Chapter 2

Déjà Vu
What Happened to Previous Censored Stories?

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The only way to make sense out of change is to plunge into it, move with it, and join the dance.
—Alan Watts

The Déjà Vu chapter has become a mainstay in Censored annual volumes. Here, censored and underreported stories featured in the previous year’s Top 25 are reexamined for coverage. What has happened since these stories were first reported and highlighted by Project Censored? Did the corporate media join the dance?

Typically, stories featured in Censored’s Top 25 either never end up getting corporate media coverage or, if they do, there is usually an eighteen- to twenty-four-month lag time. Further, that coverage is oft accompanied by a certain amount of spin associated with that new coverage.

Were it not for the work of intrepid independent journalists, Project Censored would have nothing to report. Fortunately, there have been thousands of independent news stories submitted to us by students, faculty, and community members over the past thirty-nine years. They have provided readers with an opportunity to learn about the news
that didn’t make the news. These under covered stories are sourced transparently and vetted by a panel of media scholars and professors from across the US that work with Project Censored. These stories often challenge the official, establishment narratives found in corporate media, which partially explains their absence from so-called mainstream discourse. Project Censored continues to highlight the work of independent journalists in hopes that the public will become more aware of alternatives to the corporate news and not only become more media literate, but more aware about key issues taking place around the world. This year’s “Déjà Vu” stories include the corporate media propaganda and hypocrisy surrounding the Ukraine, restorative justice programs that are turning around violent schools, preserving and protecting net neutrality, the depletion of drinking water for residents of Gaza, and a drop in US prisoners serving life sentences.

Like with many of the previous Top 25 Censored stories, we find that they languish in obscurity, and the ones regarding Gaza and the Ukraine are such examples. But, in other instances, there is more expansive coverage. There was also “good news” to report concerning the restorative justice programs used in troubled schools, protections for net neutrality, as well as a softening in mandatory sentencing for nonviolent crimes to help reduce those serving life terms in prison.

In the capsule summaries and highlights that follow, Project Censored provides updates on some of the most important developments concerning these stories over the past year.

**Censored 2015 #9**

**US Media Hypocrisy in Covering Ukraine Crisis**
(with research assistance by political analyst Eric Draitser of StopImperialism.org)

**SUMMARY:** Russia’s annexation of Crimea has caused US corporate media and government officials to call for a stern US response. Secretary of State John Kerry declaimed the Russian intervention as “a nineteenth-century act in the twenty-first century.” What Russia’s US critics seem to forget, Robert Parry reported, is the United States’ own history of overthrowing democratic governments, including the illegal invasion of Iraq, which Kerry supported.
Corporate media also failed to acknowledge that Vladimir Putin ordered Russian troops to secure Crimea and the Russian Black Sea fleet stationed there after a coup led at least partly by neo-Nazis—conditions arguably less criminal than the US invasion of Iraq, which the US legitimized with false claims. “If Putin is violating international law by sending Russian troops into the Crimea after a violent coup spearheaded by neo-Nazi militias ousted Ukraine’s democratically elected president,” wrote Robert Parry, “then why hasn’t the US government turned over George W. Bush, Dick Cheney and indeed John Kerry to the International Criminal Court for their far more criminal invasion of Iraq?”

At the very same time that Russia was moving to secure its navy, based for more than two centuries in the Crimean port of Sevastopol, the US and its NATO allies were moving significant naval assets into the Black Sea, quite literally to the borders of Russian territorial waters. As political analyst and commentator Eric Draitser explained, “It is interesting to note that Russia’s moves in Crimea in 2014 came within a matter of days of the entrance into the Black Sea of . . . US naval assets. Anyone who doubts that Moscow’s decision to support Crimea’s vote for reunification with the Russian Federation was motivated by something other than military and strategic pragmatism would do well to examine this timeline of events.”

The resurgence of Cold War rhetoric correlates in part to increased geopolitical oil interests. Nafeez Ahmed reported that Ukraine finds itself between the two superpowers and their ongoing struggle for influence in the Eurasian oil market. Russia’s Gazprom Company already controls roughly one-fifth of the world’s oil supply and provides about one third of Europe’s gas. The Obama administration has since spent over five billion dollars to “ensure a secure and prosperous and democratic Ukraine.” For those who are pondering whether we face the prospect of a New Cold War,” Ahmed concluded, “a better question might be—did the Cold War ever really end?”

UPDATE: In the lead up to, and aftermath of, Russia’s annexation of Crimea in March of 2014, the United States corporate media negatively covered Russian President Putin for acting, as he saw it, to protect Russia’s national interests and those of the Russian-speaking
population of Eastern Ukraine. The corporate media in the US either distorted or completely failed to report that Ukraine’s corrupt, but democratically elected, president Viktor Yanukovich, was ousted unconstitutionally with the help of neo-Nazis during a violent coup. The Wall Street Journal published an article called “Putin the Improviser,” stating “the Ukraine showdown is even scarier and more dangerous than you think,” framing the situation as evil dictator Putin and the “just” West trying to liberate oppressed Ukraine—a familiar and convenient narrative used in so many past US aggressions. The reality is far more complicated than America = good, Russia = bad, but one has to dig far outside the corporate media to notice.

Among the main events catalyzing a volley of propaganda between the US and Russia was the downing of Malaysian passenger airliner MH-17 on July 17, 2014, killing all 298 aboard. The US immediately blamed Russia, who denied involvement. After months of trading barbs, Robert Parry writes that according to detailed German intelligence reports, it appears at the very least the Russians did not attack, and it may be that a Ukrainian jetfighter was involved, possibly to create a false flag event, even possibly designed to shoot down Putin who was supposed to be flying in a similar plane and trajectory as MH-17, or that it was Ukrainian rebels. However, to date, there is no definitive accounting outside that the Germans seemed to have cleared Russia on the matter, a point further underscored by relative silence from Washington since the intel report was made public.

The blame game is a big part of the propaganda war surrounding Ukraine. Secretary of State John Kerry criticized Russia, pointing out the illegality of any country acquiring “part or all of another state’s territory through coercion or force.” Yet Kerry stated it is “unrealistic” for Israel to relinquish territories they have acquired in the same way. Furthermore, spokesperson for US Department of State Jen Psaki went so far as to remark, “As a matter of longstanding policy, the United States does not support political transitions by unconstitutional means. Political transitions must be democratic, constitutional, peaceful and legal.” Associated Press correspondent Matt Lee, in a rare show of courage from a major media outlet, asked Psaki, “How longstanding is that?”

Keep in mind Psaki stated this in response to questions from the
press regarding a failed coup attempt in Venezuela that took place a day earlier, and on the heels of Kerry’s remarks about Russia’s use of coercion or force the previous summer. To believe Psaki, one must also overlook US backing of the Ukrainian coup itself (which was illegal). Lee directly called out Psaki in the exchange, she replied that any claim about the US supporting a coup in Venezuela, or elsewhere for that matter, was “ludicrous.” Lee was right to call Psaki on such a bogus claim, whether Afghanistan or Iraq, Honduras or the Ukraine, just in the past decade, the US has overthrown and occupied several foreign countries and tried to in other places. Indeed, irony is not dead and the hypocrisy in official statements as well as US media coverage regarding Ukraine continued into 2015.

According to John Chipman, director-general of the International Institute for Strategic Studies, “a growing body of opinion in the US Congress considers that the US has a moral obligation and a strategic duty to provide Ukraine with increased means to defend itself.” However, the conflict is not as black and white as the corporate news would like people to think, and the United States has a stake in any conflict between Ukraine and Russia. The crisis is causing shifts in power in the region and these changes are reshaping the international landscape.

On energy politics in the region, an article in the *Hill* reported leaked policy papers which noted that Ukraine gets much of its coal from within its own borders, yet Russia has been the highest recipient of Ukraine’s coal export in recent months. Russia and US companies have other competing energy interests in the region as well, considering the large deposit of natural gas. It ought be noted that in May 2014, shortly after the coup, US vice president Joe Biden’s son Hunter Biden was hired on to the board of directors of the largest natural gas company in Ukraine, Burisma Holdings. Though most US media outlets that covered the story said it was not illegal nor did it present any conflict of interests, it raised eyebrows in the international community. While Russia and Putin are highly criticized and held suspect by the US for their interests in Ukraine, the US seems to apply a different standard to itself.

Since last year, the United States has provided what Obama deemed “nonlethal” aid to Ukraine in the form of over three billion
dollars in Humvees, drones, and equipment. Fox News reports that the US has sent 600 paratroopers to the National Guard in Ukraine to teach the troops how to “defend” themselves from Russian rockets. The US has also deployed fighter jets in Europe in order to “protect” European NATO members from Russian attacks. What should stand out is that many neo-Nazis are members of the National Guard and are receiving US training and support. One such group is Azov Battalion. Their training was to begin on April 20, 2015, the birthday of Adolf Hitler.

Despite such brazen actions by the US, on May 6, 2015, US Ambassador to Ukraine Geoffrey Pyatt, interviewed on Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty, called on Russia to “change its approach” in eastern Ukraine in order to achieve peace. Decrying what he called “a manufactured war” built upon supplies of weapons from Russia to Russian separatists and a “very effective” information warfare campaign, Pyatt made clear that the US and its allies are doing everything possible to achieve peace. Pyatt further stated that the United States has knowledge of Russian training programs for fighters and the movement of Russian surface-to-air missile systems “very close to the contact line inside the Ukrainian territory.” However, Pyatt omitted the fact that US military advisors were on the ground in Ukraine providing training and support to both regular Ukrainian military and neo-Nazi paramilitary organizations, such as the aforementioned Azov Battalion. The Ukraine claims that some 8,000 people have died in the conflict that began April of 2014, while the United Nations says the number is 6,400.

On top of the human costs, there are also economic costs. The Ukrainian currency is losing value, which is one reason the US pumps in money, to help create anti-Russian sentiment. The World Bank and the International Monetary Fund issued a loan to Ukraine to the tune of seventeen billion dollars, yet written into the loan was a catch: Ukraine had to agree to grow and sell genetically modified organisms (GMOs). US mega-corporation and GMO producer Monsanto immediately began doing business in the country which boasts some of the world’s most fertile and financially lucrative agricultural land—the famed “Black Earth” belt of Ukraine has been prized by European and global powers for centuries.
The Ukrainian economy continues to teeter on the verge of collapse. Having lost roughly 70 percent of its value since 2014, the currency is in free fall. According to Johns Hopkins professor and researcher at the Cato Institute, Steve Hanke, “the official inflation rate has consistently and massively understated Ukraine’s brutal inflation. At present, Ukraine’s implied annual inflation rate is 272 percent.” In addition, Ukraine’s GDP decreased by 17.6 percent in the first quarter of 2015. These economic woes have led to a financial crisis in which workers remain unpaid, pensioners without income, and a social emergency becoming ever more impossible to ignore or suppress.

Yet, in the midst of a fiscal and humanitarian crisis in Ukraine, the US-backed regime in Kiev continues to funnel its financial aid into its ongoing war against the self-proclaimed Donetsk and Lugansk People’s Republics. Essentially, it is US and European taxpayers now financing Kiev’s war against the East while the people of Ukraine proper pay a heavy price. And the reporting on what’s happening in Ukraine remains as murky and propaganda laden as when the coup took place in 2014. Many of the independent and some foreign press try to show how complicated matters have become, with varying perspectives, while most all corporate sources take the US State Department hard line against Russia. It harkens to another time when propaganda ran high between the US and Russia during the latter half of the twentieth century. Nafeez Ahmed’s question from last year’s #9 Censored Story still lingers—did the Cold War ever really end?

Sources:


Censored 2015 #24

Restorative Justice Turns Violent Schools Around

SUMMARY: In 2007, Restorative Justice for Oakland Youth (RJOY) spearheaded an initiative to reduce suspensions, expulsions, and violence in the Oakland Unified School District in California, the public school district in one of the most violent cities in the nation. In 2012, American Paradigm Schools (APS) took over Philadelphia’s John Paul Jones Middle School and collaborated with Alternatives to
Violence Project (AVP). Like RJOY in Oakland, the two organizations radically changed what was known as “Jones Jail” by implementing a non-coercive, nonviolent conflict resolution program in order to emphasize student empowerment, relationship building, and anger management skills. Under these programs, schools removed metal detectors and replaced their security guards with veterans trained in mediation and conflict resolution.

This approach, used at John Paul Jones Middle School and throughout public schools in Oakland is called restorative justice. Restorative justice originally developed for use in prison settings, but has since been adapted to violent schools thanks to the work of organizations like APS and RJOY. Under the restorative justice model, engagement coaches “help mediate disputes rather than dole out punishment.” As cofounder and executive director of RJOY Fania Davis reported for YES! Magazine, everyone has a chance for their voice to be heard, conflicts are resolved, and students are engaged in a process that promotes “dialogue, accountability, a deeper sense of community, and healing” instead of resorting to violence.

Restorative justice programs seem to be working. As reported in Censored 2015, the number of serious incidents in John Paul Jones Middle School fell by 90 percent in its first year and a University of California, Berkeley, study found that RJOY’s middle school program reduced suspensions by 87 percent and violent incidents by 77 percent.

UPDATE: There has been success in schools that have implemented restorative justice. American Paradigm Schools in Philadelphia has continued to see improvement in student achievement and a reduction in behavior issues over the past year. In Oakland, California, restorative justice has been so successful that over thirty schools in the area now practice restorative justice and are seeing similar results. The continued success of these schools has not gone unnoticed. Numerous other schools across the country are applying for charter licenses and implementing restorative justice practices into their curriculum, to the immense benefit of students.

Since American Paradigm Schools (APS) took over John Paul Jones Middle School, it has been renamed as Memphis Street Academy Charter School. As reported by Kevin McCorry writing for News-
works.org, Memphis Street Academy gained twenty points on its SPP rating, earning a 52.9 compared to its district’s average of 56.8. SPP, or School Performance Profile, is a school evaluation system based largely on student test scores but considers other factors, such as student involvement and graduation rates. McCorry notes that this jump in score is mostly due to an increase in enrollment, however the drastic improvement is still significant.

In November 2014, APS announced that they would be submitting applications to open two new charter schools in the northeastern part of Philadelphia. If their applications are approved, APS will run a total of five charter schools in Philadelphia, although it is unclear at the time of writing this whether APS will implement a restorative justice program in these new schools as well.

Restorative Justice for Oakland Youth (RJOY) has expanded and now has a presence in almost thirty schools in Oakland, California. Focusing on Edna Brewer Middle School in Oakland, a December 2014 National Public Radio report explained what restorative justice aimed to do in Oakland schools. “The hope of restorative justice is that dialogue builds trust and community and reduces the need for suspensions and expulsions.” As Fania Davis, cofounder and executive director of RJOY, reported in the *San Jose Mercury News* that same month, “suspensions of African-American students for defiance decreased by 40 percent [and] harm was repaired in 70 percent of conflict circles,” for the 2011–14 academic years.

The *Mercury News* continued reporting in January 2015 by stating, “In schools that have the programs, suspensions dropped by more than half over three years starting in 2011, from 34 percent to 14 percent, according to a new school district report. Graduation rates increased 60 percent at high schools with the programs, compared to 7 percent at schools without them, and chronic absenteeism dropped 24 percent at middle schools with the programs, compared to a 62 percent increase at those middle schools that didn’t have them.”

Due to success during test trials in Oakland, restorative justice has built a positive reputation and gained attention nationwide. What started as an experimental study has now taken root in public and charter schools in cities such as New York City, Los Angeles, Denver, Boston, and Cambridge.
Restorative justice is not limited to RJOY. The International Institute for Restorative Practices Graduate School (IIRP) is a private, accredited graduate school in Bethlehem, Pennsylvania, dedicated to research to develop the growing field of restorative practices. The IIRP helps individual schools develop a customized plan based on their own needs and goals. Everyone on the school staff has a say and a role in implementation, and there are professional development instructors assigned to ensure program sustainability.1

Restorative justice holds promise as a solution to the negative impacts of the high incarceration rate in the US. It is well known that “the United States has the highest rate of incarceration in the world, but several factors indicate that this response is ineffective—particularly with respect to juveniles.” There is a strong correlation between zero-tolerance policies in our school systems and later increased prison recidivism. Studies have found the existence and prevalence of the school-to-prison pipeline (particularly for African-American boys), and the negative impact of zero-tolerance policies in schools that target minority students.

“In recent decades suspensions increased from 1.7 million in 1974 to more than 3.3 million in 2006.” The more a student is excluded by being suspended or expelled, the higher the possibility that they will struggle in academics and fail to graduate as these policies give no access to alternative educational opportunities. “The CSG report found that 23 percent of students who experienced exclusionary disciplinary actions in school had subsequent contact with the juvenile justice system.”2 Implementing programs like APS and RJOY in low-income, high-crime communities where students are not expected to succeed based on their ethnic, economic, and educational background will make a difference.

Sources:


Censored 2015 #4
Corporate Internet Providers Threaten Net Neutrality

SUMMARY: In May of 2014, a 3–2 vote by the FCC opened a four-month window for formal public comments on the severity of proposed Internet rules. The decision galvanized corporate media attention on the issue of net neutrality. By contrast, for months leading up to this development, independent journalists, including Paul Ausick, Cole Stangler, and Jennifer Yeh, had been informing the public about the anticipated showdown over net neutrality and the stakes in that battle.

This was the eventual result of a federal appeals court of Washington DC, which began a crucial case brought by Verizon Communications Inc., challenging the authority of the Federal Communications Commission (FCC) to regulate Internet service providers in September of 2013. Under the FCC’s current Open Internet Order, service providers such as Verizon, cannot charge varying prices or give priority to users that access certain websites or may be able to pay more for faster speeds compared to competitors. Verizon claimed the FCC violated their First Amendment right and they should have the ability to manage and promote the content they see fit. The FCC has continually ruled that controlling communications is not in the best interest of the public. If the court decides in favor of Verizon and revokes the Open Internet Order, the FCC will have no way to regulate unbiased data access, changing the future for everyday Internet users in the twenty-first century.
Verizon v. FCC has been well covered by both corporate and independent media. However, corporate outlets such as the New York Times and Forbes tend to highlight the business aspects of the case, skimming over vital particulars affecting the public and the Internet’s future.

UPDATE: Last year’s report on net neutrality foresaw a bleak future in the fight to maintain a free and open Internet. But by February of 2015 the FCC ruled in favor of preserving net neutrality. While many conservative politicians are already drafting legislation and telecommunications corporations are filing suits against the ruling, the public has been largely ecstatic about the decision, and the continued support of individuals working collectively bodes well for the future of Internet freedom. Several factors lead to this historic decision.

In June 2014, comedian John Oliver, host of HBO’s Last Week Tonight, gave a thirteen-minute monologue about the imminent threat to a free Internet. He asked the “monsters” who leave Internet comments to go to the FCC’s website during the public commenting period, and express their support for net neutrality. Public response was so immense that it crashed the FCC website. FCC.gov received over 22,000 comments in two days, and about 40,000 more in the next month. In September a number of popular websites, including Reddit, Etsy, and Upworthy, displayed a loading symbol on their webpages to illustrate the effect tiered levels of service might have on the web. The event, called “Internet Slow Down Day,” raised public awareness and drummed up more support for net neutrality.

Perhaps this is why, in November of last year, President Barack Obama posted a video to WhiteHouse.gov, in which he expressed his support for net neutrality and a “free and open Internet,” saying it could only be preserved by classifying broadband providers as “common carriers” under Title II of the Telecommunications Act. Corporate media began covering the net neutrality debate at this point, with Fox News identifying net neutrality as a threat to innovation, to quality, and to consumer pricing, claiming net neutrality would inevitably lead to higher taxes.

In independent media, various outlets discussed the consequences
of an Internet controlled by corporate interests, while Wired firmly held that the lack of competition between ISPs was the real problem in the net neutrality debate. Growing public support for an open Internet seemed to be turning the debate around.

The White House stated on January 15, 2015, that legislation was not necessary to settle net neutrality rules as the FCC possessed the authority to write said rules—thus supporting the FCC’s legal ability regarding net neutrality. On February 4, FCC Chairman Tom Wheeler made an announcement in Wired “proposing that the FCC use its Title II authority to implement and enforce open Internet protections.” This was the first indication that the FCC would treat the Internet—both fixed and mobile broadband—as a public utility and regulate it accordingly, and corporate media had decided it was finally worth reporting about. On February 26, the FCC reclassified broadband access as a utilities service. Now classified as “common carriers,” Internet Service Providers are under the regulation of the FCC. Republican lawmakers wasted no time responding to the FCC’s new regulations; Speaker John Boehner called the Open Internet Order “a secret plan to put the federal government in control of the Internet.”

In March 2015, the FCC released a 300-page document regarding the regulations voted upon in the prior month. Opponents of net neutrality used this page count to claim that the regulations were too complex; however, out of those 200 pages only eight were dedicated to regulatory speech. USTelecom and Alamo Broadband filed lawsuits against the FCC’s Open Internet Order on March 23. According to John Ribeiro of IDG News Service, the broadband industry believes that they function “in conformance with the open Internet principles” and thus do not require further regulation. The lawsuit requested that the Open Internet Order be recognized as unlawful, stating that its terms were in excess of the FCC’s authority.

On April 10, 2015, the Federal Register placed the Open Internet Order out on “public inspection,” setting its publishing date to April 13. Once published to the Federal Register, the daily record of rules and regulations set forth by the United States government, the Open Internet Order goes into effect June 12, 2015. Now that the regulations are being made public, the door opens for opponents of net
neutrality to file more lawsuits against the Federal Communications Commission.

While the FCC has ruled in favor of net neutrality with its Open Internet Order, corporate Internet providers are unlikely to allow the ruling to go into effect without a lengthy legal fight. Net neutrality does not work in favor of the bottom line, after all. More lawsuits are predicted by news sources both corporate and independent, but either way net neutrality remains an important issue worthy of public attention and scrutiny. Some hold to the claim that the FCC’s interests in net neutrality are purely political as the federal government is more interested in taxation. However, in spring of 2015, FCC chair Tom Wheeler stated his opposition to a $45 billion merger between Comcast and Time Warner, and Comcast withdrew its proposal. Wheeler explained that “the decisions to create new net neutrality rules and to block Comcast’s merger with Time Warner Cable were driven by a common factor: the transition of cable TV firms into businesses that primarily supply high-speed Internet.” One thing is for sure, the battle over a free and open Internet is not over, but the developments through early 2015 are clear victories for the public interest. Net neutrality and the Open Internet Order are an example of how grassroots movements can change the rules on a federal level and pressure the government into working toward the greater good of society and its people.

SOURCES:


SUMMARY: In Gaza, 1.7 million Palestinians currently live without clean drinking water. With no perennial streams and low rainfall, Gaza relies on a single aquifer for all of its fresh water. The coastal aquifer, Zander Swinburne reported, is contaminated with sewage, chemicals, and seawater. The Palestinian Water Authority recently determined that 95 percent of the water in Gaza does not meet World Health Organization (WHO) standards for human consumption. The polluted water causes chronic health problems and contributes to high rates of child mortality. One study estimated that 26 percent of disease in Gaza results from contaminated water supplies. “A crippling Egyptian-Israeli blockade on Gaza has exacerbated the problem,” Al Jazeera reported.

A recent United Nations report warned that the water situation for Palestinians in Gaza was “critical.” According to that report, “the aquifer could become unusable as early as 2016, with the damage irreversible by 2020.” Even with immediate remedial action, the 2012 report stated the aquifer would take decades to recover; otherwise it would “take centuries for the aquifer to recover.”

As a result of the contaminated water supply, Al Jazeera reported the Palestinian Ministry of Health recommend that residents boil water before using it for drinking. However, residents contend that even with boiling, the tap water “is not fit to drink,” and, in many cases, is simply unavailable. According to people in the territory, Zander Swinburne reported, “during the summer months, water might spurt out of their taps every other day . . . pressure is often so low that those living on upper floors might see just a trickle.”

Instead, according to United Nations estimates, over 80 percent of Gazans buy their drinking water with some families paying as much as a third of their household income, according to June Kunugi (UNICEF). Palestinians purchase more than a quarter of their water from Israel’s national water company, Mekorot, Al Jazeera reported. Mekorot sells Gaza 4.2 million cubic meters of water annually.
UPDATE: Several factors make the depletion of Gaza’s water complicated, such as the atmosphere of political unrest and greed, along with the crippling poverty, overcrowding, and large-scale environmental degradation in the Gaza Strip. The over-exhaustion of the lone aquifer has significantly outpaced its annual recharging through annual precipitation. The high permeability of the aquifer also allows hazardous levels of seawater, coastal pollutants, and contaminants from one of the most industrialized shorelines in the world to creep their way into the water supply. These toxins have caused child mortality rates in Gaza to skyrocket and the increasing contaminants in the irrigation water continue to negatively affect crops.

The residents of Gaza continue to face the reality of depleted drinking water. This is compounded by the restrictions of movements for the residents of Gaza. Its residents live in what has been compared to an open-air prison. They may not come and go as they please. The borders both into Israel and Egypt are heavily guarded and most of the time completely closed to movement of people. Goods are often
restricted by the occupying Israeli military from entering and exiting, thus making international trade and access to necessary supplies nearly impossible for Gazans who are then often forced to purchase Israeli-made products.4

Further, the Gaza Strip is currently under Israeli military control and has been since 1948. In 2005–06, after much international pressure, Israel moved its illegal settlers out of the region, some back into Israel, with others, in continued violation of international law settling in the West Bank.5 In 2008 the citizens of Gaza, previously governed by the Fatah party, voted in Hamas. This was not well received by Israel because despite initially helping establish Hamas in the hopes of creating infighting with Fatah,6 Hamas has been critical of the policies of expansion into the occupied West Bank and expulsion of Palestinians both within Israel and in the West Bank. Since 2008 there have been three massive offensives on Gaza by Israel, and as of this writing there were thirteen additional Israeli air attacks the last week of May, 2015.7

The results of these attacks have killed many civilians and destroyed infrastructure. This endless cycle of destruction and rebuilding has been a part of the daily lives of Palestinians, but since the 2014 assault on Gaza, no rebuilding has taken place. Currently many Gazans remain without homes, schools, hospitals, and other necessary institutions. Rebuilding without necessary supplies is highly problematic. Cement and other building materials are highly restricted goods and, when allowed entry, come at an exorbitant cost which is often too high for many Gazans.8

With Gaza on the verge of collapse due to this summer onslaught in 2014, unemployment is as high as 44 percent, and access to drinking water is now just one of the many imminent dangers the people of Gaza face.9 While the sustainability of the aquifers remains a major issue, it is not the only one. Most of these historical details have been ignored by the corporate media in the US and continue to be as of this writing. Much of what was discussed above is context for the actual Gaza water story, which gives the reader a deeper understanding of how dire the situation has become for residents there. It is important to note not only what the corporate media include in their reporting on the matter, but what they frame out all together.
The only accessible aquifer in Gaza is polluted and maintains its current trajectory of irreversible damage. The denizens of Gaza are still suffering immeasurably, especially because of the raging battle between Israel and Gaza that took place in July and August 2014. The Gaza Strip, is a very small and densely populated Palestinian enclave roughly double the size of Washington DC, yet is home to more than 1.8 million people. It consists of semi-arid coastal steppe, has a warm desert climate with mild winters and dry summers, comparable to that of Tijuana, Mexico. Similar to California, sufficient fresh water and desertification from climate change have long been some of the most pressing concerns of Gaza’s citizens, who depend on their lone aquifer as their source of fresh water for drinking, irrigating their food, domestic uses and industrial production.

The latest Israeli assaults on Gaza resulted in devastating consequences to the already fragile water supply. Before the latest assaults, 25 percent of households in Gaza had daily access to water, 40 percent every other day, 20 percent once every three days, and 15 percent one in every four days. The head of the ICRC delegation Israel, Jacques de Maio, said, “Water and electrical services are also affected as a result of the current hostilities. If they do not stop, the question is not if but when an already beleaguered population will face an acute water crisis.”

Israeli bombings in Gaza on July 29, 2014, took out Gaza’s only functional power plant and destroyed many of Gaza’s water wells. The power shortage has slowed the pumping capacity of Gaza’s water supply systems, and eighty million tons of raw sewage continues to drain into the Mediterranean Sea on a daily basis. One-third of Gaza’s water wells are not working and remain unusable because it is too dangerous for technicians to access them, while the remaining operating wells only function between six and eight hours a day due to the lack of electricity.

There have been efforts to relieve this inevitable water crisis. Emirates Red Crescent Authority (ERC) has been working on projects to send clean water tanks to the Palestinians living in this severe water crisis. This operation has already delivered food aid, shelter and clothes, and medicine as part of the relief. Unfortunately, the Egyptian-Israeli blockade of Gaza makes it impossible for architectural resources and water to be imported.
One news outlet covered a possible solution to Gaza’s water woes. Yahoo! News picked up an Agence France-Presse (AFP) story on a Palestinian engineer Diaa Abu Assi is seeking to desalinate water from the Mediterranean. “In five years, there will be no drinkable water in Gaza,” Abu Assi said. “Water shortages are a real threat to life in Gaza. The only solution is to filter water from the Mediterranean.” With the support of Gaza’s Islamic University, Abu Assi hopes a solution will materialize using nanotechnology to desalinate sea water, though worries about the possibility that another Israeli bombardment could wreak havoc on any possible developments. A March AFP article claimed the Israeli government was going to double the water piped into Gaza, but as of this writing, no evidence of that had occurred.

The constant bouts of war through the years have ruined any semblance of infrastructure in Gaza, and the water story is only one of many that if readers want to learn more about, they have to look far beyond the corporate media in the US to find.

SOURCES:


Censored 2015 #23

Number of US Prison Inmates Serving Life Sentences Hits New Record

SUMMARY: A report released by the Sentencing Project, a Washington DC–based nonprofit criminal justice advocacy group, revealed
that the number of prisoners serving life sentences in the US state and federal prisons reached a new record of close to 160,000 in 2012. Of these, 49,000 are serving life without possibility of parole, an increase of 22.2 percent since 2008. The study’s findings place in striking context the figures promoted by the federal government, which indicate a reduction in the overall number of prisoners in federal and state facilities, from 1.62 million to 1.57 million between 2009 and 2012.

Ashley Nellis, senior research analyst with the Sentencing Project, argued that the rise in prisoners serving life sentences has to do with political posturing over “tough on crime” measures. “Unfortunately, lifers are typically excluded from most sentencing reform conversations because there’s this sense that it’s not going to sell, politically or with the public,” Nellis said. “Legislators are saying, ‘We have to throw somebody under the bus.’”

California is the leader in lifers, with one-quarter of the country’s life-sentenced population (40,362), followed by Florida (12,549) and New York (10,245), Texas (9,031), Georgia (7,938), Ohio (6,075), Michigan (5,137), Pennsylvania (5,104), and Louisiana (4,657). There are currently 3,281 prisoners in the US serving a life sentence—with no chance of parole—for minor, nonviolent crimes, according to a November 2013 report by the American Civil Liberties Union (ACLU). Louisiana, one of nine states where inmates currently serve life sentences for nonviolent crimes, has the nation’s strictest three-strike law, which states that after three offenses the guilty person is imprisoned for life without parole. As Ed Pilkington reported in the Guardian, the ACLU study documented “thousands of lives ruined and families destroyed” by this practice. Among those is Timothy Jackson, now fifty-three, who in 1996 was caught stealing a jacket from a New Orleans department store. “It has been very hard for me,” Jackson wrote the ACLU. “I know that for my crime I had to do some time, but a life sentence for a jacket valued at $159.”

The ACLU study reported that keeping these prisoners locked up for life costs taxpayers around $1.8 billion annually. The study stated that the US is “virtually alone in its willingness to sentence non-violent offenders to die behind bars.” Life without parole for nonviolent sentences has been ruled a violation of human rights by the European
Court of Human Rights. With 2.3 million people imprisoned in the US today, Felicia Gustin of War Times has asked, is locking people away the answer to creating safer communities? She reported on the work of the Restorative Community Conferencing Program, based in Oakland, California. According to the program’s coordinator, Denise Curtis, “restorative justice is a different approach to crime. Our current justice system asks: What law was broken? Who broke it? How should they be punished? Restorative justice asks: Who has been harmed? What needs have arisen because of the harm? Whose responsibility is it to make things as right as they can?”

As Gustin reported, the program works with youth cases referred by the district attorney. Some involve felonies such as assault, robbery, and burglary. The Oakland Unified School District has also successfully incorporated restorative justice practices as an alternative to expelling and suspending youth which, according to Curtis, “impact Black and Brown youth disproportionately much more than white youth.” Variations of restorative justice programs currently operate in Baltimore, Minneapolis, New York, Chicago and New Orleans, among other cities, and at least one study has shown such programs have been effective in reducing recidivism. Nevertheless, few are aware of restorative justice as a real alternative to mass incarceration and this positive development deserves more news coverage.

UPDATE: Although the number of incarcerated US citizens remains staggering, there have been several developments in the last year. In November of 2014, Proposition 47 was passed in the state of California. This proposition softens the mandatory sentencing of many nonviolent crimes and has already led to the parole of hundreds of prisoners statewide. As time passes it should also lead to fewer nonviolent offenders being jailed for extended periods. The goal of these acts and actions is to give people a chance to reclaim their lives after they have served reasonable, appropriate sentences for their crimes—a much-needed alternative to the current system.

According to the California Department of Corrections of Rehabilitation (CDCR) weekly report of population the total number of people in custody as of March 18, 2015, stands at 130,632 inmates in prison. Compared to the population in February 2015, the population has
gone down 1,289 inmates. Keep in mind that is barely 0.01 percent in
decrease from February to March. The slight decrease in California’s
inmate numbers may be the result of the work of Prop 47.

On November 4, 2014, California voters passed the proposition,
which states that nonviolent offenses are now reduced from felno-
ties to misdemeanors. This does not mean anyone can get released
from prison automatically; prisoners must petition the court for re-
sentencing, followed by parole. A prison guard at San Quentin State
Prison, who asked to remain anonymous, stated that prior to the
passing of Prop 47, “not every inmate had a cell, we had to lay blan-
kets out in the basketball courts. Overpopulation of the prisoners is
dangerous to both the prisoners and the guards. More fights break
out and as for the guards, each officer is assigned to one tier in the
prison containing about 180 inmates, making it even more chal-
lenging to maintain order. Many good things would come from less-
ening the prison population; less overcrowding means for inmates
a better quality of life, for guards a safer work environment, and for
taxpayers less money.”

Although positive effects can be seen within the prisons them-
selves, corporate media work diligently to create a sense of fear in the
average media consumer. This is used as a tool by media outlets as
a way of supporting the status quo against reforms in maintenance
of state authority and control. In the article “County Jail Populations
Across California Dip After Prop 47,” Christine Ward argued that
while prison populations will lower, this may mean unsafe communi-
ties. She explained, “It just means more people are out in our com-
munities that perhaps shouldn’t be there.”

Despite backlash of the state’s proposition, efforts to reduce inmate
populations on the national scale continue to be pursued and are
beginning to take effect. On March 9, 2015, Senators Cory Booker and
Rand Paul reintroduced the REDEEM Act. As stated by the Sentencing
Project, the REDEEM Act, “would repeal the felony drug ban for some
people convicted of non-violent drug offenses . . . allow the sealing of
criminal records and improve the accuracy of FBI background checks.
It would also make necessary improvements to the treatment of young
people who encounter the juvenile justice system.” The REDEEM
Act shows that the nation is beginning to take small steps toward
addressing these staggeringly high numbers of inmates. A similar bill, the Smarter Sentencing Act, was also introduced in Congress where both bills sat in committee as of this writing.

While actions are being taken, the priorities of funding in California and the United States as a whole toward fixing this issue appear to be misplaced. According to the Public Policy Institute of California, it is stated that California has made available $2.2 billion in bond revenue to build county jails, which is estimated to add more than 14,000 beds across the state. The American Legislative Exchange Council (ALEC) posted that the California Department of Corrections of Rehabilitation average annual cost per inmate is $45,006. But according to Scott Graves in his article, “Bending the Prison Cost Curves,” “under the governor’s proposed spending plan for 2014-15, California is expected to spend more than $62,000 on each prison inmate”: meanwhile, “our state is expected to spend slightly less than $9,200 for each K-12 student in 2014–15.”

While prisons do serve a purpose in the justice system of the United States, the disproportionate amount of money toward punishment rather than efforts to solve the problem at the root seems to be a Band-Aid solution. Imagine a nation where the numbers were reversed and $62,000 was spent on a child’s chance at a better future rather than building another cement structure as a rug to sweep our country’s problems under.

A New York Times article from May 2015 addressed reforms along the lines of the REDEEM Act. The article stated that in order to end mass incarceration, sentences for violent crimes must be cut in half and it noted that drug courts had been able to reduce substance abuse without incarceration. “We need to lock up fewer people on the front end as well as enhance reintegration and reduce collateral consequences that impede rehabilitation on the back end.” Hopefully these developments will not only continue, but the news media will report on them more as a way to build public awareness and support for such reforms in the interests of social justice.

sources:
CONCLUSION

In the last year, there was a continuation of troubling patterns in Gaza and Ukraine, but there were also positive developments regarding the success of restorative justice programs, a more inclusive discussion concerning the future of the Internet, and a reduction in the numbers of prison inmates for nonviolent offenses. While corporate media picked up on a few of these, they especially continued to neglect details of the foreign policy stories.

In a world that is increasingly complicated, where transnational corporations work diligently with governments to maintain and build upon the current power structure against the public interest, we the people are wise to remember the words of the late historian Howard Zinn: “You can’t be neutral on a moving train.” We are all in motion, and we must arm ourselves with the power knowledge gives. We should read and support the grassroots, independent media outlets and journalists that help us understand the many changes going on around us. As Alan Watts said, “The only way to make sense out of change is to plunge into it, move with it, and join the dance.”

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Notes
2. Studies further show correlations with statistics and data of the exclusionary policies of those that students experience, and later may determine their future in the justice system. See Mary Schmid Mergler, Karla M. Vargas, and Caroline Caldwell, “Alternative Discipline Can Benefit Learning,” *Phi Delta Kappan* 96, no. 2 (October 2014): 25.
   In 2008, Israel launched a major air attack, “Operation Cast Lead,” on Hamas, the democratically elected ruling Palestinian party in Gaza. Israel attacked Hamas political and military targets suspected of smuggling illegal arms into Gaza. Hamas responded to these attacks by launching rockets into Israel. In January 2009, Israel launched the “second stage of Operation Cast Lead” through a ground invasion. After fourteen days of fighting, both sides agreed to end the fighting and enacted a unilateral ceasefire in order to restore what very little stability they have back into the region.
   On July 8, 2014, Israel launched “Operation Protective Edge” in response to rocket attacks organized by Hamas. Hamas claimed to have fired the rockets in retaliation to the Israeli-blockade and to put pressure on Israel to release Palestinian political prisoners. After nearly two months of fighting, on August 26, 2014, a ceasefire was negotiated between the two sides. During this assault over 2,200 people were killed, nearly 1,600 of them being civilians, 7 Israeli, and the remaining Palestinians.