It's been a tough time for all of us who dream of forging a just, compassionate foreign policy towards our Latin American neighbors—and even more so for all of us who dream of just, compassionate treatment of immigrants, migrants, and refugees. But we must not just dream, but also organize for the future. That's why Latin America Working Group Education Fund (LAWGEF) launched two major blueprints this year with our vision of a transformed policy towards Central America and Colombia. We’ve used these reports to start a conversation with movers and shakers in campaigns and foreign policy circles, and we’ve shared them with faith, human rights, humanitarian, labor, environmental, and immigrant rights groups, with Latin American civil society partners, with grassroots activists, with State Department officials, members of Congress, journalists, researchers, students, teachers—and with you.

If you or your local community organization are meeting with your member of Congress or their staff in the next few months, including with any members newly elected in November 2020, you may want to share with them these blueprints for change and ask them questions about how they will commit to forging a path forward for a more just, compassionate foreign and immigration policy towards our Latin American neighbors. Or, share the reports when you write a letter to your member of Congress on any relevant issue. Let us know how it goes and please contact us (lawg@lawg.org) if you find out there are any potentially great new allies headed to Congress in January 2021. And stay tuned for actions to push for these changes together with us in the next few months!

Protect Colombia’s Peace

LAWGEF brought together U.S. and Colombian civil society organizations to create Protect Colombia’s Peace, a report urging the U.S. government to adopt the full implementation of the peace accords as its principal diplomatic message for Colombia. It has been almost four years since the signing of the historic peace agreement that ended the Western Hemisphere’s longest running civil conflict, which claimed the lives of over 261,000 people and displaced almost 8 million Colombians. As the report cautions, “Despite an outpouring of civic action by Colombians, many of them victims of the conflict, to make the peace accords real,
the Colombian government’s actions have been limited and have failed to protect those risking their lives for peace. The toll can be seen in the more than 500 human rights defenders killed since the accords were signed.*

This joint U.S.-Colombian civil society initiative advocates for U.S. aid and stronger diplomacy to call on the Colombian government to implement the peace accord’s ethnic chapter and gender provisions, ensure justice for the victims of the armed conflict, protect human rights defenders, advance sustainable drug policy and rural reforms to reach Colombia’s small farmers and Afro-Colombian and indigenous communities, end abuses by the Colombian armed forces, and dismantle the paramilitary successor networks. The international community must encourage full compliance with the peace accords before it is too late.

We are proud to say this report was a transnational collective effort by LAWGEF with the network of Colombian human rights organizations known as Coordinación Colombia Europa Estados Unidos (CCEEUU), Washington Office on Latin America (WOLA), and Oxfam, with input from many other U.S., international, and Colombian organizations, including Afro-Colombian, LGBTQ, and Colombian-American organizations.

Find the full report and executive summary in both English and Spanish at lawg.org/protect-peace.

Serve Your People: A Roadmap for Transforming Relations between the United States and the Northern Countries of Central America

LAWGEF in summer 2020 launched Serve Your People, a report that provides a roadmap for transforming relations between the United States and the northern countries of Central America (El Salvador, Guatemala, and Honduras) under a new administration. The report was created by LAWGEF along with Kids in Need of Defense (KIND), Oxfam America, Climate Refugees, Church World Service (CWS), and WOLA.

Serve Your People calls for a dramatically new policy that goes far beyond undoing recent attacks on the rights of asylum seekers, immigrants, and migrants. It recommends starting with principled diplomacy against corruption and for human rights and standing, not with corrupt officials, but with civil society forces for change in Central America. This vision calls for supporting equitable development strategies and helping countries address the impact of climate change. It recommends, not aid to abusive security forces, but well-targeted humanitarian assistance to those in need. The report also outlines ways the United States can help respond to the COVID-19 pandemic in the Americas. It maps out how to restore and advance access to protection for migrants and refugees at our border and throughout Mexico and Central America. These actions must be driven by a new vision that encourages Central American governments to serve their people, with equity and justice, and reverts away from enforcement-centric immigration policies and militarization to policies that are humane, inclusive, and just.
Above all, the report insists: The U.S. government’s message to the governments of northern countries of Central America should no longer be: Prevent your people from fleeing. Nor should the answer be: The United States will provide some aid to fix your problems. Rather, the message must be: Protect the rights and well-being of all your citizens so that they can make the choice to stay. And the United States’ message to the citizens working to build more democratic, inclusive, and just societies should be: We stand with you.

Find the full report at lawg.org/serve-your-people.

Speaking Out to Stop Deportations Now
Lauri Álvarez & Daniella Burgi-Palomino

We’ve had our work cut out for us these past few months. The Trump Administration has continued its assault on asylum seekers by weaponizing the pandemic under the guise of public safety through mass deportations and expulsions. There’s also been continued attacks against members of our immigrant communities in the United States. Here’s a recap of what has been happening, what we’ve been doing to push back, and how you can get involved.

Halting deportations and expulsions from the border and ICE detention facilities

The Trump Administration is succeeding at keeping immigrants and asylum seekers out—by violating international law. Since March 2020, the Department of Homeland Security (DHS) has been rapidly expelling asylum seekers at our borders under Presidential CDC order Title 42. Over 200,000 asylum seekers, including unaccompanied children, have been denied their chance of due process and their right to apply for asylum in the United States since then and instead have been rapidly expelled and returned to the same dangers they were fleeing.

If that weren’t enough, ICE is continuing to export the coronavirus to countries with fragile healthcare systems through deportations. There have been 456 deportation flights during the pandemic and 1,219 ICE flights between ICE detention centers. The conditions in detention centers are inhumane with reports of no soap, receiving one mask per month, and no social distancing. A whistleblower complaint recently filed by nurse Dawn Wooten demonstrates the extent of ongoing human rights violations in ICE jails as it alleges gross medical misconduct in the Irwin detention center in Georgia, failure to provide migrants with COVID-19 tests when symptomatic, and migrant women undergoing hysterectomies without their consent. Over 6,500 detainees have already tested positive in custody but that doesn’t account for those who weren’t tested and were deported—and who then tested positive upon landing. Many receive only a temperature check before being forced on a flight to their home countries where they are sometimes greeted by stigma from their own communities who fear contracting the virus.

Art on the Mexican side of the U.S.-Mexico border. Photo by Daniella Burgi-Palomino.
We've been working tirelessly to bring awareness to these shameful practices endangering the lives of asylum seekers and migrants. We hosted a congressional briefing with Representatives Veronica Escobar (D-TX) and Frederica Wilson (D-FL) and a webinar with our partners on how deportations and expulsions are exacerbating the spread of COVID-19 and forcing asylum seekers back to danger and instability. And we didn’t stop there—we created a graphic and explainer for you to easily explain to your members of Congress and to your networks the impacts of these practices. And we contributed to the introduction of the Immigration Enforcement Moratorium Act (S.4011 and H.R. 7569) which would halt all deportations during the pandemic and prohibit federal funds from implementing mass expulsions at the border. As we look towards building more humane immigration policies, we need your help to contact your members of Congress and ask them to co-sponsor these bills to show strong support for halting expulsions and deportations during the pandemic.

Working to halt future possible deportations of TPS beneficiaries

The shameful anti-asylum policies are harming not only asylum seekers in Latin America and at the border but members of our communities in the United States. Last September, the 9th Circuit Court of Appeals ruled in favor of the Trump Administration stripping Temporary Protected Status (TPS) beneficiaries from their humanitarian protections as early as March 2021 (in the Ramos v. Nielsen case). This would mean that unless there is a rehearing of the case, over 300,000 beneficiaries would be deported to countries they no longer call home. And in many cases, they would be deported to situations of violence and poverty, and few support systems. In the midst of a global pandemic, in which over 130,000 essential U.S. workers have TPS status, this decision would be detrimental to our economy and healthcare system as well as to so many members of our communities. Our TPSians need permanent protections and they need them now. Last year, the House passed H.R. 6, The Dream and Promise Act, and it’s time to pressure the Senate to follow suit. We need your help advocating for the rights of our TPS community members and to build the momentum for a new Congress to pass these protections immediately next year.

Now is not the time to stand idly by as the rights of our community members and asylum seekers are being stripped away by this administration. These extreme anti-asylum policies are inhumane and against the values we hold dear as a country. We must speak up and stand up to protect our community. And we must lay the groundwork for rescinding these anti-asylum policies all together, ending the criminalization of all migrants, reverting away from militarized enforcement, and work to build immigration policies that are truly humane and inclusive.

Contact your senators to cosponsor S. 4011 and contact your representative to cosponsor H.R. 7569! Visit LAWG.ORG/StopDeportations to learn more about how you can help halt deportations during the pandemic.
APIB: Brazil’s Guardians of the Forest

Jaret Waters

Although the destruction of the Amazon Rainforest and the communities that inhabit these lands continues to run rampant in Brazil, indigenous peoples are not shying away from the fight and are calling on the world to do the same. “We are experiencing an emergency to defend indigenous lives and our territories,” declared Sônia Guajajara, executive director of the Association of Brazil’s Indigenous Peoples (APIB). “We need the world to know this, and to do its part. Indigenous land: not an inch less. Indigenous blood: not a single drop more.” On October 15, Guajajara accepted the Letelier-Moffitt Human Rights Award from the Institute for Policy Studies (IPS) on behalf of APIB in recognition of their mobilization of indigenous communities across the country against threats to their environmental and cultural rights. LAWG co-director Lisa Haugaard served as one of the jurors for the award, which alerts the world of the critical moment indigenous communities are facing.

The longstanding threats to indigenous communities in the Amazon, including the destruction of biomes, land grabbing, and illegal mining, have been greatly exacerbated during the Bolsonaro administration, a “genocidal government, which values the profits of international corporations at the expense of life—often our own lives,” according to Guajajara. The government has launched targeted attacks against the defenders of these lands, with Bolsonaro recently weaponizing a UN tribunal to accuse indigenous peoples of environmental crimes. In addition to these smear campaigns and abuses of power, indigenous communities have been particularly affected during the COVID-19 pandemic, as Bolsonaro’s government neglects their needs and limits their access to healthcare. Through their own monitoring, the APIB has found that nearly 1,000 indigenous people have been killed and over 30,000 infected by the virus. As Guajajara notes, however, “we are not talking just about numbers, but about important leaders who have left us too early, about elders who died, taking ancient stories and wisdom with them.”

APIB has taken several measures to respond to these threats and attacks, advocating for their environmental and cultural rights and engaging the international community in this effort. Last year alone, they organized a leadership delegation to Europe to denounce Bolsonaro’s crimes against indigenous peoples, a women’s march in Brazil consisting of 3,000 indigenous leaders, and a protest against the dismantling of indigenous health policies administered by the Ministry of Health. Moreover, this year they have formed the National Committee for Indigenous Life and Memory, with the goal of tracking the true impact of the pandemic on indigenous communities to combat the government’s underreporting of these statistics.

In addition to recognizing APIB’s progress in protecting their communities, the Letelier-Moffitt Human Rights Award serves as a reminder of the importance of international support for indigenous mobilization efforts. Beyond the dire need for international actors to pressure the Bolsonaro Administration, the world must work together to combat the multinational corporations that are leading these attacks on indigenous land. As Guajajara explains, “The Amazon Rainforest does not burn by itself. Behind every fire that is lit is corporate greed, like agribusiness. And behind them are the largest banks and corporations in the world. They are the ones who profit from this destruction. They profit from every centimeter of land invaded, from every tree cut and burned. In the flames, they see money.” The Amazon should be a source of life, not wealth. We cannot permit another inch of indigenous land to be stolen, nor another drop of indigenous blood to be spilled.
Civil Society Organizations Condemn U.S. Asylum Policies in International Forum

Sofía Muñoz

Latin American and U.S. human rights activists brought severe violations of the rights of migrants and asylum seekers affected by U.S. policies to the attention of an international human rights organization, the Inter-American Commission on Human Rights (IACHR). The hearings are an opportunity for civil society organizations to present cases of human rights violations to the commission and for government representatives to respond to them.

The “Regional situation of the human rights of migrants, refugees and unaccompanied children” hearing was led by Global Exchange and the University of San Francisco Migration Studies Program and supported by over thirty civil society organizations from the United States, Mexico and Central America, including LAWG.

“The anarchy at the U.S.-Mexico border finds itself in a level of gravity without precedent in the history of the United States and Mexico. This is a direct result of racist policies and it is the maximum expression of violations of human rights,” declared Laura Peña, pro bono counsel at the American Bar Association’s Commission on Immigration.

Maira Delgado Laurens, a University of San Francisco Migration Studies graduate student, highlighted the Trump Administration’s implementation of the so-called “Title 42 CDC order” which closed the U.S. border to migrants and asylum seekers citing the pandemic as a major point of concern. “[Its implementation] was based on political reasons, not security,” said Delgado Laurens. Peña added that the Trump Administration’s argument for expelling migrants was that they cannot be held in “congregate settings,” yet current conditions in U.S. detention centers show this is not their true intent, as the U.S. government has been quite willing to hold immigrants in crowded detention centers, even as COVID-19 cases spread within ICE facilities.

Nicole Elizabeth Ramos, border rights project director at Al Otro Lado, noted that since January 2019, there has been a dramatic increase in reports of kidnappings and rapes, affecting women and families with small children on the Mexican side of the border. Criminal organizations have taken advantage of migrants’ increased vulnerability due to the pandemic and the Trump Administration’s Migrant Protection Protocols (MPP), which force migrants and asylum seekers to wait in Mexico. “In reality, should be referred to as the Migrant Persecution Protocols because that is more in line with its intent,” said Ramos.

Padre Melo (Ismael Moreno Coto, S.J.), a Jesuit priest and human rights activist from Honduras, focused on the flawed and dangerous logic behind the United States’ “safe third country” agreements with Central American countries, which deny asylum seekers the right to protection in the United States and deport them to countries they are not from. “These asylum cooperative agreements are more threats than opportunities for migrants and refugees, and they respond more to the discriminatory policies of the United States government than to decisions based on the respect for human rights of the recipients of these agreements,” said Padre Melo. And, as seen from the militarized response of the Guatemalan government towards Honduran migrants in October 2020, “The U.S. border is already in Guatemala.”

The civil society organizations called for the Inter-American Commission on Human Rights to condemn the actions of the U.S. government and encouraged the international community to take measures to hold the United States accountable. LAWG echoes the sentiments raised by our partners in this hearing and will continue to monitor the conditions of human rights in the region while pushing for more humanitarian policies that protect all migrants and asylum seekers.
In late September 2020, a new “caravan” of Hondurans desperate to seek a better life outside their country began to depart from San Pedro Sula. The group, which had grown to several thousand people by the time it arrived in Guatemala, was turned back with a show of force by Guatemalan security forces in riot gear. But while most of the migrants were deported back to Honduras, the forces driving migration continue—despite the near-total closure of access to asylum in the United States and worsening conditions for migrants in Guatemala and Mexico.

The impact of the pandemic, poverty compounded by the effects of climate change, and violence from organized crime, gangs, and state security forces, as well as violence against women and LGBTQ+ Hondurans, continue to drive migration from Honduras. A less discussed but crucial factor is the closure of space for Honduran citizens to organize and express their views to create a better life for themselves, their families, and their communities. Hondurans face a government that not only fails to meet their basic needs, but profits from corruption, led by President Juan Orlando Hernández, whom U.S. prosecutors, during their successful prosecution of his brother Tony Hernández for drug trafficking, claimed accepted money from drug cartels for his campaigns. Yet efforts to organize for change are met with repression and threats, attacks, and legal harassment of human rights activists and journalists. Hondurans looking towards their 2021 elections for prospects of change see that their Congress failed so far to pass reforms to block opportunities for fraud that plagued the 2017 elections.

As one Honduran humanitarian organization summed up the reasons people were giving for joining the latest caravan: “There is nothing for us in this country, I lost my family members because of COVID-19, there is no work, and the tyrant is overwhelming us.”

Pandemic: The Last Straw

Honduras has registered over 98,000 COVID-19 cases as of late October 2020, although given limited testing, this is likely an undercount. The pandemic is complicated in Honduras by an ongoing dengue epidemic. Some hospitals are overwhelmed, and a number of health care workers have died.

The economic impact of the pandemic is profound. Pandemic restrictions permitted people to leave their homes only once every two weeks, changed in September to once a week. Yet most of the population work in the informal sector or in jobs that cannot be performed from their homes. State employees protested due to nonpayment of their salaries. Maquila factories reopened in mid-May, but often without adequate protective gear for workers, conditions for social distancing, or access to healthcare. The pandemic is increasing hunger and inequality in rural areas. Government food programs are limited and sometimes distributed in ways that favor political supporters.

Pandemic restrictions have been at times brutally enforced. Thousands of people were arbitrarily detained at the start of the lockdown. In April 2020, members of the Military Police shot at and beat three brothers returning home from selling bread; one brother died the next day of his wounds, one was seriously injured, and the third was detained. As part of its lockdown, the Honduran government suspended constitutional guarantees, including freedom of expression and assembly.
Corruption: Where's the Money?

The massive scale of corruption led the international community to press the Honduran government to establish an anti-corruption mechanism, the Organization of American States-led Mission to Support the Fight against Corruption and Impunity (MACCIH). As MACCIH, working with Honduran prosecutors, began to advance in its investigations, resistance by corrupt elites grew. Following the precedent set by former Guatemalan President Jimmy Morales, President Hernández refused to renew MACCIH’s mandate, and it was forced to shut its doors in September 2019. The Trump Administration’s focus on pressing the Honduran government to deter migration, establish Honduras as a “safe third country” for other asylum seekers, and receive deported Honduran migrants, rather than emphasizing improvements in governance and combating corruption which could help reduce the causes of forced migration, gave President Hernández the political space to shut MACCIH.

In 2020, two major successes of MACCIH’s anti-corruption efforts were unraveled by Honduran courts. On July 23, a court ordered former First Lady Rosa Lobo released from jail, where she was awaiting retrial for corruption after the Supreme Court overturned her conviction. On August 3, an appeals court dismissed charges against 22 of the 38 defendants in the “Pandora” case, many of them members of Congress, in which some $12 million of agricultural ministry funds were channeled through fake NGOs, much of which ended up financing National and Liberal party campaigns.

Meanwhile, new cases of corruption are surfacing. The nongovernmental National Anticorruption Council (CNA) denounced flawed or corrupt pandemic-related purchasing practices, such as when the government purchased 5 mobile hospitals from a Turkish company for $47 million in March 2020. Four of the five mobile hospitals finally arrived months later in shabby condition and were still not functional as of mid-October.

In August 2020, civil society activists launched social media campaigns and graffiti appeared across the country with the slogan, “Where’s the Money?” Another sign then appeared in front of the ruling National Party headquarters: “Here Is the Money;” The Honduran government reacted by detaining several people involved in painting graffiti. One prominent doctor, critical of the government’s response to the pandemic, was detained and beaten by police.

Protesters Face Repression

With the absence of effective avenues to influence the government to serve its citizens, protest continues to be a primary way that Honduran citizens express their concerns. The United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights office in Honduras tallied more than 470 demonstrations in 190 days of the pandemic.

Yet the rights of protesters, as well as of journalists and human rights defenders covering the protests, continue to be violated by Honduran security forces. In September 2020, a photojournalist covering an Independence Day rally protesting corruption was wounded by a tear gas canister thrown by police, according to the journalist, directly at him. A 22-year old bystander to the same event was beaten by police; the local police station refused to accept his complaint. Garifuna leaders protesting the disappearance of their community members (see pg. 9) were teargassed in July. Police beat transport workers demanding government pandemic relief in San Pedro Sula in June.
Human Rights Activists and Journalists Face Threats, Attacks, and Harassment

The space for human rights activists and journalists to defend and monitor rights is limited and closing while the opportunities for corruption and abuse expand. Environmental monitoring group Global Witness rates Honduras as the most dangerous country (per capita) in 2019 to be an environmental or land rights defender. To mention just two recent cases:

- Four Garifuna (Afro-Honduran) men and a fifth person were kidnapped from their homes in Triunfo de la Cruz in July 2020 at gunpoint by men wearing uniforms of a Honduran government police investigative unit. Among the men were community activists, including Alberth Sneider Centeno, leader of the Triunfo de la Cruz community and active participant in Garifuna rights group OFRANEH. Sneider is a principal force behind efforts to defend Garifuna territory and urge compliance with the Inter-American Court of Human Rights 2015 ruling ordering the Honduran government to respect the rights and territory of the Triunfo de la Cruz community. Little progress seems to have been made in investigating the disappearance of these men.

- While deputies charged with corruption in the Pandora case were set free, eight environmental activists charged with alleged crimes as they defended their community’s river from pollution from a mining project have been in pretrial detention for over a year, in the case known as Guapinol. In August 2020, a court ruling put five more activists in danger of being placed in pretrial detention. On October 13, 2020, one Guapinol activist, Arnold Joaquin Morazán Erazo, was murdered. The Guapinol community demands accountability and justice for this murder—and for their jailed community members to be set free.

Electoral Reforms Stalling

In November 2017, President Hernández was reelected in a highly controversial electoral process. Honduran citizens and electoral observers denounced irregularities and fraud. In the aftermath, protests broke out. Honduran security forces, particularly the Military Police, allegedly shot and killed at least 16 protesters and bystanders, according to the UN High Commissioner for Human Rights office in Honduras. Almost all these cases remain in impunity.

Yet, a year from the next presidential elections, the executive branch and Congress have failed to advance electoral reforms, meaning that the elections will likely go forward with few changes to ensure a free and fair electoral process. Even if the electoral reform bill does advance, it still does not address some of the major issues, such as the need for a second round of voting to prevent a candidate winning with a simple majority but little legitimacy (given the likelihood that multiple candidates will run and split the votes); setting presidential terms limits; and blocking dirty money from entering campaigns.

If advances are not made, it is likely a continued lack of legitimacy in the next elections will cause greater social conflict and human rights violations and intensify, not begin to resolve, the profound crisis of democracy in Honduras since the 2009 coup. And forced migration from Honduras will continue.
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