



# NNIRR Board Road Trip to South Texas

At the end of June, members of NNIRR’s [Board of Directors](#) traveled to South Texas to meet with partners and allies and to visit key sites along the border. We thought this shared experience and connection with border colleagues would be important as we gear up for our **Just Borders** initiative, to spotlight border issues nationwide...



We met up in San Antonio, where our Board chairperson, Eddie Canales, met us with a huge (air conditioned) van that we would use for our travel down to the border. Eddie and Sister Pam Buganski from the Falfurrias-based [South Texas Human Rights Center](#) served as our terrific hosts for our brief trip.

Our first night we stayed in San Antonio at *La Casa de Maria y Marta*, a refugee women’s shelter, where we gathered for our



first day to meet. With lunch and afternoon conversation with local friends, discussion included the particular challenges of working with border communities when family members and close friends work for the Border Patrol, and in general how border enforcement is deeply embedded in the local economy and culture.

We talked about what it meant to “shift the narrative” on the border, typically portrayed as a site of danger and violence where policing is necessary for “protection.” **We need to end the demonization of the border, lift up the guarantee of human rights for all, and address the human needs of the region. Action must be taken to rollback the focus on militarization.**

Members shared their experiences on delegations from other parts of the country. Monami Maulik, for director and founder of [DRUM, the South Asian Organizing Center](#) in New York, described how some years ago, DRUM had brought a community delegation to Arizona. Their visit was also filmed by friends at **Breakthrough**, producing the video, [Checkpoint Nation? Building Community Across Borders](#). The tour transformed delegation members into border rights advocates. Gerald Lenoir, a founder of the [Black Alliance for Just Immigration \(BAJI\)](#), related a similar, transformative experience with a delegation they had organized soon after BAJI formed.

We made note of the need for more “media education” about issues on the border, given that the media is largely how most people outside of the region are informed about what is taking place on the border, and elsewhere for that matter – and how that media coverage is often distorted and dangerous!

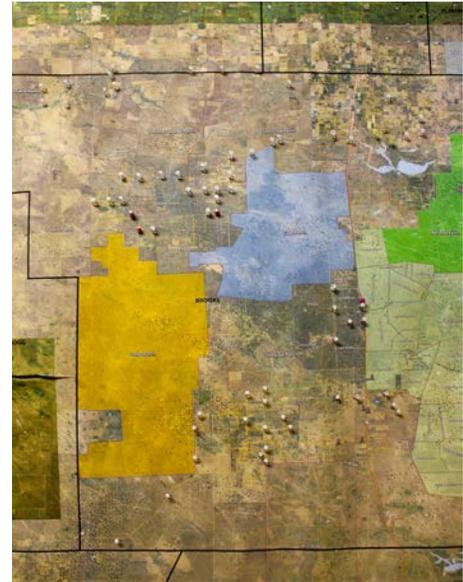
Leaving San Antonio, we headed to the **Karnes “Family” Detention Center**, where some of us were able to meet with a few of the women detainees, who were detained with their children.

**Executive Director Catherine Tactaquin** shared this from her meeting: *I spoke with Georgia, who was there with her two young children. She came with the kids from Honduras, and has been there for eleven months. She hasn't seen her husband, who is here in the US, for eight years. They don't know how her bond could ever be paid. So she waits, and dreams of leaving with her children and uniting with their dad. The kids are learning some English, but miss their friends. It is just insane that they are imprisoned. And without a doubt, Karnes is a prison.*



**Monami Maulik:** *Our next stop was to visit Karnes Detention Center- part of a new trend to build more 'family' prisons as the solution to the border issue. I was handed a piece of paper with the name of a Guatemalan woman and her 5-year old daughter. Before leaving the shelter, I began playing with a beautiful little girl, full of life and brilliance. She told me her name and then I met her mother. I knew from her mother's face, that this was the family I was supposed to go visit in detention next. In so many years of doing detention/deportation work, there are these rare moments of joy. I was relieved in being able meet them in a safe place rather than in prison. And make no doubt, 'Residential Detention' is prison for women and children. The mother had fled violence back home and spent 11 months in Karnes with her daughter. Her bond was \$7,500- far more than most detainees can ever pay.*

On our second day, we had another Board session in Falfurrias, at the South Texas Human Rights Center. While there we scanned the maps of the region where the Center has set up over 80 water stations, negotiating often with local ranchers to allow them to set up the stations. The Center



has also been deeply involved in helping to locate missing family members, and identifying the remains of dead migrants, the disappeared. The Center has worked with forensics experts and students who have all been part of efforts, together with groups stretching along and on both sides of the southwest border, to help identify remains.



On the way out of Falfurrias, we stopped at the Sacred Heart Cemetery, where unidentified remains have been buried. Some of the burial plots are unmarked, and in a number of cases, the remains of more than one person have been placed together in the same plot.





Traveling south, we stopped at one ranch to visit some of the water stations installed by Eddie, Sr. Pam, and many volunteers who have been showing up at the Center to give their support. The station itself is pretty simple: a large barrel, anchored to rebar pounded into the sand, and also anchored with a tall pipe topped by a “red cross” banner – a universal symbol for assistance. The barrels are filled with gallon jugs of water, and are checked periodically and replenished. Eddie said that migrants will often leave the partly consumed jugs of water for others who may come along.



Despite better judgment, our van proceeded to just one more station – and got stuck in the sand. Even Sr. Pam’s 4-wheel drive wasn’t successful in pushing us out. After exhausting efforts that included putting towels and sticks under the wheels to get traction – and valiant but failed efforts to push the van along, we had to resort to a call for assistance. Through the sheriff’s office (they are aware of the Center’s water station project), we were eventually pulled out with the help of the local volunteer fire department!

We had spent a couple of hours in the 95 degree weather (heat index at 100 degrees). As we prepared to leave, **Sr. Pam** commented to us, *I want you to reflect why God planned this as part of your experience.*

Many of us shared **Monica Hernandez’** comments on our “inconvenience”: *We had plenty of water and a van to sit in. Nothing compared to the harrowing journey of migrants walking 20-30 miles through the thick brush along that road, hiding from the Border Patrol, at the mercy of traffickers, dehydrated. Migrants like Hilda, whom I met yesterday at the Karnes Detention Center, and who came to the U.S. to escape family violence and to provide her son with a better/different future...*





Delayed by our little mishap at the water stations, we rushed to our next activity: a meeting in Alamo hosted by the **South Texas Civil Rights Project**. Over a delicious dinner, we shared updates and a great discussion with more than a dozen local folks all working in some way on immigration issues in the area. *Once again, we learned about so much great work being done, often too invisible outside of the border region!*



We questioned folks about bringing delegations to the area, for exposure and solidarity-building. Are such delegations useful? Do they impose too much of a burden on local organizers, who obviously have lots of other work to do. The response was overwhelmingly positive! **It seemed that everyone understood the value and importance of meeting and raising awareness with potential allies from outside the region.**



As in our discussion with folks in the San Antonio meeting, there was strong support for the notion of “shifting the border narrative” – demystifying the issues, exposing the human rights abuses that are committed against migrants and the local community, and building broader support for critical reforms and remedies.



Before leaving the next day, Board members were both enthusiastic and sobered by their experiences, feeling more committed and to building a stronger movement to support human rights at the border, to demilitarize policies and structures, and to contribute to a positive initiatives that would strengthen human needs, and certainly, to save lives.

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## Reflections After the Road Trip

On the heels of this tour of South Texas, there has been a lot of news impacting immigrant and refugees' lives, some encouraging, most foreboding:

- We have been cautiously optimistic about a federal judge's ruling in August that the detention of children and their mothers crossing the border is in violation of a prior court settlement. A judge has further ruled that the Obama Administration must begin releasing families. While the ruling is awaiting a response from the Justice Department who might appeal, hopes are high for an eventual end to family detention.
- A lawsuit continues to hold up Obama's Executive Action for DACA/DAPA (Deferred Action for Childhood Arrivals & Deferred Action for Parents of Americans and Lawful Permanent Residents), which has caused a temporary stay. If implemented, these programs could provide temporary relief from deportation for some 4.4 million people, according to the Department of Homeland Security. However, legal wrangling could eventually delay a definitive ruling by the Supreme Court until June of 2016 – and even if positive, would leave few months for implementation by the current Administration.

The treacherous journey and the increase of migrant deaths as a result of crossing dangerous desert and mountainous regions is not adequately documented. Right after NNIRR was in Texas, The Texas Observer published [Graves of Shame](#), an article by John Carlos Frey, in which he reported on the unknown numbers of human remains, believed to be migrants that are buried in cemeteries throughout South Texas. University forensic anthropologists have been helping exhume the grave to provide proper identification and reburial, and to notify anxious and grieving families. Migrant rights advocates in Texas are demanding accountability from the state's Governor Gregg Abbott and Attorney General Ken Paxton and are asking for further investigation into wrongdoing concerning the recovery, identification and burial practices of unidentified human remains.

While this should be the focus of moral outrage, electoral theatrical posturing has instead directed attention toward inflamed anti-immigrant rhetoric and messages dehumanizing and stigmatizing immigrants with mistruths in an effort to garner attention and whip up the most conservative of Republican voters. But the bile has not remained merely in the media.

Manipulating a terrible tragedy in San Francisco in early August, the vitriol has crossed over into dangerous public policy territory with the passage of HR 3009, denying federal funding to cities that do not report undocumented immigrants to federal authorities. In San Francisco community groups and advocates gave testimony to the

importance of the sanctuary city laws in providing safety from violence for immigrants. NNIRR signed on to a national letter opposing this bill, *but the advocacy to halt this trend must continue.*

The issue of human rights at the borders is not just a U.S. concern. In keeping with the National Network's global work for migrants' rights, Executive Director Catherine Tactaquin [spoke this spring](#) at the UN in Geneva on a panel for the Office of the High Commissioner for the Human Rights of Migrants, in support of the new "[Recommended Principles and Guidelines for Human Rights at International Borders.](#)" Joined by colleagues from Latin America and Europe who decried the current crisis at borders, including the increase in migrant deaths, she stressed the need for governments to respect and adhere to human rights at international borders. Our *Just Borders* project will promote these guidelines at our own borders and work in solidarity with our global partners for international migrant rights. [UN Human Rights at International Borders](#)

**Meanwhile, the international refugee crisis has reached alarming levels in Europe with hundreds of thousands of people mostly fleeing violence in Syria, Iraq and Eritrea risking their lives to reach safety. The numbers of migrant deaths in European waters are staggering, while others have been found suffocated in lorries abandoned by ruthless traffickers. Those who have survived the perilous journey have ended up living in squalid camps waiting in hope for asylum anywhere in the European Union. EU governments have been distressingly slow in responding, and worse, several countries have threatened to close borders, leaving tens of thousands of refugees stranded, [NY Times - Migrants Detained](#), while Hungary has begun building a wall to keep people out.**

Our partners in Europe, the Platform for International Cooperation on Undocumented Migrants (PICUM), [has critiqued the EU proposals](#): "EU migration policies during this time period have limited and in several cases even blocked migrants from arriving in regular manners to seek protection and better living conditions."

In a mass expression of humanity in the past weeks, citizens in several European cities rallied in the tens of thousands in support of the flow of migrants and refugees, critical of the inadequate response of their governments. In Iceland, over 11,000 families offered to house refugees [Iceland offers housing](#) to help with the crisis. These events demonstrate that the citizens of the EU recognize the human rights of refugees and migrants, and are demanding a better response.



*Monami: The impacts people face and the 'choices' they make are not solely 'individual' choices worthy of judgment and scapegoating- they are too often the failures of leaders that force the lack of choices. Misled and failed policies-both within countries and more often, among global north and south countries, with continued inequalities of power and wealth.*



NNIRR's trip to South Texas cemented the organization's resolve to turn our attention to the southern border, where we will shine a national spotlight on the human rights crisis that has led to an unprecedented increase in migrant deaths and has torn families apart through unjust deportations and incarceration of women and children who are being held in deplorable prison conditions.

**A focus on the border and human rights is a critical component in the broader fight for fair and just immigration. Any proposals for reform must address these issues. #Just Borders!**

Board member **Janis Rosheuvel** shared her perspective on social media, echoing the organizations resolve to keep fighting for justice:

*Walking away from this weekend on the Texas-Mexico border with the NNIRR board with expanded visions for racial justice, reaffirmed belief in people mobilizing in their way on their terms to realize change, and humbled by the grind it takes to simply live, love, fight and keep on. Thanking God for the depth and dedication of my comrades in struggle... Also, if you do not know the amazing work of the South Texas Human Rights Center, now you know!*

Coming away from the tour of South Texas, NNIRR is ready to take action to put a spotlight on the human rights crisis at the southern border and in Europe. There is so much to be done, and we need all the help we can get. [Donate](#) if you can and check the [NNIRR website](#) for actions you can take in your community. Later this month, keep your eye out for the #JustBorders Toolkit with materials and support for community action to push for human rights and dignity for migrants here and across the globe.

*(Photo credits: Lillian Galedo, Patricia Ice, Catherine Tactaquin)*