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Empire of Prisons

How the United States is Spreading Mass Incarceration around the World

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JUNE 05, 2014

This article explains how the United States is exporting its model of mass incarceration and social and political control to at least 25 countries. This “prison imperialism” is rooted in the Program for the Improvement of the Colombian Prison System signed in March, 2000 by the US Embassy and Colombia’s Ministry of Justice. That program coincided with a rapid increase in Colombia’s prison population including a rise in political arrests and the militarization of the prison system. Other aspects of this experience are worsened overcrowding, human rights abuses and unhealthy conditions. Nevertheless, the US-Colombia collaboration has become the standard for prison imperialism around the world with Colombian training programs forming a major component. US involvement in international prison systems is carried out by several government agencies including the Bureau of Prisons, the United States Agency for International Development (USAID), the Pentagon, and the US State Department’s Bureaus of International Narcotics and Law Enforcement (INL), Democracy, Human Rights and Law Enforcement (DRL) and Consular Affairs, as well as state penal systems. This article provides close-ups of prison imperialism in Colombia, Mexico and Honduras and ends with a discussion of international resistance to the US model by Prisoners of Empire and their allies. The author especially wishes to thank the Colombian human rights group, Lazos de Dignidad (Links of Dignity) for their invaluable help in researching and developing the ideas presented herein, and for their tireless

advocacy for Colombia's political prisoners. This article is a result of an ongoing joint effort between Lazos and the Alliance for Global Justice (AfGJ) in exposing and resisting the Empire of Prisons, and in standing up for its antidote: peace with justice and real, participatory democracy.)

Prison Imperialism: an Overview

The United States, which leads the world in imprisonment rates, is exporting its model of mass incarceration to developing countries around the world. This “prison imperialism” is one of the foundational components to the infrastructure of Empire. Along with the militarization of police forces and borders, mass incarceration enables neoliberal economies to manage by force and intimidation the inevitable consequences of global capitalism: widespread social disruption and rising political dissent. (Neoliberalism is a system including free trade agreements, austerity programs and other measures that assure profitability is treasured above any other social value, and in the developing countries of the US Empire, it is backed up by the US military and its allies.)

Since 2000, there has been an explosion in US efforts to augment and restructure international penitentiary systems, providing training for prison personnel and/or building new jails in at least 25 different countries. The first of these efforts was the Program for the Improvement of the Colombian Prison System, signed by the US Embassy and the Colombian Department of Justice on March 31, 2000. The program was funded as part of the \$9 billion the US has invested since 1999 in Plan Colombia mostly to benefit the military and law enforcement.

By 2002 in Afghanistan, and 2003 and 2004 in Iraq, the US was building and managing prisons as part of the invasion and occupation of those countries. These programs were connected from the start with the so-called “Global War on Terrorism” as well as the “Drug War”, through which many prison efforts have been funded. Closely related was the establishment of the Guantanamo Bay Detention Camp in January 2002. Many have heard the horror stories of abuses in Abu Ghraib, Guantanamo and the Bagram military detention camps. What most are unaware of is that US involvement in foreign jails has become a worldwide affair and is not just associated with direct military occupations.

The Foundation is Laid in Colombia

Virtually unreported in the US media were the appalling conditions that resulted from the initial US-Colombia collaboration that laid the foundation for future international programs. Funding began with an initial grant from the US of \$4.5 million. The first prison built was the penitentiary in Valledupar, commonly known as Tramacúa, completed in November, 2000. Conditions at Tramacúa are so bad that prisoners have access to clean water for only an average 10 minutes a day, sanitary facilities rarely work, torture is common, neglect of health care is systemic and UN and Colombian authorities and international observers have on three different occasions documented the presence of fecal matter in prison food.

Alleviation of overcrowding and improvement of prison conditions were cited as reasons for the Colombian restructuring program. However, the accord itself more explicitly links the project to

the War on Drugs. The document states that, “Within the objective of the program of narcotics control, the project...seeks to consolidate strategies aimed at controlling illicit actions committed from the interior of the prisons by persons that belong to groups on the margin of the law and that are related to the [narcotics] traffic and crimes against humanity.”

The document goes on to declare that, “The financial support of the United States government to the Ministry of Justice and Law – INPEC [Colombian Bureau of Prisons], will be supplied under this Appendix of the Supplement to Plan Colombia and with annual allocations from the Department of State/ Bureau of International Narcotics and Law Enforcement (INL)....”

The reality is that this program has little to do with narco-trafficking or “crimes against humanity”. This is shown by the double standard applied in Colombian prisons. Right-wing paramilitaries and narco-trafficking gangs are often one and the same, and paramilitary organizations and the military have been responsible for 70 to 80% of political violence and atrocities during the more than 50 years of the Colombian Civil War. Yet paramilitaries, big narco-traffickers and their associates regularly enjoy privileges and favors far beyond what is available to common prisoners. Of course, most rarely if ever see the inside of a jail. Murderers of unionists and human rights defenders enjoy a 98% impunity rate for their crimes and many who are convicted are awarded with house arrest—rarely an option for Colombia’s political prisoners.

A 2008 article by the Colombian weekly La Semana exposed how at the Itagüí maximum security prison, paramilitary prisoners were using cell phones to arrange murders and other violent operations. In a common area near paramilitary leaders’ cells, security cameras were not functioning, and a search found a pistol, grenade and money hidden inside books. La Semana questioned prison Director Yolanda Rodriguez about this, to which she responded that whenever she tried to do anything about paramilitary privileges, she found her “hands tied”. She said that on a daily basis she received communications from high government officials, including the Regional and General Directors of INPEC and the Minister of Justice, ordering rule changes in favor of paramilitary prisoners.

The experience is very different for the general populace and especially for the political prisoners. Indeed, Colombian prisons have been converted into theaters of war. While common prisoners already must deal with overcrowding, neglect and abuse, these are multiplied greatly for political prisoners and prisoners of war for whom direct attacks and torture are common occurrences. Prison professionals are being replaced with current and ex-members of the Colombian Armed Forces, including several instances of School of the Americas graduates put in charge of penitentiaries.

Part of the legacy of US involvement has been the formation of GRI (Immediate Reaction Groups) and CORES (Operative Commandos with Special Reference to Security) in the prisons. These SWAT-style special operations units have on multiple occasions launched assaults on political prisoners and prisoners of war, especially those participating in hunger strikes and other forms of nonviolent protest. Raquel Mogollón visited Tramacúa prison representing the Alliance for Global Justice (AfGJ) shortly after an attack by the GRI and CORES against striking prisoners in June, 2011. Many of the inmates had suspended themselves

in protest from makeshift hammocks and harnesses attached to railings up to 5 floors high. In an AfGJ article about Mogollon's visit, she reports that:

“The GRI took these little nasty mats they had, about two inches thick, and put them on the floors. When they would start to cut down prisoners from their harnesses and hammocks, they would hope they hit the mats. Some did, some didn't. One prisoner after another reported they counted as many as 50 to 60 times that projectiles were fired.

Prisoner Wilson Rodriguez said that he had been thrown from the fourth floor. He was one of five prisoners carried unconscious from the prison and hospitalized. He was later locked away and given access to water only five minutes each day. Osvaldo Guzman Toro, had fallen three floors. Rodriguez added, “They put out these little mattresses, pretending to use them for safety, but some of the people were being cut down from the fifth floor.”

Mogollón described the GRI, the guards who undertook the attacks, saying that they ‘...look like SWAT teams, with shields, helmets and all. Several of the prisoners said they pleaded with the GRI not to attack, saying that the GRI shouldn't be there, that the strike was peaceful. But the GRI responded that they were following orders, that they couldn't back down. Specifically, the inmates said the GRI told them that they had been “ordered by the Minister and the General....”

Mogollón reported that, ‘At least three inmates told me that guards stripped them naked and shot tear gas cans at their genitals. They said that during the attacks the guards were using “pimienta, pata y palos”, or, “peppers, kicks and batons”. Prisoners reported that some of the canisters they were shooting were the size of their forearms—about a foot long.’”

What have been the general results of the US-Colombia prison improvement program? With regards to overcrowding, the problem has not been alleviated but has gotten worse. According to the Office of the People's Defender, the rate of overcrowding is 58%, the worst rate ever reported and some jails are overcrowded by as much as 400%. In 1998, two years before the program began, the Colombian prison population, according to INPEC figures, was 51,633. By 2007, the population had risen to 63,603. By December 2013, the number of prisoners had reached 120,032.

Torture has become widespread. INPEC's office for internal disciplinary control documented 79 cases of physical or verbal abuse against prisoners during the first six months of 2008. These included beatings, broken bones, denial of medical care, death threats, sexual harassment and hog-tying prisoners with both hands and feet handcuffed. In a 2008 survey of 230 prisoners, 54% of respondents answered they had been tortured in jail—46% did not answer the question at all, possibly for fear of reprisals. Psychological torture was reported by 86% of those who did answer, including isolation, threats to relatives and simulated executions.

Another feature of the Colombian model has been massive relocation of prisoners far from family and friends. For poor families, these transfers make it virtually impossible to maintain contact with loved ones. When family members are able to visit, they are frequently subjected to humiliating treatment and sudden policy changes that often result in denial of the visitor's entry into penal institutions.

The rate of increase of political prisoners has gone up considerably as well. In a meeting with Colombia's MOVICE (the Movement of Victims of State Crimes) in 2009, the Alliance for Global Justice (AfGJ) was told that between 1992 and 2002, there were some 2,000 provably arbitrary political arrests later thrown out of courts. Between 2002 and 2006, there were 8,000 such arrests. Detainees were usually charged with "rebellion" based on falsified evidence and the testimony of paid informers. Charges were usually dropped after "suspects" had served an average two to three years in jail. Thousands of prisoners of conscience and those jailed as a result of frame-ups for nonviolent political activities do not have their cases dismissed and are condemned to spend long years in prison. Prisoners of war, who make up a minority of the political prisoners, are treated the worst of all. The social and political context to their imprisonment has been largely unrecognized or denied, although the current peace process will likely address their situation as part of the negotiations, provided it is not derailed by Colombia's extreme right wing.

Exact statistics are not currently available regarding rates of political arrests today. However, based on the experience of the AfGJ and what we are hearing from our partners and contacts in Colombia, all indications are that the rate has not diminished but risen, especially since the installation of the Marcha Patriótica (Patriotic March) popular movement for a just peace. Marcha Patriótica leaders and members have been specifically targeted for repression. The state is especially targeting leaders of farmers strikes and union officers for arrest.

Honduras

Colombia has provided the pattern for US involvement in international prison systems, including the institutionalization of abuses that are now being exported globally. Especially, the Colombian model has been applied to Mexico and Central America where the US (and Colombia) have been involved in prison programs since 2009. Once again, these have been funded and overseen as part of the Drug War via the Central America Regional Security Initiative (CARSI). Of great concern has been the support the US has given to Honduras following the 2009 coup. Since that time, reports of human rights abuses have skyrocketed. In 2012, Assistant Secretary for International Narcotics and Law Enforcement Affairs William Brownfield visited Central American countries offering funds from a \$200 million package earmarked to fight drug trafficking by reinforcing police departments, borders, courts and prisons.

In his March, 2012 visit to Honduras, Brownfield designated an additional \$1.75 million for Honduras to spend on prison, police and border and port security. In his announcement, Brownfield heaped praise on the Honduran coup government and Armed Forces. A State Department spokesman said of the visit that ""By partnering with Honduran law enforcement agencies, the United States aims to boost anti-drug trafficking efforts, promote citizen safety, and help young people find alternatives to joining gangs." By May, 2012 the US government had authorized another \$50 million for security aid to Honduras.

The 2014 Human Rights Watch report on Honduras, maintains,

“Honduras suffers from rampant crime and impunity for human rights abuses. The murder rate, which has risen consistently over the last decade, was the highest in the world in 2013. Perpetrators of killings and other violent crimes are rarely brought to justice. The institutions responsible for providing public security continue to prove largely ineffective and remain marred by corruption and abuse, while efforts to reform them have made little progress.

Journalists, peasant activists, and LGBTI individuals are particularly vulnerable to attacks, yet the government routinely fails to prosecute those responsible and provide protection for those at risk....

Impunity for serious police abuses is a chronic problem. Police killed 149 civilians from January 2011 to November 2012, including 18 individuals under age 19, according to a report by Honduras’s National Autonomous University. Then-Commissioner of the Preventive Police Alex Villanueva affirmed the report’s findings and said there were likely many more killings by police that were never reported....”

Specifically in regards to prisons, a February 13, 2014 report by Marcos Rodriguez of the HRN radio network informs us that,

“The investigations of HRN reveal that overcrowding in the country’s jails has soared by 300%....Presently apprehensions by the police increased 35% according to official statistics....It is calculated that by the end of 2014, the penitentiary population in Honduras could exceed 19,000 inmates....In these instances the 24 jails of the country are occupied by almost 13,000 inmates, however the system only has capacity for 8,500 prisoners, signifying a [rate of] overcrowding of approximately 49%.”

Mexico

In Mexico, the US is funding the construction of up to 16 new federal prisons and is advising an overall prison “reform” based on the US and Colombian models. The Federal Center for Social Readaptation (CEFERESO) #11 in Hermosillo, Sonora is the first Mexican prison built with private investment and will be managed by a for-profit company for the next 20 years. True to form, the opening of Ceferso #11 was occasioned with the massive transfer of 1,849 prisoners from all over Mexico. Five months after the transfer, prisoners were still being denied access to family and legal defense teams.

Mexico’s National Commission for Human Rights (CNDH) visited CEFERESO #11 in October, 2013 a year after its installation to investigate conditions in Mexico’s for-profit prison and reported that the institution had “...even graver deficiencies than those found in other jails of the Republic of Mexico without private capital.” The abuses noted by the CNDH included arbitrary and sudden transfers, being held for long periods incommunicado, being kept in cells for excessively long periods, no classification system for prisoners, insufficient food, poor quality of health services, lack of sports, recreation and cultural activities, lack of work and job training, and insufficient personnel. In only 4 months, the CNDH received 47 complaints regarding sudden transfers to CEFERESO #11 without warning or notice either to families or legal reps.

And while exact figures are not readily available, reports from a number of sectors in Mexico indicate a significant increase in politically motivated arrests since US involvement, including notable political detentions of labor and indigenous leaders.

Once more, the Drug War is the main reason cited for US involvement in the Mexican prison system. But in a country that has been itself described as a “Narco-state” with a 98% impunity rate for violent crime, one must question the veracity of this justification just as we must in Colombia, Honduras and elsewhere. According to a report by the Universal Periodic Review (EPU by its Spanish initials) of the United Nations Human Rights Council in coalition with three Mexican human rights organizations, 60% of those incarcerated in Mexico are there for minor crimes and only 12% for grave crimes such as murder, rape and violent robbery. Again, we must state the obvious: US funded and restructured prisons are about social and political control, not about drug trafficking. Federal prison construction in Mexico is the southern twin to immigrant detention centers on the US side of the border. Privately run immigrant detention centers make profits off of the misery of those uprooted by the neoliberal policies imposed by the US government and the US and Mexican oligarchy, and off of the displacement of rural communities, the vacuum of which has been filled by the proliferation of extremely violent narco-gangs.

Colombia as Partner in Prison Imperialism

In Mexico, Central America and elsewhere, the US has drafted Colombia as a major partner in prison imperialism. Both in collaboration with the US and independently, Colombia operates its own international training programs. Between 2009 and 2013, Colombia had given training to 21,949 international students, including military, police, court and prison officials. Half of those trained are from Mexico. Honduras, Guatemala and Panama are the other leading recipients of this training.

An earlier April 14, 2012 US Department of State Fact Sheet on the Colombia Strategic Development Initiative (CSDI) reported that Colombia had trained over 11,000 police officers in 20 Latin American and African countries, as well as in Afghanistan. It reported that “Colombia has trained more than 6,000 Mexican federal and state law enforcement personnel, over 500 prospectors and judicial personnel and 24 helicopter pilots. Prison guards and officials are included among the “law enforcement personnel”.

General John Kelly who oversees the US Southern Command, told a House hearing on April 29, 2014 that

“The beauty of having a Colombia – they’re such good partners, particularly in the military realm, they’re such good partners with us. When we ask them to go somewhere else and train the Mexicans, the Hondurans, the Guatemalans, the Panamanians, they will do it almost without asking. And they’ll do it on their own. They’re so appreciative of what we did for them. And what we did for them was, really, to encourage them for 20 years and they’ve done such a magnificent job.

But that's why it's important for them to go, because I'm—at least on the military side—restricted from working with some of these countries because of limitations that are, that are really based on past sins. And I'll let it go at that.”

Prison Imperialism Around the World

According to a Report on International Prison Conditions released by the Department of State's Bureau of Democracy, Human Rights and Law Enforcement (DRL), the US has been involved in prison programs in at least 25 countries since 2000. State Department agencies participating in international prison programs besides the DRL include the Bureaus of International Narcotics and Law Enforcement (INL) and Consular Affairs. The report also refers to participation of the United States Agency for International Development (USAID), the US Bureau of Prisons and state prison systems.

In 2003, the INL along with the Department of Justice and International Criminal Investigative Training Assistance Program (ICITAP) led efforts by the US government to reestablish Iraq's national security system. The INL is now funding 23 programs overseas in partnership with federal and state agencies. The report also tells us that “In South Sudan, for example, INL has obligated \$6.5 million since 2010 in support of the country's first prison training center for corrections officers, the Lologo training academy.” Similarly, since 2010, the DRL has spent \$5 million in programs around the globe, including in Iraq, Morocco and South Korea.

What this document downplays is perhaps more telling than anything. In the whole report, Colombia only bears the following mention: “In Haiti, Colombia, El Salvador, and Guatemala, USAID Missions have worked to address prison overcrowding through the reform of penal codes and by improving processes such as alternative dispute resolution to reduce the amount of time individuals spend in pre-trial detention.” An appendix states that “...prison and detention facility conditions in the following 25 countries whose governments receive United States assistance raise serious human rights or humanitarian concerns....” Nowhere on that list is Colombia.

Likewise, the report downplays the role of the US Bureau of Prisons, letting us know that “The Federal Bureau of Prisons...has also provided prison reform assistance to 17 countries. This assistance is primarily comprised of visits by foreign delegations to BOP institutions and briefings by BOP staff on issues ranging from inmate and staff management to prisoners' rights and correctional services.” What they don't let us hear is anything about the major construction projects carried out with BOP supervision in Colombia and Mexico, nor the extent of BOP advice, direction and accreditation in restructuring those countries' prison systems.

Also unmentioned are US military detention centers. It is with military oversight that the transitions of these centers to civilian institutions is undertaken. We have already seen the example of the INL and other agencies that in the midst of the invasion and occupation of Iraq were tasked with setting up a new prison system. US prison imperialism is one of many threads that weave together the US government's civilian and military branches.

In Conclusion – and in Resistance

For us in the United States it is important that we remember that US international prison programs are reflections and extensions of our own internal situation. The US has the highest overall rate of incarceration in the world. This rate has almost quadrupled since 1980 despite falling crime rates. In 1980 the rate was 221 per 100,000 US residents. Today the rate is 716 prisoners per 100,000. The number of US federal prisoners has risen by 790% since 1980. Thus we can see that this expansion overseas parallels what is happening at home. To further put this matter in perspective, the US has 700,000 more prisoners than China, even though China has four times our population.

The US prison system has over 80,000 persons in solitary confinement. In 2012 the Justice Department estimated that that year alone there had been 216,000 victims of prison rape. We have more political prisoners than many know of or care to admit, and our basic rights to protest and dissent are being undermined and even criminalized on an almost daily basis. Overcrowding, denial of health services, physical abuse and torture, lack of safety, lack of job training and rehabilitation services, forced relocation far from home communities and family and denial of access to visitors and legal counsel for long periods of time are all features of prison imperialism that are rooted in the policies and practices of the US penal system. It almost goes without saying that the beginning of resistance to prison imperialism must therefore begin at home.

But it must not stop there. We must link our struggles with international struggles. We have seen how the experiment that began in 2000 in Colombia has spread to Afghanistan, Iraq, Mexico, Honduras, South Sudan and across the planet. By looking specifically at the examples of Colombia, Mexico and Honduras, we start to see the kinds of results and concerns we must look for as we examine prison imperialism in other countries.

The US government is clearly spreading an Empire of Prisons around the world. And just as clearly, around the world Prisoners of Empire are resisting abuses. On July 25, 2013, the AfGJ reported on a prison hunger strike in Colombia that, without planning, was happening at the same time similar hunger strikes were happening in California and elsewhere, noting that,

“Prisoners in the Doña Juana Penitentiary in Colombia are halfway through the third week of a hunger strike to demand better conditions. Located in La Dorada, Caldas, the prison is one of the jails built with US funding and advice as part of the ‘New Penitentiary Culture’. Typical of such prisons are overcrowding, lack of medical treatment, a concentration of political prisoners, and beatings and other forms of torture by prison guards...It is no coincidence that prisoners at Doña Juana and prisoners in the California prison system began hunger strikes on the same day. Strikes are or have been also underway in Guantanamo and Afghanistan. From California to Colombia, all are protesting US ‘Prison Imperialism’ that jails the population at high rates and uses inhumane practices such as solitary confinement, torture and denial of services to dehumanize the incarcerated.”

Shortly after the above statement was released, AfGJ also learned of hunger strikes happening in immigration detention centers in Arizona.

The international awareness and linking together of each others' struggles is something that is just starting to happen and grow. We are seeing these struggles come together spontaneously and by accident. These movements resist not only the US model of mass incarceration: they resist the Empire itself. If these movements can become more cognizant of each other and interconnected through shared international solidarity, it may be more than just the prisons that are liberated.