



Exodus of Child Migrants from Central America Shows Urgent Need to Fix Failed Policies

Statement and Recommendations from the Mesoamerican Working Group on the Crisis of Unaccompanied Minors Migrating to the U.S. Southern Border

On Friday, July 25th, President Obama and his counterparts from Guatemala, Honduras and El Salvador will meet at the White House to discuss the humanitarian crisis linked to the dramatic increase in the numbers of unaccompanied migrant children attempting to cross the U.S.' southwestern border. In light of this important meeting, we, civil society organizations of the Mesoamerican Working Group, call on the U.S. government to carefully examine the root causes of the child migrant crisis and fix the failed policies that have contributed to the current influx of tens of thousands of Central American and Mexican children and youth fleeing their homes.

As organizations with close ties with, and decades of experience in, the region, we have long observed how U.S. policies have played a role in generating the dire economic conditions and violent crime that are leading to the mass migration of Hondurans, Guatemalans, Salvadorans and Mexicans. We urge the Obama Administration and Congress to develop a humanitarian, evidence-based and sustainable response to the refugee crisis of Central American and Mexican children who face grave dangers migrating to the United States. Various forms of U.S. security aid that directly contribute to violence and displacement should be immediately suspended and U.S. security policy toward the region as a whole should undergo a thorough review.

We further urge the U.S. government to reject politically expedient enforcement and dissuasion strategies that fail to address root causes and human rights concerns, and instead guarantee due process and uphold the international standard of "the best interest of the child."¹ Members of Congress should reject proposed changes to the Victims Trafficking Reauthorization Act of 2008 and support efforts to ensure that the health and human rights of detained migrant children are fully protected, that they have access to legal representation in any judicial procedure and that none of them are forced to return to a violent environment that puts their lives and safety at risk.

It is our hope that Congress will act to ensure that taxpayer money to address the border crisis is oriented toward effective solutions. We are extremely concerned by the priorities reflected in President Obama's funding request. Propaganda campaigns to keep people from migrating have no history of working where serious push and pull factors exist. We are particularly concerned about additional funding provided to state security forces to apprehend migrants and control violence, given that these forces, particularly in Honduras, are reportedly contributing to the bloodshed and violating human rights.

These children are in danger in their home countries. This refugee crisis stems from historic and recent causes that must be confronted with policy reforms, rather than deportations and huge additional expenditures.

¹ "Refugee Children: Guidelines on Protection and Care, <http://www.unhcr.org/3b84c6c67.html>

We support the recommendations made by the Congressional Progressive Caucus in its recent statement entitled “Kids First: A Response to the Southern Border Humanitarian Crisis.” These recommendations to the Obama administration include:

- “Current laws to protect children should not be repealed, amended or circumvented, including the right to seek asylum and TVPRA of 2008.
- “Conduct an immediate review of security assistance to Northern Triangle countries and Mexico, including CARSI and the Merida Initiative.
- “Reform U.S. trade policies that have contributed to forced migration.
- “Eliminate and rescind funding to military and police involved in human rights abuses.”

In addition, the Meso American Working Group offers the following recommendations to Congress and the U.S. administration:

Within the United States:

- Funds approved by Congress to address the refugee crisis within the United States should be directed primarily to the Department of Health and Human Services to boost its capacity to care for unaccompanied children and to the Department of Justice Administrative Review and Appeals, to assure that every child is provided with legal representation in immigration proceedings.
- Unaccompanied children who face credible threats of violence against their persons, whether in their homes or in their communities, should be granted protection by the United States government and should not be forced to return to their countries of origin.
- Unaccompanied children should be allowed to reunite with family members in the United States while legal proceedings are pending.
- Minor children should be allowed to reunite with parents or legal guardians from El Salvador or Honduras who reside legally in the U.S. under Temporary Protected Status (TPS). These children should be allowed to remain legally in the United States for as long as their parents’ or guardians’ TPS is authorized.

Foreign Aid:

- The U.S. government should re-assess its counterproductive security policy in Mexico and Central America, which supports military deployment and military style tactics in crime-fighting in the name of the “war on drugs.” The U.S. should suspend aid to corrupt and abusive security forces and to governments that are failing to take effective action to address impunity and corruption and to bring to justice all members of security forces involved in extrajudicial killings, torture, and other human rights violations. The U.S. should support efforts to prosecute government abuses and corruption and dismantle organized criminal networks operating within police and military forces.
- U.S. assistance should promote poverty alleviation, education, prevention and treatment programs, job training programs, women's equality and humanitarian assistance for at-risk sectors and communities that have been displaced or that suffer extreme poverty. Investment in violence prevention and rehabilitation efforts should be directed toward community-based initiatives that involve local government agencies and community organizations.
- The U.S. should invest in community-led, sustainable economic development. This requires a serious reconsideration of current trade and economic policy in the region, which has resulted in high rates of poverty, unemployment and displacement, including re-negotiation of NAFTA and CAFTA, and reforms to U.S. economic development aid programs to prioritize sustainable local development