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Trump administration opens 2019 with tear gas attack on migrants at US-Mexico border

US Customs and Border Protection (CBP) agents began the new year early Tuesday with a barrage of tear gas, smoke bombs, pepper spray and plastic pellets fired at a group of migrants, including children, trying to cross from Mexico to apply for asylum in the United States at the border between Tijuana and San Ysidro.

Shortly after, the nearby border crossing at Otay Mesa was closed in a show of force by a phalanx of border agents dressed in full riot gear and armed with shields. Hundreds of immigrants are waiting at the crossing to file their asylum claims.

According to the Associated Press (AP), border agents fired three volleys of gas at the group of approximately 150 people in Mexico as they sought to cross a border fence near the Playas neighborhood in northwest Tijuana.

Women, children and journalists were all hit by the gas, resulting in severe eye pain and choking. Children were reportedly being passed through concertina wire in a desperate effort to reach the US. The CBP reported that it detained 25 people during the assault, while others were able to escape back into Mexico through a hole in the fence.

Photos and video of the assault evoke scenes from the Gaza Strip, where Israeli soldiers routinely fire tear gas and live rounds at Palestinians who approach Israel's border fence.

The CBP released a statement shortly after the incident insisting that tear gas was fired only after migrants threw rocks at heavily armored border agents and that no immigrants waiting at the border were impacted: "No agents witnessed any of the migrants at the

fence line, including children, experiencing effects of the chemical agents, which were targeted at the rock throwers further away.”

However, this was exposed as a lie by an Associated Press (AP) photographer at the scene who reported that rocks were thrown by migrants only after they were provoked by the volley of tear gas. Video from the scene shows one person throwing a tear gas canister back in the direction of the border agents.

The New Year’s Day assault follows a similar attack in late November, in which a joint patrol of US military and border patrol agents fired tear gas and pointed their assault rifles at a group of immigrants seeking to cross from Tijuana into the US. It also comes after the deaths last month of two Guatemalan children, 8-year-old Felipe Alonzo-Gómez and 7-year-old Jakelin Caal, in CBP custody.

Several of the migrants involved in Tuesday’s incident told the AP they had arrived in Tijuana in December as part of a caravan of workers and peasants fleeing unemployment and gang violence in Honduras. The Trump administration has implemented new policies that have slowed the processing of asylum claims at official ports of entry to a crawl, effectively denying the right to asylum for all Central Americans crossing the border.

Trump seized on news of the caravan during the midterm elections in November to stoke anti-immigrant xenophobia among his far-right base and to deploy nearly 6,000 active duty soldiers to the border in violation of the law. Nearly 3,000 soldiers are still actively involved in assisting CBP patrols and erecting barriers along the border, though it is not clear as of this writing if any soldiers participated in Tuesday’s attack.

Central American workers seeking a better life in the US are now faced with the options of living in makeshift slums and tent encampments along the border, returning home to face death at the hands of gangs or abusive partners, or making a daring attempt to cross an increasingly restricted and militarized border. After fleeing conditions created by American invasions, IMF-dictated austerity programs and US-backed coups and dictatorships, these workers and their children confront tear gas, barbed wire and desert detention camps.

Trump has forced a partial shutdown of the federal government, now heading toward its third week, over his demand that Democrats support his request for \$5 billion in funding for a southern border wall, leaving 800,000 federal employees furloughed or forced to work without a paycheck.

While the media has presented this as a fierce showdown between Trump and the Republicans on one side pushing for a wall and the Democrats on the other opposing the

wall, both sides agree on carrying out anti-immigrant measures, including increasing “border security.”

As Trump himself has repeatedly pointed out, the Democrats in Congress have routinely voted for increased militarization of the US-Mexico border, including hundreds of miles of fencing to make border crossings much more difficult. Incoming Speaker of the House Nancy Pelosi and Senate Minority Leader Charles Schumer made clear at a meeting with Trump in the White House last month that they were eager to strike a deal that would dispense with a wall in name only. “We have a disagreement about the wall. Whether it’s effective or not. Not on border security, but on the wall,” Schumer told Trump.

The *Washington Post*, politically allied with the Democratic Party, denounced Trump and the government shutdown in an editorial Tuesday afternoon for “allowing several hundred undocumented immigrants to dodge deportation orders each day the shutdown continues.” This is the outcome of the furloughing of most federal immigration judges and the closure of immigration courts during the shutdown.

The *Post*’s editorial board declared the indefinite deferment of deportation of hundreds of immigrant workers not currently in federal detention, who will have a ruling on their cases postponed for another few years, to be among the “more perverse effects” of the shutdown.