The Chronicle
By Alice Loyd (through July 2, 2014)

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SOCIAL JUSTICE: IMMIGRATION

The wave of immigrant children flooding Texas Border Patrol facilities calls our attention to a human dilemma that is bound to increase as climate change worsens, resources become scarcer, and governments lose ground to street violence. Stories in news sources reveal that most of these minors are not trying to sneak past the border. Instead they turn themselves in and allow US policy toward immigrant youth decide their fate. US Department of Health and Human Services estimates that the number of undocumented immigrant children entering the United States has grown from 24,668 in 2013 to 60,000 in 2014.

John-Michael Torres, a spokesman for LUPE, a south Texas community activist group, is quoted as explaining the increase in this way: “It’s not an issue of border security, it’s an issue of crisis in the other countries. The politicians who are trying to make it about militarizing the border are doing a disservice to actually addressing the issue. Immigration reform is not going to address the murder rate in Honduras.” Tiffany Nelms, who works with unaccompanied children at the US Committee for Refugees and Immigrants, stated, “We are looking at this as a humanitarian crisis, versus an issue of migration.” She said that about 90% of the children are reunited with a relative, at least in the short-term until their case is determined. Without the right to court-appointed attorneys about half of all migrants represent themselves in immigration court. A young immigrant told the reporter, “People are not coming over because of immigration law. It’s because the economy is on the floor and the violence is out of control. Murder has become normal.”

Honduras has the most murders per capita of any country. Drug cartels and gangs are at the root of the increased violence. Some of these children are fleeing gang initiations, according to several reports.

But not all the children fleeing the region are arriving in the US. They are also looking for refuge in Mexico and other nations, such as Panama, Nicaragua, Costa Rica and Belize, according to the United Nations Refugee Agency.

Attempts by Texas authorities to move children and their caregivers from overcrowded facilities to other states has met with resistance, as reported in a Washington Post article that began, “The immigration situation is getting ugly.” Three busloads of immigrant children—
many who had fled gang violence in Guatemala, El Salvador and Honduras—met a human blockade on Tuesday afternoon in California. Many were accompanied by parents. In downtown Murrieta, about 70 miles north of San Diego, hundreds of protesters shut off access to a nearby Border Patrol station in Riverside County, waving American flags, shouting “go home” and holding signs that read “stop illegal immigration” and “illegals out.”

President Obama’s response, as expressed by White House Officials, will be to ask Congress to provide $3.7 billion in new funds to control the surge at the South Texas border, and to grant broader powers for immigration officials to speed deportations of children caught crossing without their parents. Mr. Obama will ask Congress to give the Homeland Security secretary new authorities to accelerate the screening and deportation of young unaccompanied migrants. A portion of the funding will also go to improve economies and social conditions in the countries that are the sources of the immigrants.

Meanwhile the federal government is quietly building more prisons for illegal immigrants. The Bureau of Prisons (BOP) has contracted for the operation of 13 for-profit private prisons located mostly in small towns away from the eyes of activists, prisoner's families, or attorneys. Run by three private companies, together these 13 facilities house more than 25,000 immigrant prisoners at a cost to US taxpayers estimated at $1 billion a year. The BOP typically operates its own prisons, which are generally said to be well run and relatively free of scandal. In contrast, the private immigrant prisons, which are filled mostly with low-security inmates, have been marked by riots and allegations of poor care. They don’t have to measure up to BOP policies and are exempt by law from open-records requirements, and according to a multi-year ACLU investigation entitled “Warehoused and Forgotten: Immigrants Trapped in Our Shadow Private-Prison System.” Private prisons are one of the worst features of the nation’s growing incarceration apparatus.

The US immigration situation is not the only migration issue in the news. Migrants from neighboring countries have been reported as enslaved in Thailand—pushed into the Thai sex trade, garment manufacturing, or domestic work. A recent opinion article in the New York Times publicizes exploitation in fishing and fishing-related industries. Two to three million people are said to have illegally fled into that country, which the State Department now lists as one of the worst violators among 188 countries judged every year on how they deal with human trafficking. The Department’s annual human trafficking report states that men from Myanmar, Cambodia and Thailand are forced to work 18 to 20 hours a day, seven days a week, for very low wages on Thai fishing boats that travel throughout Southeast Asia and beyond.

And in the Mediterranean region, hundreds of thousands of people are preparing to make treacherous crossings on unseaworthy vessels from the North African coast to Greece and Italy as this summer’s “boat season” gets under way. The UN High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR), the UN’s refugee agency, has said for the first time it may be necessary to process the migrants and refugees outside Europe, in countries such as Egypt, Libya or Sudan. Campaigners for refugee rights tend to reject the idea of large processing camps outside Europe, fearing refugees would be at the mercy of states with poor records on human rights and justice. The
shift in UNHCR's position—and growing appeals from Greece and Italy for action—comes as the latest figures show a rapidly accelerating problem. About 42,000 people have attempted to cross the Mediterranean to Italy so far this year, according to Frontex, the EU border agency. Last year there were 3,362 arrivals by the end of April.

In recent weeks there have been dozens of deaths in the Mediterranean and Aegean seas between Turkey and Greece. Amnesty International has said: “With virtually no safe and legal routes into Europe, people are increasingly pushed into the hands of smugglers and traffickers, and are forced to risk their lives on unseaworthy vessels.” At least a third of those heading for Greece end up having to be rescued.

For less desperate people, organized protest can be an alternative to immigration. The worldwide #WaveOfAction campaign update states, “There have been periods in history when large numbers of people rebelled about the way things were, demanding change, such as in 1848, 1917 or 1968; today we are experiencing another period of rising outrage and discontent, and some of the largest protests in world history. [It] is now evident that we are in the midst of an unprecedented global uprising.”

The #WaveOfAction campaign is a continuation of the Occupy movement and is being organized by Anonymous. Designed to run from April 4, 2014 until the Fourth of July, the update report presents an optimistic forecast. “We are entering a new phase of synergetic convergence, a complexifying evolution toward sustainability, shared prosperity, health and wellbeing that enhances overall human potential with a profound spiritual connection to the planet and all sentient beings.” Let us hope.

**COMMUNICATIONS: PRIVACY**

Concern about technology and how it can be used to infringe on the right to privacy continues to make the news. On July 2, an independent board declared a set of National Security Agency data collection programs both “legal and effective in protecting national security.” The Privacy and Civil Liberties Oversight Board called the information collected “valuable,” but questioned the NSA’s intrusion into Americans’ data and recommended limits to the government’s ability to access large amounts of American communications data that the NSA inevitably collects and searches through without a warrant.

In an interview at the 2014 Southland Conference, former vice-president Al Gore was asked if Edward Snowden was a whistleblower or a traitor. His response: “He clearly violated the law so you can’t say OK, what he did is all right. It’s not. But what he revealed in the course of violating important laws included violations of the US constitution that were way more serious than the crimes he committed. In the course of violating important law, he also provided an important service. OK. Because we did need to know how far this has gone.”
Vodafone, one of the world’s largest mobile phone groups, has revealed the existence of secret wires that allow government agencies to listen to all conversations on its networks, saying they are widely used in some of the 29 countries in which it operates in Europe and beyond. Publishing its first Law Enforcement Disclosure Report, the company has pushed back against the increasingly widespread use of phone and broadband networks to spy on citizens.

The European Union’s court of justice has backed the “right to be forgotten” and said Google must delete “inadequate, irrelevant or no longer relevant” data from its results when a member of the public requests it. The judges stated that in their view the EU data protection directive already established a “right to be forgotten,” saying that even accurate data that had been lawfully published initially could “in the course of time become incompatible with the directive.” In technical terms the ruling establishes that a search engine such as Google must be regarded as a “data controller” under the data protection laws in those EU countries where it establishes a branch to promote and sell advertising.

In another victory for privacy, the US Supreme Court ruled that police must obtain a warrant to search the contents of cellphones seized from people they have arrested. On June 25 Chief Justice John Roberts, writing that many owners of modern cellphones “keep on their person a digital record of nearly every aspect of their lives” delivered the opinion. It states, “Modern cell phones are not just another technological convenience. With all they contain and all they may reveal, they hold for many Americans the privacies of life.”

The final Communications story concerns net neutrality rather than privacy, but is directly related to the effect of technology on our lives. On May 15, the Federal Communications Commission voted to move forward with their proposed rules for net neutrality, the principle that all Internet traffic should be treated equally. The proposal, officially known as a notice of proposed rule-making, would allow Internet service providers like Verizon or AT&T to charge websites like Facebook and Twitter for faster service. The proposal will now be open for public comment for four months.

Consumer rights advocates such as Free Press and Consumers Union argue that the proposed rules would create two tiers of Internet service, with large companies being able to afford the faster rates, thus out-competing smaller companies. These groups have also argued that the Internet should be reclassified under the law and regulated as a public utility.

The principle of net neutrality “guarantees a level playing field in which Internet users do not have to pay Internet service providers more for better access to online content, and content generators do not have to pay additional fees to ensure users can access their websites or apps.”
CLIMATE CHANGE

On May 6, the White House released “The National Climate Assessment,” a 1,300-page report compiled by 300 leading scientists and experts and meant to be the definitive account of the effects of climate change on the United States. The findings are expected to guide President Obama in his plan to move the nation toward climate-mitigation policies during the last two years of his presidency.

The report emphasized that the effects of human-induced climate change are being felt already in every part of the United States, in the form of drought in dry regions, torrential rains in wet regions and increasingly common and severe heat waves. Wildfires are growing worse, and forests are dying from an increase in heat-loving insects. These effects have been caused by an average warming of less than 2 degrees Fahrenheit over most land areas of the country in the past century, the scientists found. They said if greenhouse gas emissions continue to rise rapidly, the warming could conceivably exceed 10 degrees by the end of this century.

To highlight the release of this information, the President arranged interviews with eight major weather forecasters. TV weather forecasters are among the most trusted sources of climate change information, according to opinion polls, and a 2010 study by George Mason University's Center for Climate Change Communications found that only 19% of TV weather forecasters accepted that human activity was the main driver of climate change. Andrew Freedman, who covers climate change for Mashable, writes, “Many TV meteorologists remain climate change sceptics, in part because they are skilled at forecasting weather over short time periods . . . and because many TV meteorologists also lack specific training in climate science.”

The military seems to be taking climate science more seriously. A report published by CNA Corporation Military Advisory Board May 14 finds the accelerating rate of climate change poses a severe risk to national security and acts as a catalyst for global political conflict.

The report states that climate change-induced drought in the Middle East and Africa is leading to conflicts over food and water and escalating longstanding regional and ethnic tensions into violent clashes. Rising sea levels are putting people and food supplies in coastal regions at risk and could lead to a new wave of refugees. The report anticipates an increase in catastrophic weather events around the world that will create more demand for American troops.

The ability to establish who is responsible for climate change could provide a breakthrough in major climate negotiations. Developed countries have been calling for emission reductions in developing countries, while the latter have used developed countries’ historical emissions, their carbon debt, as a reason for inaction.

Scientists from universities in the UK and New Zealand have come up with an intricate mathematical formula to measure present, past and future impacts in terms of financial costs. The method, though too elaborate to quote at length here, is described in a recently published
article, and if accepted by negotiating parties, could answer the question, “How much responsibility does each nation bear?”

Applying the formula, the USA, contributing 24-27% of the cumulative global cost, is responsible for the highest cumulative cost of carbon emissions during the period 1902 to 2009, followed by the EU with 17-19%. China is currently the biggest source of carbon dioxide emissions, but the cumulative costs of its emissions are still far behind at 10-12%. The calculations support the position that the main reason for a warming climate is the historical greenhouse-gas emissions of developed countries; 41-47% of the costs are due to the cumulative emissions of carbon dioxide from the US and the EU alone. On the other hand, the emissions of the big four major contributors account for only 57-59% of the total cumulative costs, leaving over 40% to the rest of the world, supporting the need for a global treaty covering all nations put forward by developed countries.

A team of scientists from the UK, US, Germany and Australia has developed a new method for foreseeing how sea levels might rise around the world in the 21st century. Lead author Dr. Ivan Haigh reported, “By 2020 to 2030, we could have some statistical certainty of what the sea level rise situation will look like for the end of the century. That means we'll know what to expect and have 70 years to plan.”

The study found that identifying and removing regularly occurring inter-annual (from one year to the next) and multi-decadal (involving several decades) variability leads to the most accurate prediction of levels.

Francisco Calafat of the National Oceanography Center explained:

> For example, processes associated with the North Atlantic Oscillation have a strong influence on the sea levels around the UK over multi-decadal periods. Such processes introduce a large amount of “noise” into the record, masking any underlying acceleration in the rate of rise. Our study shows that by adequately understanding these processes and removing their influence, we can detect accelerations much earlier.

**POLLUTION**

The American Legislative Exchange Council (ALEC) has launched a broad campaign to block the Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) from cutting greenhouse gas emissions from power plants.

Issuing a resolution with a long string of “Whereas” statements is only the beginning of an effort by influential Republican and big business lobbying networks to halt government plans. Whereas ALEC’s usual style is to propose legislation—and this tactic is already being exercised in the cause—the surprise may be a strategy to line up state attorney generals in opposition. Lawsuits against the new EPA regulations could sink the emissions controls before they come into effect.
China's environment is in a critical condition, especially water and air quality, vice minister of environmental protection Li Ganjie said in early June. In China's top 10 river basins in 2013, about 9 percent of the water was class V; the worst level. Compared to 2012, the percentage of class V water quality dropped by only 1.2 percentage points. Of 4,778 monitoring sites for groundwater almost 60 percent were poor or extremely poor. Only three of the 74 monitored cities met the national standard for good air in 2013.

Officials at NC Department of Environment and Natural Resources (DENR) have ordered Duke Energy to fix more leaking pipes in its coal ash dams, including one at the Dan River power plant that spilled ash in February. DENR, in warnings called notices of deficiency, ordered Duke to get engineering evaluations at four dams at the Dan River, Cape Fear and Roxboro power plants. The problems were uncovered by internal video Duke took at the state’s direction.

Are antibiotics pollutants? Yes, as they are now being emitted in the aggregate throughout the world, they are. In a pronouncement issued on April 30, the World Health Organization (WHO) urged all countries to be more sparing in their use of antibiotics in humans and in animals. “Without urgent, coordinated action by many stakeholders, the world is headed for a post-antibiotic era, in which common infections and minor injuries which have been treatable for decades can once again kill,” said Dr Keiji Fukuda, WHO's assistant director general for health security.

New drugs are not on the horizon. There have been no new classes of antibiotics for 25 years, said Dr Danilo Lo Fo Wong, senior adviser on antimicrobial resistance to WHO Europe. Pharmaceutical firms cannot cover the costs of research and development, because new antibiotics have to be used sparingly for fear of resistance developing—and when that begins, they have a short lifespan. “New antibiotics coming on to the market are not really new,” Lo Fo Wong said. “They are variations of those we already have.” This means that bacteria are likely to develop resistance to them that much sooner.

SHORTS

World's Largest Marine Sanctuary: On June 16 President Obama announced his intent to make a broad area of the central Pacific Ocean off-limits to fishing, energy exploration and other activities. The proposal, slated to go into effect later this year after a comment period, could create the world’s largest marine sanctuary and double the area of ocean globally that is fully protected. The Pacific Remote Islands Marine National Monument would be expanded from almost 87,000 square miles to nearly 782,000 square miles—all of it adjacent to seven islands and atolls controlled by the United States.

Pollinator Health: On June 20 the President released a memorandum outlining the strategies and planned actions of the new Pollinator Health Task Force in an effort to support and fund research about pollinator deaths to address the issues brought forth by the declining bee
population. Efforts will be made to understand the effects of pesticides on bee and other pollinator populations, and find possible solutions to thwart the collapse of bee colonies.

**Batteries for Utility Scale Solar Power:** The success of solar energy as a source of electricity generation has been measured by battery storage capacity. Now scientists at the University of Southern California may have developed a battery that is safe, cheap, and capable of being scaled up large enough for power plant application. Their research has produced a two-tank design employing quinones—oxidized organic compounds found in fungi, bacteria, and some animals, as the electroactive material. The team reports the battery can be made as large as needed, recharged 5,000 times and will have an estimated 15-year lifespan. Since the tank contents can be dissolved in water, such a system would create a minimal impact on the environment.