

PROJECT CENSORED'S TOP 25 NEWS STORIES

Continuing an initiative that dates back to 1976, the Project Censored team has selected and judged the most important American and international news stories of 2014–2015 that were underreported or ignored by the US corporate media.

Compiled by
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1. Half of Global Wealth Owned by the One Per Cent

In January 2015, Oxfam, an international non-profit organisation that aims to eliminate poverty, published a report stating that one per cent of the global population will own more wealth than the rest of the 99 per cent combined by 2016. The Oxfam report provided evidence that extreme inequality is not inevitable but is the result of political choices and economic policies established and maintained by the power elite—wealthy individuals whose strong influence keeps the status quo rigged in their own favour.

In addition to reporting the latest figures on global economic inequality and its consequences, the Oxfam study outlined a nine-point plan that governments could adopt in creating new policies to address poverty and economic inequality.

According to the report, the proportion of global wealth owned by the one per cent has increased from 44 per cent in 2009 to 48 per cent in 2014 and is projected to reach 50 per cent in 2016.

An October 2014 Oxfam report, "Even It Up: Time to End Extreme Inequality", revealed that the number of billionaires worldwide had more than doubled since the 2009 financial crisis, showing that, although those at the top have recovered quickly, the vast majority of the world's population are far from reaping the benefits of any recent economic recovery. Even more staggering, the world's richest 85 people now hold the same amount of wealth as half the world's poorest population.

"Failure to tackle inequality will leave hundreds of millions trapped in poverty unnecessarily," the report's authors warned.

Through its reports and the "Even It Up" campaign, Oxfam described how to address economic inequality, identifying nine specific actions:

1. Make governments work for citizens and tackle extreme inequality.
2. Promote women's economic equality and women's rights.
3. Pay workers a living wage and close the gap created by skyrocketing executive rewards.
4. Share the tax burden fairly to level the playing field.
5. Close international tax loopholes and fill holes in tax governance.
6. Achieve universal free public services by 2020.
7. Change the global system for research and development and pricing of medicines so everyone has access to appropriate and affordable medicines.
8. Implement a universal social protection floor.
9. Target development finance at reducing inequality and poverty, and strengthening the compact between citizens and their government.

Oxfam, in its "Even It Up" report, calculated that a "1.5 percent tax on billionaires' wealth over \$1bn in 2014 would raise \$74bn", which would be "enough to fill the annual gaps in funding needed to get every child into school and deliver health services in the poorest 49 countries".

2. Oil Industry Illegally Dumps Fracking Wastewater

California state documents obtained by the Center for Biological Diversity in October 2014 revealed that the oil industry had illegally dumped almost three billion gallons of wastewater from fracking (hydraulic fracturing to extract oil and gas) into central California aquifers. According to the Center for Biological Diversity report, the leaking occurred through at least nine injection disposal wells used by the oil industry to dispose of contaminated waste.

The affected aquifers supply water for human consumption and for irrigation of crops for human consumption. The documents also revealed that water supply wells located close to wastewater injection sites were tested and found to have high levels of arsenic, thallium and nitrates, all toxic chemicals linked to the oil industry's wastewater.

In June 2015, the Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) released its study of the impacts of fracking on drinking water supplies. Although the EPA's assessment identified "important vulnerabilities to drinking water resources", it concluded that "hydraulic fracturing activities...have not led to widespread, systemic impacts on drinking water resources".

In response, Food & Water Watch issued a press release by executive director Wenonah Hauter, who wrote: "Sadly, the EPA study...falls far short of the level of scrutiny and government oversight needed to protect the health and safety of the millions of American people affected by drilling and fracking for oil and gas." Noting that the oil and gas industry refused to cooperate with the EPA on a single "prospective case study" of fracking's impacts, Hauter concluded: "This reveals the undue influence the industry has over the government and shows that the industry is afraid to allow careful monitoring of their operations."



An aerial view of pits containing production water from oil wells near California 33 and Lokern Road in Kern County. (Source: ZeroHedge.com)

3. Eight-Nine Per Cent of Pakistani Drone Victims Not Identifiable as Militants

Since President Barack Obama's inauguration in 2009, an estimated 2,464 people have been killed by drone strikes targeted outside of the United States' declared war zones. This figure was posted in February 2015 by Jack Serle and the team at The Bureau of Investigative Journalism, who maintain a database of all known strikes—based on fieldwork, media reports and leaked documents—which provides a clearer picture of the scale and impact of the US drone program than the episodic reporting provided by corporate media.

According to Bureau data, al-Qaeda members comprise only four per cent of the total 2,379 people killed by US drone strikes in Pakistan as of October 2014, just over 10 years after the first such strikes. Of the total killed, about 30 per cent could be identified and 11 per cent were defined as militants. Little is known about the remaining 1,675 unnamed victims. The Bureau of Investigative Journalism reported these numbers after conducting a year-long investigation that compiled information from various sources to provide an overview of drone strike casualties.

US drone missions are flown mainly over Pakistan, where the CIA aims to weaken al-Qaeda and limit its movement into neighbouring Afghanistan. The use of unmanned drones is seen as a way to minimise involvement and resentment in a country that is characterised by the *New Yorker* as "unstable" and that is known to possess over 100 nuclear weapons. While the unofficial drone war for control over the Pakistan-Afghanistan border ended in mid-2013, the drone campaign continued with five strikes recorded in January 2015, the most since July 2014. In January, additional strikes were reported to have killed at least 45 in Somalia and three in Yemen, where a 12-year-old child

was among the casualties.

The Bureau of Investigative Journalism's findings undermine the validity of US Secretary of State John Kerry's claim that "the only people we fire a drone at are confirmed terrorist targets at the highest level". Regardless of whether or not those killed were in fact dangerous, the inability to account for their identities invites scepticism towards US military operations and raises moral concerns about basic respect for human dignity.

In April 2015, Jeremy Scahill reported that a US military base in Ramstein, Germany, is the "the high-tech heart of America's drone program". Top-secret US documents obtained by *The Intercept*, Scahill reported, provide "the most detailed

blueprint seen to date of the technical architecture used to conduct strikes with Predator and Reaper drones". Most drone pilots operate in the US, but depend on Ramstein to control their aircraft.

4. Popular Resistance to Corporate Water Grabbing

In January 2000, the people of Cochabamba, Bolivia, shut down the city in protest against the privatisation of their municipal water system which had resulted in rate hikes that doubled or tripled their water bills. In February of that year, Pacific News Service correspondent Jim Shultz broke the story in the Western press with "A War Over Water", his first-hand reports of clashes between riot police and protesters. On the 15th anniversary of the Cochabamba protests, popular resistance to corporate water control continues to expand around the world, encompassing remunicipalisation of privatised water utilities, direct action against unjust water shutoffs, and rainwater harvesting. A common theme—access to water as a fundamental human right—unites these three issues.

As Ellen Brown reported, today's "water wars" not only pit local farmers against ranchers or urbanites, but also involve new corporate "water barons" including Goldman Sachs, JPMorgan Chase, Citigroup, The Carlyle Group and other investment firms that are purchasing water rights from around the world at an unprecedented pace.

A 2014 report on water grabbing defined it in these terms: water grabbing refers to situations where powerful actors are able to take control of or reallocate to their own benefit water resources at the expense of previous (un)registered local users or the ecosystems on which those users' livelihoods are based. It involves the capturing of the decision-making power around water, including the power to decide how and for what purposes water resources are used now and in the future.

The authors of this report identified five "interlinked" drivers of the current "new wave of water grabbing":

- Changing patterns in global food markets have triggered a renewed interest in acquiring land and water resources for agricultural production.
- Rising oil prices and concerns that a "peak oil" period has been reached have led to the rise of agrifuels that use large amounts of water throughout the production cycle.
- Growing global demand for raw materials underpins the continued expansion of the extractive industries and large-scale mining projects—including, in particular, hydraulic fracturing or "fracking".
- The market-based management of water resources,

especially the privatisation of water systems and services, which jeopardises water access for poor and marginalised groups in many developing countries.

- The financialisation of water utilities, infrastructures and the resource itself.

Corporate efforts to privatise water rights are meeting robust grassroots resistance as communities around the world assert their rights to decide how water resources are used. Over the past 15 years, as Victoria Collier reported for CounterPunch, there have been 180 cases across 35 countries of water "remunicipalization", with water control returned from private ownership to the public. "From Spain to Buenos Aires, Cochabamba to Kazakhstan, Berlin to Malaysia, water privatization is being aggressively rejected," she reported.

In opposition to the fast-growing private-public partnership (PPP) model, which Collier described as a

"marketing euphemism for privatization", communities in Japan, the Netherlands, India, Costa Rica, Brazil and other countries are now pursuing public-public partnerships (PUPs) to forestall corporate water takeovers and to develop "non-profit, public-driven solutions for water infrastructure needs".

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5. Fukushima Nuclear Disaster Deepens

The 2011 nuclear reactor meltdown in Fukushima, Japan, continues unresolved, despite both assurances by government authorities and major news media that the situation has been contained and the assessment of the United Nations International Atomic Energy Agency that Japan has made "significant progress" in cleaning up the site.

The continued dumping of extremely radioactive cooling water into the Pacific Ocean from the destroyed nuclear plant, with radiation already being detected along the Japanese coastline, has the potential to have an impact on entire portions of the Pacific Ocean and North America's western shoreline. While acknowledging that the water in remaining tanks at the Fukushima facility is heavily "tainted", the Japanese government's Nuclear Regulation Authority affirmed in a December 2014 statement a decision to dump it into the Pacific.

Aside from the potential release of plutonium into the Pacific Ocean, Tokyo Electric Power Company (TEPCO) admitted that the facility is releasing a whopping 150 billion becquerels of tritium and seven billion becquerels of caesium- and strontium-contaminated water into the ocean every day. By contrast, the Japanese government does not allow over 100 becquerels per kilogram to be sold to its citizenry. "This water contains

plutonium 239 and its release into the Ocean has both local as well as global repercussions," wrote Michel Chossudovsky of Global Research.

In August 2014, TEPCO acknowledged that nearly every fuel rod at Reactor 3 in the No. 1 plant had melted as a result of the earthquake and tsunami, Sarah Lazare reported, drawing on Japanese press sources. Previously, TEPCO had estimated that only 63 per cent of the reactor's nuclear fuel had melted. The TEPCO statement also noted that the fuel began melting six hours earlier than previously believed. Both factors, Lazare wrote, would make the extraction and disposal of melted fuel more difficult.

More than four years since the tsunami and earthquake devastated Fukushima, corporate media do not treat the ongoing disaster itself as significantly newsworthy. Instead, most developing corporate coverage focuses on whether other countries, including the USA, are adequately prepared if a similar type of nuclear disaster were to occur elsewhere. Certainly this is an important consideration, but the plight of the Japanese people displaced by the disaster, not to mention the long-term, potentially global environmental consequences, remains dramatically underreported in the corporate press.

In May 2015, the Japanese Nuclear Regulation Authority gave final clearance to the Sendai Nuclear Power Plant, which is owned and operated by the Kyushu Electric Power Company, to restart operations. It is the nation's first nuclear power plant to resume operations, under new government regulations, since the 2011 Fukushima disaster. Russia Today reported: "Despite objections from almost two thirds of the public, [Japanese Prime Minister Shinzo] Abe wants nuclear plants to supply about 20–22 percent of Japan's energy needs by 2030."

6. Methane and Arctic Warming's Global Impacts

In recent years, atmospheric methane levels have reached an all-time high. A greenhouse gas that is a leading contributor to global warming, methane is far more destructive than carbon dioxide. In his report for Truthout, Dahr Jamail quoted Paul Beckwith, a part-time professor of climatology and meteorology at the University of Ottawa: "...our climate system is in early stages of abrupt climate change that, unchecked, will lead to a temperature rise of 5 to 6 degrees Celsius within a decade or two." Such changes would have "unprecedented effects" for life on Earth.

The melting of Arctic ice releases previously trapped methane into the atmosphere. "What happens in the

Arctic," Beckwith observed, "does not stay in the Arctic." The loss of Arctic ice affects the Earth as a whole. For example, as the temperature difference between the Arctic and the equator decreases, the jet stream increases. This in turn speeds the melting of Arctic ice.

Dr Leonid Yurganov, a senior research scientist at the University of Maryland and the Joint Center for Earth Systems Technology, stated: "Increased methane would influence air temperature near the surface. This would accelerate the Arctic warming and change the climate everywhere in the world."

The East Siberian Arctic Shelf (ESAS) is one area of particular concern. Some two million square kilometres in size, the ESAS releases 17 million tons of methane into the atmosphere each year, according to a recent study. Dr Natalia Shakhova, a research associate professor with the University of Alaska Fairbanks International Arctic Research Center, reported that ESAS emissions "are prone to be non-gradual (massive, abrupt)".

A 2013 study, published in *Nature*, reported that a 50-gigaton "burp" of methane is "highly possible at any time".

7. Fear of Government Spying is "Chilling" Writers' Freedom of Expression

Mass surveillance has "badly shaken writers' faith that democratic governments will respect their rights to privacy and freedom of expression",

according to a January 2015 PEN America report based on the responses of 772 writers from 50 countries.

Reporting for Common Dreams, Lauren McCauley covered not only the PEN America report, but also a July 2014 report by the American Civil Liberties Union and Human Rights Watch indicating that US journalists and lawyers increasingly avoid work on potentially controversial topics due to fear of government spying.

8. Who Dies at the Hands of US Police—and How Often

Compared with other capitalist countries, the United States is unquestionably different when it comes to the level of state violence directed against minorities, Richard Becker reported in January 2015 for *Liberation*. Using 2011 figures, Becker wrote that, on a per capita basis, "the rate of killing by U.S. police was about 100 times that of English cops in 2011". Similarly, US police were "40 times as likely to kill as German police officers", and "20 times as likely to kill as their Canadian counterparts". This, Becker noted, is probably not the kind of "American exceptionalism" that President Obama had in mind when he addressed graduating West Point cadets in May 2014.

It is not clear how many people that police in the US

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kill each year, since there is no federal agency that accurately keeps track of such information. The FBI compiles annual statistics for "justified homicides" by police, and all reported police killings are registered as "justified" killings by the FBI. Participation in reporting homicides to the FBI by police and sheriff's departments is voluntary, but only about 800 police agencies—out of 18,000—provide statistics.

According to FBI statistics, there were 461 "justified homicides" by police in 2013, but the website KilledByPolice.net reported that "U.S. non-military police killed 748 people in just the last eight months of 2013, and 1,100 in 2014". The Killed By Police figures were compiled using establishment media sources; but because not every police killing is reported, and checking all news sources across the country is virtually impossible, these figures likely underestimate the number of police killings of civilians.

In England, which Becker characterised as "also a capitalist country with a long history of racism", police do not carry guns on patrol. Official records indicate that police in England fired guns only three times while on duty in 2013, with "zero reported fatalities".

In recent months [late 2014], there has been an outpouring of opposition to police murder in the United States. Hundreds of thousands have taken to the streets in hundreds of cities, towns and campuses. "As in all other progressive struggles throughout history," Becker wrote, "it is the movement of the people in the streets, schools and workplaces that is the key to real change."

In June 2015, a team of reporters at the *Guardian* filed a major new report on police killings in the US. Summarising findings from the study, Jon Swaine, Oliver Laughland and Jamiles Lartey reported that 102 unarmed people were killed by US police through the first five months of 2015, and that "agencies are killing people at twice the rate calculated by the US government". Furthermore, they wrote: "Black Americans are more than twice as likely to be unarmed when killed during encounters with police as white people." Based on analysis of public records, local news reports and the *Guardian*'s own reporting, they noted that "32% of black people killed by police in 2015 were unarmed, as were 25% of Hispanic and Latino people, compared with 15% of white people killed".

Over the five-month period covered in the study, *Guardian* researchers identified 27 people killed by police

use of Tasers. All but one of these victims were unarmed. The study also documented 14 officer-involved deaths following altercations in custody, including that of Freddie Gray, whose death from a broken neck sustained in a Baltimore police van led to public protests and the indictment of six city police officers.

9. Millions in Poverty Get Less Media Coverage Than Billionaires Do

In June 2014, Fairness and Accuracy in Reporting published a study showing that ABC *World News*, CBS *Evening News* and NBC *Nightly News* give more media coverage to the 482 billionaires in the US than to the 50 million people in poverty, airing almost four times as many stories that included the term "billionaire" as stories including terms such as "homeless" or "welfare".

"The notion that the wealthiest nation on Earth has one in every six of its citizens living at or below the poverty threshold reflects not a lack of resources, but a lack of policy focus and attention—and this is due to a lack of public awareness to the issue," Frederick Reese of MintPress News wrote.

10. Costa Rica Setting the Standard on Renewable Energy

For 75 days straight during the first months of 2015, the nation of Costa Rica did not burn any fossil fuels to generate electricity. Instead, as a result of heavy rainfall, hydropower plants generated almost all of the country's electricity. The country's geothermal, wind and solar energy sources made reliance on coal and petroleum sources unnecessary.

11. Pesticide Manufacturers Spend Millions on PR Response to Declining Bee Populations

A May 2014 study from Harvard's School of Public Health showed that two widely used neonicotinoids appear to cause significant harm to honeybee colonies. In April 2015, *Science* magazine published two additional studies, whose findings corroborate and extend those of the Harvard study.

Neonicotinoids are used as seed treatments in more than 140 crops. They are systemic pesticides, meaning they are absorbed through roots and leaves and distributed throughout an entire plant, including its pollen and nectar. For pollinators, low-level exposure can lead to sublethal effects such as altered learning, impaired foraging and immune suppression; at higher levels, exposure can be deadly.

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In response to scientific evidence like this, three of the leading corporations that produce neonicotinoid pesticides—Bayer, Syngenta and Monsanto—have engaged in massive public relations campaigns, costing more than US\$100 million and employing tactics similar to those that Big Tobacco used for decades to deny public health findings.

As Michele Simon reported in a study for Friends of the Earth, these tactics include creating distractions by blaming anything but the pesticides for documented collapses in honeybee populations—including, for example, blaming farmers for misuse of the pesticides. These companies also attack scientists and journalists to discredit their findings.

At the same time, Bayer, Syngenta and Monsanto attempt to buy credibility by cultivating alliances and strategic partnerships with farmers, beekeepers and agricultural organisations by representing themselves as "Friends of the Bees". Thus, for example, Monsanto announced the formation of a Honey Bee Advisory Council, a strategic alliance of Monsanto executives and others. The British Beekeepers Association received significant funding from Bayer, Syngenta and other pesticide companies; in return, it endorsed the insecticides as "bee-friendly".

12. Seeds of Doubt: USDA Ignores Popular Critiques of New Pesticide-Resistant Genetically Modified Crops

Despite nearly 400,000 petition signatures from citizens, health professionals and farmers expressing public opposition, in September 2014 the US Department of Agriculture (USDA) approved a new generation of genetically engineered corn and soybeans created by the biotech company Dow AgroSciences. The new Enlist™ brand seeds will tolerate a new weedkiller also engineered by Dow, called Enlist Duo™, which combines for the first time two common herbicides: 2,4-

Dichlorophenoxyacetic acid, a component of the toxic Agent Orange herbicide used during the Vietnam War, and glyphosate, the key element in Monsanto's Roundup® herbicide. Since some weeds have developed resistance to either 2,4-D or glyphosate, Dow aimed to combine the two into a single, more effective herbicide in Enlist Duo.

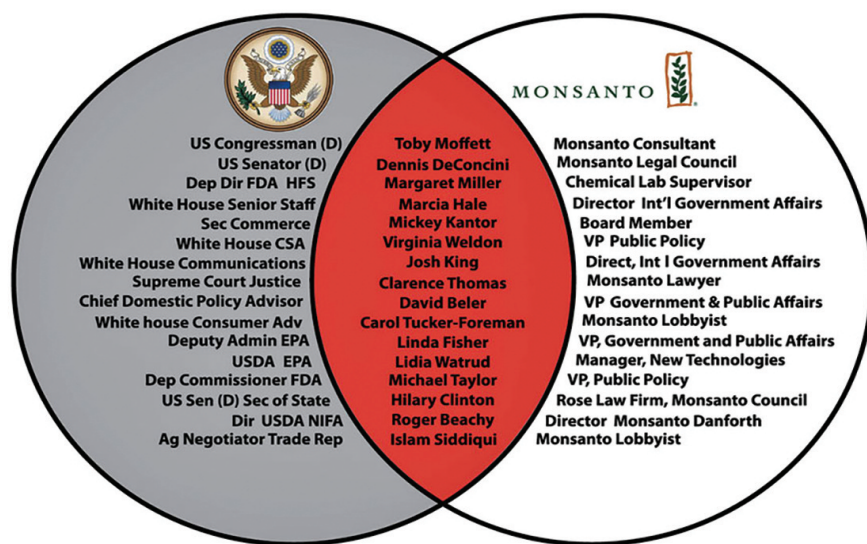
The USDA approved the new Enlist Duo—resistant seeds, even though it acknowledged that this approval "could increase use of 2,4-D by as much as 600 percent and possibly affect nearby crops such as tomatoes and grapes not engineered to resist the chemical" according to Anastasia Pantsios's reporting. Her report continued: "As farmers have been encouraged to devote more and more acres to single crops (aka 'monocropping') and use huge doses of glyphosate-based herbicides to deal with weeds, so-called 'superweeds' have cropped up that are resistant to the herbicides. But many farmers and food safety advocates fear that increased applications of more powerful herbicides will only cause more resistant weeds to appear."

The herbicide 2,4-D not only threatens crop integrity, but is also associated with public safety risks including various forms of cancer, Parkinson's disease, hormone disruption and birth defects.

Spokespersons for numerous organisations, including the Center for Food Safety and the Organic Consumers Association, condemned the USDA decision. Pantsios reported that Wenonah Hauter, executive director of Food & Water Watch, said that "the USDA ignored public opposition and its responsibility to protect public health and agriculture". Hauter called the approval of 2,4-D-ready crops "one of the most negligent decisions that the USDA has made in the nearly twenty years since genetically engineered crops have been on the market".

As Mary Ellen Kustin and Soren Rundquist reported, research shows that almost 500 elementary schools are

located within 200 feet [~61 metres] of soybean and corn fields. "This finding is alarming," they wrote, "because young children are especially vulnerable to the toxic herbicide 2,4-D in Dow AgroSciences' Enlist Duo™..." Kustin and Rundquist noted that although "Dow claims that Enlist Duo would not drift more than 202 feet [61.6 metres] if applied properly", the EPA's own risk assessment found that "other formulations of 2,4-D have drifted more than 1,000 feet [~305 metres]". They concluded: "The EPA needs to pay considerably more attention to the additional exposure risks borne by young children who live or study near corn and soybean fields than it did in its risk assessment."



The revolving door between Monsanto and the US government.
(Source: The Cornucopia Institute, <http://tinyurl.com/mamce5b>)

13. Pentagon and NATO Encircle Russia and China

In service of corporate capital and with vested interests in the regions' natural resources, the Pentagon and the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) have been encircling Russia and China with military bases and missile defence systems, Bruce K. Gagnon reported.

The US has established military bases in Romania and Bulgaria, with plans for another in Albania, in an attempt to surround Russia. Bases with missile defence systems are located in Turkey, Poland and Romania, while US Navy destroyers with comparable capabilities operate in the Black Sea. Similarly, NATO has expanded into Latvia, Lithuania and Estonia on Russia's border, with talk of Georgia, Sweden, Ukraine and Finland joining NATO and thus adding to the potential for encirclement. US and NATO deployment is designed to "safeguard oil and gas fields in the [Caspian Sea] region", according to General James Jones in 2006 when he was NATO's Supreme Allied Commander Europe.

The US Navy is also preparing to increase its presence in the Arctic, officially to "protect shipping". However, Senator Angus King (Independent-ME) has observed that previously inaccessible fossil fuels in the Arctic will now be accessible, suggesting that, as in the Caspian Sea region, protection of sea lanes is linked to the potential for increased oil extraction in the Arctic.

In encircling China, the US Navy has Aegis-equipped destroyers with missile capabilities patrolling the region. In addition to the naval presence, there are 30 ground-based missile defence systems in South Korea as well as at bases located in Hawaii, South Korea, Japan, Guam, Okinawa, Taiwan, Australia and the Philippines.

Author and professor Noam Chomsky has described US foreign and military policy regarding oil supplies as a "lever of world domination". Control over natural resources keeps competing markets dependent on the US as well as in line with its interests.

14. Global Forced Displacement Tops Fifty Million

On World Refugee Day 2014, the global total of people who had undergone forced displacement was the highest on record since World War II. A "Global Trends" report compiled by the UNHCR (United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees) established a figure of 51.2 million globally displaced people at the end of 2013, an increase of six million from 45.2 million in 2012. The globally displaced population consists of refugees, asylum seekers, and internally displaced people who have fled their homes to other parts of their home countries.

Refugees account for 16.7 million people worldwide—

including over six million who had been in exile for more than five years by the end of 2013. Over half (53 per cent) of the 11.7 million refugees under the UNHCR's mandate came from three countries: Afghanistan (2.56 million), the Syrian Arab Republic (2.47 million) and Somalia (1.12 million). (The remaining five million Palestinian refugees are registered under the United Nations Relief and Works Agency, UNRWA.) In a span of just five years, Syria has gone from being the world's second-largest refugee-hosting country to being its second-largest refugee-producing country.

The report documented nearly 1.2 million asylum seekers, including a record 25,300 asylum applications from children who had been separated from or were unaccompanied by their parents. Internally displaced people amounted to a record 33.3 million people, the largest increase of any group in the "Global Trends" report. The UNHCR noted that "helping these people

represents a special challenge as many are in conflict zones".

Further, the report noted that the figure of 51.2 million forcibly displaced people does not include the worldwide population of stateless people. Noting that statelessness "remains hard to quantify with precision", the UNHCR reported a figure of 3.5 million stateless people based on data reported by the governments of 75 countries. However, recognising

limits in that data, the UNHCR estimated that statelessness affected closer to 10 million in 2013.

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15. Big Sugar Borrowing Tactics from Big Tobacco

The Union of Concerned Scientists reported in June 2014 that "food and beverage manufacturers along with industry-supported organizations such as trade associations, front groups, and public relations firms" have actively sought to ensure that Americans continue to consume sugar at high levels.

The sugar industry has adopted many of the same tactics previously developed and employed by the tobacco industry, including attacking scientific evidence, spreading misinformation through industry websites, research institutes and trade associations to deceive the public, deploying industry scientists, influencing academia and undermining policy.

16. US Military Sexual Assault of Colombian Children

According to an 800-page report commissioned by the Colombian government and the Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia (FARC), US military personnel raped at least 54 children in Colombia between 2003 and 2007. Adriaan Alsema, writing for Colombia Reports, was first to report the story in the English-language

press on 23 March 2015. Alsema's article highlighted the subsection of the report authored by scholar Renán Vega, who documented that US military contractors sexually abused more than 50 underage girls in the town of Melgar in 2004. Vega reported "abundant information about the sexual violence" as well as the US contractors' "absolute impunity" due to "bilateral agreements and the diplomatic immunity of United States officials". According to Vega, the US military contractors also "filmed [the abuse] and sold the films as pornographic material".

Alsema's report documented additional instances of sexual abuse, including the drugging and rape of a 12-year-old girl by Sergeant Michael Coen and defence contractor César Ruiz in 2007. Despite warrants issued for the arrest of Coen and Ruiz by Colombian prosecutors, the warrants were not executed due to diplomatic immunity granted to US military personnel and civilian contractors. In fact, Alsema reported, no arrests have been made in any of the cases regarding children raped by US military contractors.

17. Media "Whitewash" Senate's CIA Torture Report

Although the corporate and progressive press alike focused public attention on the US Senate Intelligence Committee's December 2014 report on the CIA's secret program of abductions, "brutal" interrogations and torture of terrorism suspects, Nafeez Ahmed reported that this coverage has "whitewashed the extent to which torture has always been an integral and systematic intelligence practice since the second World War".

Despite President Barack Obama's claims that he officially banned torture in 2009, these practices continue today, "under the careful recalibration of Obama and his senior military intelligence officials", serving to "legitimize the existence and expansion of the national security apparatus", Ahmed wrote.

President Obama did not ban torture in 2009, Ahmed reported, and now his administration is "exploiting the new Senate report to convince the world that the intelligence community's systematic embroilment in torture was merely a Bush-era aberration that is now safely in the past". In fact, Obama's 2009 executive order "rehabilitated torture". That order required that interrogation techniques fit the US *Army Field Manual*, which complies with the Geneva Convention prohibitions against torture that date back to 1956. However, in 2006, revisions to the manual added 19 different methods of interrogation that "went far beyond the original Geneva-inspired restrictions" of the previous

field manual. At the time, Obama's Director of National Intelligence, Admiral Dennis Blair, advised the Senate Intelligence Committee that the *Army Field Manual* revisions allowing "new forms of harsh interrogation" would remain classified.

"What we are seeing now," Ahmed wrote, "is not the Obama administration putting an end to torture, but rather putting an end to the open acknowledgement of the use of torture as a routine intelligence practice."

The Senate's complete report ran to 6,700 pages, yet after White House objections only a 499-page summary was published in December 2014, with significant details redacted. As the Bureau of Investigative Journalism reported, less than one quarter of the 119 detainees named in the Senate report on the CIA's secret torture program are actually housed at the Guantánamo Bay military prison. The Bureau's investigation has produced a database providing details of what occurred to each of the 119 individuals.

Research by the Bureau of Investigative Journalism documented that only 36 individuals of the 119 were sent to Guantánamo after CIA interrogation. Of these, 29 remained as of January 2015. Seven of the 36 were released between March 2007 and January 2010, with six moved abroad and one sent to a maximum-security prison on the US mainland.

This search engine can access over 850 billion personal records, including private phone calls, emails, Internet chats and some cellphone locations.

18. ICREACH: The NSA's Secret Search Engine

Based on documents leaked by Edward Snowden, Ryan Gallagher reported for The Intercept that the National Security Agency (NSA) has developed a "Google-like" search engine called ICREACH, which has the capacity to gather personal information. This search engine can access over 850 billion personal records, including private phone calls, emails, Internet chats and some cellphone locations. The NSA is sharing the data collected through its ICREACH program with nearly two dozen US government agencies.

"The documents provide the first definitive evidence," Gallagher wrote, "that the NSA has for years made massive amounts of surveillance data directly accessible to domestic law enforcement agencies." Planning documents specifically identify the Federal Bureau of Investigation (FBI), the Central Intelligence Agency (CIA) and the Drug Enforcement Administration (DEA) as "core members", Gallagher reported.

According to a December 2007 NSA secret document: "The ICREACH team delivered the first-ever wholesale sharing of communications metadata within the U.S. Intelligence Community." The Intercept reported that one key issue raised by the ICREACH program is whether

domestic law enforcement agencies, such as the FBI or the DEA, have used ICREACH to trigger secret investigations of US citizens through a controversial process known as "parallel construction".

As Gallagher explained, parallel construction involves information gathered covertly by law enforcement agents, who subsequently create a new evidence trail that excludes the original, covert one. "This hides the true origin of the investigation from defense lawyers and, on occasion, prosecutors and judges—which means the legality of the evidence that triggered the investigation cannot be challenged in court."

19. "Most Comprehensive" Assessment Yet Warns Against Geoengineering Risks

Two comprehensive reports by dozens of researchers convened by the National Academy of Sciences (NAS) offered "a fairly damning critique of geoengineering", according to Tim McDonnell of *Mother Jones*. Highly controversial, geoengineering refers to technological efforts to counteract global warming by altering the atmosphere's chemical composition.

The first of the two NAS reports found that most proposals to remove carbon dioxide from the atmosphere—through processes such as fertilising the ocean with iron to dissolve carbon dioxide—are too expensive to be implemented widely.

However, as Robinson Meyer reported in the *Atlantic*, a February 2015 University of Oxford study found that reforestation—planting trees—is among the "most promising" short-term responses to climate change.

The Academy's second report evaluated proposals to seed the atmosphere with particles to reflect sunlight back into space, a process known as "albedo modification". According to the NAS study, albedo modification is inexpensive compared with carbon dioxide removal proposals but involves unknown risks. Implementing technologies to block solar radiation would entail "significant potential for unanticipated, unmanageable, and regrettable consequences in multiple human dimensions...including political, social, legal, economic, and ethical dimensions" according to the authors of the NAS study.

As Jeremy Schulman reported in a subsequent article in *Mother Jones*, Ken Caldeira, one of the climate scientists who first ran models to test potential geoengineering solutions, continues to advocate geoengineering research—but not as an immediate or best response. As

Schulman reported, Caldeira would "much rather stave off global warming by drastically cutting carbon emissions". Caldeira's stance aligns with the conclusions of the National Academy of Sciences.

20. FBI Seeks "Backdoors" in New Communications Technology

Responding to announcements by Apple and Google that they would make customers' smartphone and computer data more secure, in October 2014 the FBI's director James Comey announced that the Bureau was seeking to enlarge its data collection capabilities to include direct access to cellphones, tablets and computers through an expansion of the 1994

Communications Assistance for Law Enforcement Act (CALEA). Comey told an audience at the Brookings Institution that expanding surveillance was in the interest of public safety to protect the nation against potential terrorist threats.

According to the FBI director: "Unfortunately, the law hasn't kept pace with technology, and this disconnect has created a significant public-safety problem." Specifically, Comey called on Congress to update CALEA to mandate all software and hardware providers to build interception methods into their products and services.

21. The New Amazon of the North: Canadian Deforestation

Since 2000, Canada has led the world in deforestation, despite being overshadowed by reports of the forests in Brazil and Indonesia. With only 10 per cent of the world's forests, Canada now accounts for 21 per cent of all deforestation in

the world. Surges in oil sands and shale gas development, logging and road expansion have been the major contributors to the destruction of Canada's forests. According to Stephen Leahy, writing for the Inter Press Service, deforestation by Canada and other countries deposits more carbon dioxide into the atmosphere than does all of the world's transportation machinery.

22. Global Killing of Environmentalists Rises Drastically

A 2014 report, *Deadly Environment*, by the nongovernmental organisation Global Witness revealed that from 2002 to 2013 at least 908 people globally were killed due to their environmental advocacy, with the rate of murder doubling in the last four years. Latin America and Asia show the highest rates of

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violence as tensions over limited natural resources in these regions escalate. Will Potter wrote for *Foreign Policy* that, today, "Brazil remains overwhelmingly more dangerous for environmentalists than other countries". Twice as many environmentalists were killed in Brazil as in any other country. However, Brazil is just one especially striking case in what is a global trend.

Though the Global Witness report is significant, it has limitations of its own, Potter noted. "The research is confined to 74 countries in Africa, Asia, and Central and South America, and it only includes murders," he observed. "Nonlethal violence and intimidation, which [are] much more pervasive, are left out." Further, the report does not address the "well-documented history of violence against environmentalists in Western countries".

23. Unprocessed Rape Kits

A report by the White House Council on Women and Girls titled "Rape and Sexual Assault: A Renewed Call to Action", issued in January 2014, revealed that nearly one in five US women have experienced rape or attempted rape in their lifetime.

Furthermore, the report indicated that, although the testing of rape kits—forensic exams that collect evidence of rape or sexual assault, including the perpetrator's DNA—can be "vital for the prosecution of cases", a backlog of untested rape kits may factor into low rape prosecution rates. The report described a DNA Backlog Reduction Program, administered through the National Institute of Justice, which would fund 120 state and local crime labs to conduct DNA testing.

In March 2014, the White House announced that its fiscal year 2015 budget would provide \$35 million for a new grant program to "inventory and test rape kits, develop 'cold case' units to pursue new investigative leads, and support victims throughout the process".

24. NSA's AURORAGOLD Program Hacks Cellphones around the World

The National Security Agency (NSA) has hacked cellphone networks worldwide for many years, according to a report in *The Intercept* based on documents provided by Edward Snowden.

Ryan Gallagher's article analysed the contents of at least nine NSA documents that show how the NSA has spied on hundreds of companies as well as other countries that are close to the US. As Gallagher reported, through a secret program codenamed AURORAGOLD the NSA sought "security weaknesses in cellphone technology" to "exploit for surveillance". Furthermore, Gallagher wrote, the documents also

revealed NSA plans "to secretly introduce new flaws into communication systems" which would make those systems easier for the NSA to access—a "controversial tactic that security experts say could be exposing the general population to criminal hackers".

AURORAGOLD monitored the contents of messages sent and received by over 1,200 email accounts associated with major cellphone service providers. In some cases, this allowed the NSA to intercept "confidential company planning papers" that would help it "hack into phone networks", Gallagher wrote.

"Even if you love the NSA and you say you have nothing to hide, you should be against a policy that introduces security vulnerabilities," said Karsten Nohl, a leading cellphone security expert and cryptographer, "because once NSA introduces a weakness, a vulnerability, it's not only the NSA that can exploit it".

The existence of the NSA surveillance units that

...through a secret program codenamed AURORAGOLD the NSA sought "security weaknesses in cellphone technology" to "exploit for surveillance".

conducted AURORAGOLD has not been publicly disclosed. However, the NSA documents revealed that as of May 2012, the agency had technical information on "about 70 percent of cellphone networks worldwide—701 of an estimated 985—and was maintaining a list of 1,201 email 'selectors' used to intercept internal company details from employees", wrote Gallagher ("Selector" is an NSA term for a

unique identifier, such as an email address or a telephone number.) AURORAGOLD appears to have been active since 2010, according to the documents.

Summarising Nohl's comments, Gallagher noted that "the broad scope of information swept up in the operation appears aimed at ensuring virtually every cellphone network in the world is NSA accessible".

25. Greenland's Meltwater Adds to Rising Sea Levels

In February 2015, Tim Radford reported for the *Climate News Network* that atmospheric warming is capable of reaching thousands of metres below Greenland's massive ice sheet, potentially increasing the glaciers' rate of flow and creating pools of "meltwater" trapped below the ice. Two separate but related studies confirmed that surface melt can drain down to fill concealed lakes under the ice, ultimately contributing to rising sea levels. ∞

Editor's Note

This article is edited from Project Censored's compilation. To see the complete text, links and references, go to www.projectcensored.org/category/top-25-of-2014-2015. The book *Censored 2016: Media Freedom on the Line* is now available from <http://www.projectcensored.org>.