

International

# Love thy neighbor: Sanctuary churches in US protect migrants

## Millions facing expulsion under tough new immigration guidelines

**GREENSBORO:** Business owner Oscar Canales has spent the past three months confined to a church basement in the US city of Greensboro, knowing he could face deportation to El Salvador the moment he steps outside. Expulsion would mean tearing him apart from his wife and three American children, not to mention shuttering the thriving roofing company he founded which today employs six US citizens.

Canales first came to authorities' attention six years ago, when he was arrested for lacking papers following a minor accident at a traffic light. But with no criminal record, past administrations chose to overlook the fact he crossed the border illegally in 2005 and issued him work permits that were renewed every year. Now, he and millions of others are facing expulsion under tough new immigration guidelines instituted by President Donald Trump.

In response, some progressive Christian groups have boosted their efforts to protect vulnerable migrants by exploiting the protected "sanctuary" status of their places of worship while providing shelter and legal aid to would-be deportees. Canales, who received his deportation order last December, has been living in the United Church of Christ since January 17. He cannot imagine leaving America. "All my family is here, my wife, my kids," he says, adding he is fearful of being forced to face the violent gangs of a homeland he left long ago. "They can take one kid and ask for money. If you don't give it today, they can do anything. They can kill people."

“All my family is here, my wife, my kids”

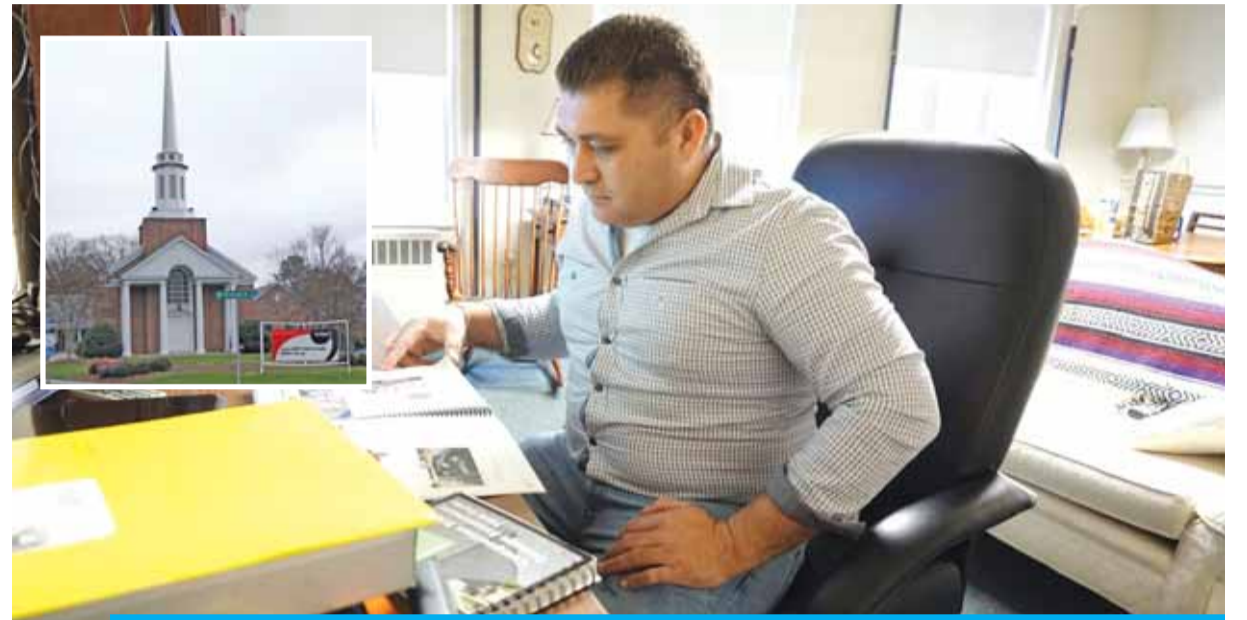
### Growing movement

Canales is among more than 40 people currently known to be taking sanctuary in US churches, a figure that has skyrocketed since Trump's election in 2016, when there were just five, according to the Reverend Noel Andersen of the Church World Service which tracks the movement. "Under the Obama era there was a lot more prosecutorial discretion" especially for those who have committed low-level offenses such as traffic violations, or had community or family ties like Canales, he said. "Essentially Trump comes in and gets rid of the priority guidelines, and anyone who is undocumented is a priority"-a group that is estimated to number some 11 million.

In Trump's first year, US Immigration and Customs Enforcement arrested 109,000 criminals and 46,000 people without criminal records—a 171 percent increase in the number of non-criminal arrests over 2016. The goals of the sanctuary movement are to prevent the break-up of families, win legal reprieve for as many people as they can, and effect narrative change. Their philosophy is at odds with the anti-immigration tide that has swept the country's political right, particularly in many southern states which are also a bastion of right-leaning Evangelicals.

### Rooted in faith

But for the Reverend Julie Peoples, the Greensboro pastor, her duty to provide shelter to those in need couldn't be more clear. "Jesus teaches us to love our



**GREENSBORO:** Business owner Oscar Canales works at the Congregational United Church of Christ where he is living in sanctuary. (Inset) The United Church of Christ, a sanctuary church.—AFP photos

neighbor as ourselves, that was the most important command of all," said the soft spoken preacher who has led her congregation since 1991. "We are convinced that Jesus wouldn't call anyone an alien, for starters, that we are all human beings, that we are all children of God-I believe personally that God crosses all our borders and has no interest in or respect for the borders that we create."

Canales is the second person to benefit from sanctuary at the Greensboro congregation—the first was single moth-

er Minerva Cisneros Garcia, 42, who came from Mexico's Guerrero state in 2000 with her first son, who became blind as a baby as a result of cancer.

Like Canales, Minerva was a law abiding citizen who was caught up in an immigrant raid in 2009, after which she was granted stays at her annual hearings. But last spring she received a letter in her mailbox informing her that her time in the US was up, and she would have to leave her three sons behind.—AFP

## Migrant weary northerners put faith in Italy's League

**VARESE:** In the picturesque northern city of Varese, nestled in Italy's rich Lombardy region, voters turned en masse to the anti-immigration League party in the general election, convinced that only nationalists would put their interests first. "With the League in power, I won't have to deal with people coming here from abroad who are willing to earn less than me to do the same job," said Davide Quadri, a 25-year-old law student as he celebrated the League's win at the party's local headquarters.

Though the country was plunged into uncertainty on election night, with no party or coalition obtaining the votes to form a government, the far-right League surged in the polls. Led by ambitious leader Matteo Salvini, it became the biggest party within its coalition—which scooped 37 percent of the vote—emboldening its supporters. "All that (immigration) has to stop, so that young people study, work and have a future here," added Quadri.

Surrounded by party posters emblazoned with the League emblem—a warrior brandishing a sword towards the sky—newly elected MP Matteo Bianchi said young people had been "let down by leftists politics over the last few years". "It explains Italy's brain drain: this misfortune that pushes young qualified people out of Lombardy to start life abroad."

Born in the 1980s as a northern secessionist movement, the League has rebranded itself as a nationalist party, rallying against traditional politics and raging about hundreds of thousands of illegal migrants in Italy. Banners plastered on the walls of the Varese offices denounce "the dominance of Rome," the collusion between "politics and mafia", or simply declare "No, to the immigrant vote."

### 'Feeling of insecurity'

In the Varese province, where unemployment stands at 8.2 percent—higher than the average for the region but 3.5 percent lower than the national rate—the League made historic gains, with some candidates obtaining one in every two votes. "This result is linked to the wave of immi-



**MILAN:** In this picture taken on January 10, 2014 the leader of far-right League party (Lega), Matteo Salvini (R) sits next to Toni Iwobi, chief immigration spokesman of the League during the presentation of a demonstration against immigration.—AFP

gration over these last years and to the feeling of insecurity that it has brought with it," says 34-year old legal advisor Chiara Gorone. "Even in little villages, we are confronted with migrants squatting in buildings, its true that we'd like to go back to a calmer situation," she added.

The party has had to fend off accusations of racism, especially after Lombardy's new governor and League representative, Attilio Fontana, called on Italy to defend the "white race" during the election campaign. But supporters say Italy has done more than its fair share to house the migrants who have arrived on the country's shores by boat from Libya. They also point to Tony Iwobi, 62, who became the first black senator ever to be elected in Italy after Sunday's vote and hails from the anti-migrant movement.

Promises to send immigrants back home was not the only string in the League's bow. In Lombardy, it drew

support from residents who believe the party will grant them greater regional autonomy. In a consultative referendum last October in Lombardy and Veneto, an overwhelming majority of voters from these two regions, which together account for 30 percent of the country's GDP, voted 'yes'. In the strongly industrial region, the League also won over small and medium business owners, with the promise of tax cuts.

"Thirty years ago, Italian entrepreneurs were envied worldwide for their creativity, then the decline started and today the best want to go abroad," said 67-year-old Eugenio Malnati, who manages a small business. "Taxes, bureaucracy, all that has smothered us," he added. And don't even mention the concept of basic universal income, promised to poor Italians by the Five star Movement. For those in wealthy Lombardy, the incentive is seen as a reward for laziness.—AFP

## Protesters held after scaling Iran embassy in London

**LONDON:** Four protesters were arrested after gaining access to the balcony of the Iranian embassy in London on Friday, police said, prompting a complaint from Tehran about security at the building. "We were called at 4.20 pm (1620 GMT) to reports of four protesters on the balcony of the Iranian embassy in Princes Gate, Knightsbridge," a spokeswoman for London's Metropolitan Police said.

At around 6.40 pm (1840 GMT) all four men were arrested on suspicion of criminal damage and being unlawfully on diplomatic premises. "All four people have been taken to a central London police station. They remain there in custody," the spokeswoman said. It is understood the protesters did not manage to get inside the building. Iranian foreign ministry spokesman Bahram Ghasemi said Tehran had lodged a strong protest with the British government over the incident, according to the IRNA state news agency. The report said supporters of an "extreme cult" living in Britain were responsible. Iran's deputy foreign minister Abbas Araghchi made his protest known to the British ambassador in Tehran, demanding "absolute protection of our diplomats in London and immediate dealing of the police with the attackers", IRNA said.—AFP

## Trump to make first trip to Latin America

**WASHINGTON:** Donald Trump will make his Latin America debut next month, visiting Peru and Colombia after harsh rhetoric towards Hispanic migrants and neighbors to the south. Trump will travel to Peru to attend the Summit of the Americas in Lima on April 13-14, a gathering of leaders from across the Western Hemisphere. From there he will visit Colombia, White House officials said.

The announcement ends speculation that Trump may skip the summit entirely. He is the first president since Bill Clinton not to have visited Latin America during his first year in office. As recently as this week—after Trump spoke to the summit host, Peru's President Pedro Pablo Kuczynski—the White House refused to say whether Trump would attend. When Trump travels south he is likely to encounter protests and perhaps a hesitant welcome from fellow heads of state and government. Trump has long courted controversy in the region. His election campaign was marked by accusations of Mexicans sending "rapists" over the border.

He suggested Colombia was not doing enough to stop cocaine coming to the United States, has promised to build a wall on the US border with Mexico and threatened to tear up a trade deal with Mexico and Canada. Argentina and Brazil also face the prospect of punitive tariffs on steel exports after Trump's controversial announcement on Thursday.

On Friday, Trump spoke by phone with old business acquaintance, Argentine President Mauricio Macri—whose office said he had urged the US president to exempt his country from the tariffs. The first Summit of the Americas took place in Miami in 1994, and it has long been a forum for the United States to influence events across the region. Then president Barack Obama used the last summit, in 2015 in Panama, to meet Cuban leader Raul Castro for the first time and to try to isolate the Venezuelan regime.

Venezuela will likely be a hot topic again this time round. President Nicolas Maduro vowed last month to attend the meeting despite the hosts saying he is unwelcome. "Are they afraid of me? They don't want to see me in Lima? They're going to see me, come rain, thunder or lightning!" a defiant Maduro told a press conference in Caracas. The leftist Venezuelan president vowed to get to the summit venue in Lima "by air, land or sea!" Maduro is seeking a second six-year term despite the oil-rich country's widespread economic woes. He has barred leading opponents from standing.—AFP

## 3 women, suspect dead in California hostage standoff

**LOS ANGELES:** A gunman and three women thought to be his hostages were found dead Friday at a California veterans home after an hours-long standoff with police. The assailant struck at 10:20 am at the Veterans Home of California—Yountville in the Napa Valley, the largest veterans' home in the United States with around 1,000 former servicemen and women.

"Shortly before 6:00 pm this evening law enforcement personnel made entry into the room where we felt the hostages were being held by the suspect and unfortunately made the discovery of three deceased females and one deceased male suspect," Captain Chris Childs of the California Highway Patrol told a news conference. "This is a tragic piece of news, one we were really hoping we wouldn't have to come before the public to give."

The Napa County Sheriff's Office had earlier issued an advisory on social media telling people to avoid the area following reports of gunfire, as the California Highway Patrol dispatched officers, air support and a SWAT team to the site. Childs said a sheriff's deputy who was first on the scene exchanged fire with the sus-

pect, adding that "we credit him with saving the lives of others in the area by eliminating the ability for the suspect to go out and find further victims."

The three victims were described by local media as employees of The Pathway Home, an on-site counseling service for veterans who suffer from post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD). It was not immediately clear whether they had been targeted or were chosen at random. The San Francisco Chronicle said the gunman—apparently a 36-year-old war veteran wearing "a stash of bullets" around his neck and waist—had been on the PTSD treatment program, adding that his weapon was a rifle.

### Gunman was calm

It quoted state senator Bill Dodd identifying the program's executive director, Christine Loeber, as being one of the dead, although the victims' names have not been officially released. Police did not say how they died, although local media, citing unnamed sources, reported that the assailant shot the three women before turning the gun on himself.

Dodd, whose district includes the center, said the gunman had been asked to leave several days earlier, according to the Chronicle. "It's a residential program so guys live in the building, staff work in the building," Larry Kamer, whose wife Devereaux Smith was working at the center, told the local ABC7 News channel. Smith, a development director for The



**YOUNTVILLE:** Chris Childs, assistant chief of the California Highway Patrol, speaks at a press conference after an active shooter turned hostage situation at the Veterans Home of California.—AFP

Pathway Home, was one of four women released by the gunman, said Kamer.

"There was a going away party for a couple of the staff who were leaving today. They were having cake and toasting and all that and then he apparently just walked in with this rifle," Kamer said the gunman was calm and talked to everyone present. The discovery came after several fruitless hours of trying to contact the man by the sheriff's department, City of Napa Police and the FBI.

California Department of Veterans Affairs secretary Vito Imbasciani said in a statement the agency was "devastated" by the deaths. "Our hearts are heavy for the entire Yountville Veterans Home community and the families and friends who are grieving for those who died," he added. "Nothing matters more than caring for our veterans and employees during this difficult time. We appreciate the tremendous law enforcement response today and unfailing support of this community." —AFP