done. “After that, I became careful and suspicious,” Castro told Al Jazeera.

But like so many of the individuals supporting migrants and asylum seekers, Castro said he must continue to do this kind of work.

“It’s what gives my life meaning. I just have to shut out my emotions and help the people who are in need.”

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