

Black delegation finds human rights abuses on U.S.-Mexico border

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MEDIA CONFERENCE

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WHAT: Media conference for "Braving Borders, Building Bridges: A Journey for Human Rights", a tour the U.S.-Mexico border by an African American delegation led by Rev. Phil Lawson and Rev. Kelvin Sauls of the United Methodist Church. The delegation will give a preliminary report on the violations of the human rights of migrants it investigated. The tour took place April 26-29, 2007 in Tucson, Douglas and Sasabe, Ariz.; Agua Prieta, Magdalena and Altar, Sonora Mexico; and the Pascua Yaqui Nation.

WHEN: Sunday, April 29, 2007 at 12:30 p.m.

WHERE: America Latina United Methodist Church, 118 N. Westmoreland Avenue, Tucson

WHO: The Black Alliance for Just Immigration (BAJI) based in Berkeley, Calif., the Coalicion de Derechos Humanos (the Coalition for Human Rights), a Tucson-based organization and the National Network for Immigrant and Refugee Rights located in Oakland, Calif.

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(Tucson, AZ) A 14-member delegation of African Americans investigated human rights abuses of immigrants, Mexican Americans and indigenous communities on the U.S.-Mexican border in fact-finding tour April 26-29, 2007 in the Tucson border region.

Delegates from six states and 10 cities took part in "The Braving Borders Building Bridges: A Journey for Human Rights" tour of sponsored by the Black Alliance for Just Immigration (BAJI) in partnership with Coalicion de Derechos Humanos and the National Network for Immigrant and Refugee Rights.

The tour began with members observing trials of migrants charged with illegal entry into the United States at federal court building in Tucson. From there delegates heard reports from the Pima County Medical Examiners Office on increased migrants deaths during passage through the desert. The group then traveled to the border towns of Douglas, Ariz, and Agua Prieta and Altar in Sonora, Mexico, to hear testimonies of local people impacted by the increased border crossing and militarization of the border. The tour ended with visits with Pascua Yaqui leaders and a Tohono O'odham activist, representing Native American communities also impacted by the militarization of the border.

"The increasing numbers of those who have died is a direct result of U.S. policy funneling migrants to cross through the desert," said the Rev. Phillip Lawson, interim pastor of Jones United Methodist Church in San Francisco, Calif., and member of the delegation.

Migrants typically crossed into the United States through urban areas till 1994 when the U.S. adopted the "Prevention Through Deterrence" policy sealing off of urban-area borders and forcing migrants to risk life by crossing through desert and mountain areas.

"The image that does not leave my head is of 12 men in orange suits and women in pink, handcuffed and with shackles on their legs," Rev. Lawson said. "They were prosecuted by a D.A., guarded by six deputies and judged by a magistrate, each saying simply, 'Presente.' Their only crime was risking their lives in search of a better life."

The delegation heard first-hand accounts of racial profiling and abuses including:

- Harassment of Mexican-Americans drivers by border patrol agents Douglas;
- Mexican-American homes broken into by border patrol agents searching without warrants for undocumented persons;
- Physical abuse of migrants caught crossing in the desert; and
- Harassment of Native Americans traveling to and from religious ceremonies in Mexico.

"We came to investigate human rights abuses, and we found significant evidence that there are widespread violations caused by the U.S. militarization of the border and immigration control," said Gerald Lenoir, coordinator of the Black Alliance for Just Immigration. "These policies are racist attacks on the most vulnerable members of society: immigrants of color."

Leaders of Coalicion de Derechos Humanos concurred.

"The increase in the militarization of the border and cities like Chicago and Oakland as well as the expansion of private prison construction called for by the STRIVE bill will fuel even more human rights violations," said Isabel Garcia, co-chair of the Coalicion de Derechos Humanos. STRIVE is a border enforcement bill currently pending in Congress opposed by the three tour sponsors. "The criminalization of Latinos and immigrants matches what has been done to African Americans historically. Already 60 percent of the people in federal prisons are Black and Latino."

The National Network for Immigrant and Refugee Rights launched a national community dialog ueto expose the militarization of border and immigration control, explained network spokesperson Arnoldo Garcia.

"The BAJI border tour is a major contribution to the dialogue breaking the silence on the thousands of migrants who have died as a result of these policies," Mr. Garcia said. "By coming to the border the BAJI tour represents an unprecedented coalition to stop the deaths and joins our demands for justice."

BAJI will share its findings in reports in several cities and to the U.N. Special Rapporteur on Migrants.

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