Holding Strong, with You

Lisa Haugaard

We are facing headwinds against us in our quest for a U.S. policy towards Latin America that reflects our nation’s best values.

The Dreamers are in limbo. Over 300,000 people from Honduras, El Salvador, Nicaragua, Haiti, and other nations who fled natural disasters and wars, worked hard and built lives in the United States have had their Temporary Protected Status revoked. Soon they will have to choose between life in the shadows and life in a country they may no longer know. Asylum is growing harder to obtain. Families are being separated on a daily basis. And then there is the President’s constant hateful rhetoric about immigrants.

The Trump Administration is trying to slash humanitarian aid to Latin America, put newly-opened U.S. diplomatic relations with Cuba on ice, and make U.S. policy towards the region center once again on the war on drugs—and, above all, they are blocking and demonizing migrants and refugees.

Despite all of this, with your voice and support, we are holding strong.

Together we convinced Congress to keep funding historic peace accords in Colombia and programs for Afro-Colombian and indigenous communities; UN human rights offices and anti-corruption efforts; and the Inter-American Foundation’s grassroots development aid. We helped limit money for the border wall and expanded deportation forces—though we are deeply concerned about what’s been approved.

We denounced the brutal killings of protesters by security forces following the contested elections in Honduras. We worked to organize strong congressional statements on human rights, like a letter calling for protection for Colombian human rights defenders Diego, Grace, Lily, and Andrea at a rally for Honduras outside of the State Department. Photo by Lily Folkerts.

[CONTINUED ON PAGE 2]
rights defenders signed by more than 70 members of Congress. We brought human rights activists from Honduras (with Alianza Americas); Colombia (with the Washington Office on Latin America—see page 3—and with the Colombia Human Rights Committee); and Mexico to speak truth to power.

We launched a petition against ICE separating families, which is now at over 30,000 signers. We are working with you to build support for forward-leaning legislation on Cuba (see page 5), so that we can pick up steam with a new Congress.

We have also visited concerned people around the country—such as those involved with the Chicago Religious Leadership Network, St. Louis Inter-Faith Committee on Latin America, and Rochester Committee on Latin America—and have seen the amazing work being done every day for human rights in Latin America and immigrant rights at home.

Thanks for all you do, dear supporters and activists: You inspire us. Together, we will overcome.

Here at LAWG we have been working hard to increase understanding among policymakers about the relentless attacks against human rights defenders and human rights violations in Honduras.

Below is a snippet from one of the articles in our report, Between a Wall and a Dangerous Place. The graphic included shows documented human rights violations that took place in the weeks after Honduras’ contested election. The report explores the intersection of human rights, migration, corruption, and public security in Honduras and El Salvador. You can find the full article, as well as the complete report, at lawg.org/BetweenDangers.

Protest Met with Brutal Repression: A Summary of Human Rights Abuses in Post-Electoral Honduras

Lisa Haugaard

In the aftermath of the highly contested November 2017 Honduran presidential election, massive protests—over 1,000 in total—against suspected electoral fraud and the disputed reelection of President Juan Orlando Hernández took place all over the country. Twenty-two people, most of them protesters, were killed by Honduras’s security forces—all but one by the Military Police. Protests continue in January 2018—and so does the repression. This article details acts of government repression of protesters, journalists, and human rights defenders in the wake of the election. It also suggests the challenges that Honduran citizens, and the international community, face in order to protect human rights at this critical moment.

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The Latin America Working Group (LAWG) and the Washington Office on Latin America (WOLA) brought in February 2018 a delegation of award-winning Colombian human rights defenders to Washington, D.C. to shed light on the peace process and on the recent wave of attacks against community leaders and social activists. In a public event hosted by the U.S. Institute for Peace, the defenders shared their perspectives on the impact—and perils—of their work and the state of peace in Colombia.

Socorro Acero Bautista

“Pardon me because I am a regional leader. I only have a third grade education and it is very little what you can learn at the school I attended. However, what I did learn was to fight for all human beings.”

“In Tame, the wave of paramilitary violence started in 1999 and lasted until 2004. They came and wiped out everything,” said Socorro. “They killed my son, they threatened me. Here, I am protected because I am here with all of you, thank God, but at that time, I had nothing. I had to leave, I had to hide.”

Socorro works with the Standing Committee for the Defense of Human Rights in Colombia and, as a former victim of paramilitarism, she helps oversee and provide guidance to other victims in the Tame municipality of Arauca, including those searching for their missing loved ones.

Enrique Chimonja Coy

“The most sacred act is to help bring life into this world or to otherwise create it. I think with all of you, coming from different places around the world, we are trying to assist perhaps the most painful birth... which is the birth of a construction towards peace—not just in Colombia, but around the world.”

At the event, Enrique commemorated defenders who were killed in Colombia by displaying an orange piece of fabric stitched with some of their names along with the message, “Never Forget.” The prominent Afro-Colombian leader of Buenaventura, Temistocles Machado, who was killed earlier this year in January, was listed among those names.

Enrique noted that Temistocles was murdered due to failure of the government to recognize the legitimate owners of territories in Colombia. “His assassination and that of many other defenders demonstrate how the business sector’s economic interests have discouraged them from participating in the construction of peace and instead, made them determined to strip those who are farmers, indigenous, and Afro-descendants of their territories,” he said.

Enrique works with the Interecclesiatic Commission on Justice and Peace (Justicia y Paz) in Buenaventura, where he supports communities who have suffered human rights violations. Enrique has documented hostilities against the community by armed groups. He has also spearheaded initiatives denouncing impunity and the loss of land in an effort to protect indigenous and Afro-Colombian communities.

Angélica Ortiz

“Not everything is going well with the peace agreement. There was a misunderstanding that putting an end to the situation with FARC rebels would end the violence—but we see the violence is increasing.”

Enrique in front of the White House. Photo by Andrea Fernández Aponte.
Speaking of social leaders in and near her territory, Angélica said: “They are targets of repeated threats. Unfortunately, the authorities serve as an obstacle. Whenever defenders meet with them to lodge complaints, the authorities say, ‘We cannot do this anymore.’ We have a government that does not respond to these threats.”

“In the peace agreement they say they will protect defenders but nowhere do they say how they will accomplish this goal. A lot has been said in the agreement but there is a serious lack of specific details. That is where we are stuck at the moment,” she said.

“I think each and every one of us has to contribute to the construction of peace. And also continue weaving the path to live a better life because there is a major challenge ahead of us if we truly do want to live in total and absolute peace in Colombia,” Angélica added.

The Association of Wayuu Women was created in 2006 in the middle of a wave of paramilitary violence. It served as an alliance between small villages and Wayuu organizations to shed light on the issues facing victims of the armed conflict, which included the presence of armed groups, and military occupation of their territory. The organization has helped increase the political participation of Wayuu women and empowered them to become indigenous leaders. Angélica has served as secretary general of the Association of Wayuu Women since 2007.

Iván Madero Vergel

“A human rights defender is someone who is convinced that we cannot succeed in achieving peace alone, that we cannot get ahead alone; that we have to get together in different collective spaces to demand our rights—rights that can generate spaces for social well-being.”

Speaking of the work of social leaders, Iván said: “It is an altruistic activity, it is a resistance activity, and many of us dared to do that: to create these organizations so that we can be the voices of our communities. That is why so many people are angry. They feel impotent because of this powerful voice that we use to make public complaints. They see us as an obstacle to their individual plans.”

Iván serves as president of the Regional Corporation for the Defense of Human Rights (CREDHOS). Founded in 1980, CREDHOS promotes the protection of human rights, democracy, and international humanitarian law. Its mission is to establish spaces for tolerance, understanding, and peaceful living on behalf of vulnerable and victimized populations from Barrancabermeja and Magdalena Medio.

Socorro, Enrique, the Association of Wayuu Women, and CREDHOS were chosen to receive the 2017 National Prize in Defense of Human Rights in Colombia. Lisa Haugaard from LAWG and Gimena Sánchez from WOLA are jurors for the prize. The Swedish humanitarian agency Diakonia and the Church of Sweden sponsor the award, which was created in 2012 to combat the social and political stigmatization of defenders by highlighting their significant contributions to Colombia.

“This award can help Colombian society begin to think of the award winners as part of the solution to our problems instead of an additional problem. They can contribute to building peace. In fact, they have been building peace for years and with their support, Colombian democracy can improve,” said César Grajales, director of Diakonia’s program in Colombia.
Cuba Policy: Jump-Starting the Bills, with Your Action

Kayla Hardin-Lawson & Mavis Anderson

There’s no shortage of Cuba bills waiting in the wings—there are five alone dealing with lifting restrictions on travel and financial transactions and trade. What is lacking is congressional initiative to take up, discuss, and pass these bills into law—a lethargy that advocacy and activism can energize.

Reminiscing just a few years back, the Obama Administration moved away from the historic and damaging U.S. isolationist policy to a gradual normalization of U.S.-Cuban relations. But with the change in administrations came a shift in attitude and focus. Trump unveiled a new Cuba policy, intent on rolling back much of the positive progress of the previous years.

Now, many bipartisan bills remain dormant, hibernating in the subcommittees they were referred to in early 2017. Yet although Cuba policy is now stagnant, the potential for progress remains. We highlight a few standout bills, their potential for the future, and actions you can take to end the embargo! See the chart below for a complete list of bills:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Bill (Leading Sponsor)</th>
<th>Number of sponsors*</th>
<th>Brief Summary</th>
<th>Current Status</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Cuba Trade Act (H.R. 442) (Rep. Tom Emmer (R-MN-6))</td>
<td>24</td>
<td>Allows businesses in the private sector to trade freely with Cuba.</td>
<td>Referred to the Subcommittee on Trade.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Freedom to Travel to Cuba Act (H.R. 351) (Rep. Mark Sanford (R-SC-1))</td>
<td>26</td>
<td>Removes the current travel restrictions to Cuba.</td>
<td>Referred to the Subcommittee on the Western Hemisphere.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Cuba Agriculture Exports Act (H.R. 525) (Rep. Eric Crawford (R-AR-1))</td>
<td>64</td>
<td>Repeals financing restrictions, allowing firms in the U.S. to offer credit to Cuba in connection with exports of U.S. agricultural goods.</td>
<td>Referred to the House Committee on Agriculture.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Agricultural Export Expansion Act (S.275) (Sen. Heidi Heitkamp (D-ND))</td>
<td>16</td>
<td>Lifts the ban on private banks and companies offering credit for agricultural exports to Cuba.</td>
<td>Read twice and referred to the Committee on Banking, Housing, and Urban Affairs.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Freedom to Export to Cuba Act (S.1286) (Sen. Amy Klobuchar (D-MN))</td>
<td>17</td>
<td>Lifts the current embargo and allow more U.S. goods to be exported to Cuba</td>
<td>Read twice and referred to the Committee on Banking, Housing, and Urban Affairs.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Freedom to Travel to Cuba Act (S.1287) (Sen. Jeff Flake (R-AZ))</td>
<td>54</td>
<td>Eliminates current restrictions on traveling to Cuba for tourist purposes.</td>
<td>Read twice and referred to the Committee on Foreign Relations.</td>
</tr>
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</table>

* Updated on May 17, 2018. You can find the full article and updated information on these bills at lawg.org/CubaBills. Make sure you ‘like’ our End the Embargo campaign on Facebook at fb.com/EndtheEmbargo and sign up to receive our action alerts at lawg.org/signup to get the latest updates and news on U.S.-Cuba policy.
Mexico and its asylum and immigration policies have recently received much attention thanks to President Trump’s fixation on the migrant caravan, an annual demonstration in which Central Americans garner safety in numbers and travel together to the U.S.-Mexico border, many to claim asylum. Secretary of Homeland Security Kirstjen Nielsen said they should seek safety “in the first safe country they enter, including Mexico.” But no law forces individuals to seek asylum in Mexico or justifies the rejection of asylum protection in the United States based on the possibility to do so in Mexico. Caravan participants and any migrant can apply in either country, but in neither is it easy. What does it look like to be a migrant seeking asylum in Mexico?

Until recently, Mexico acted mainly as a transit country, rather than a destination for migrants. The increase in asylum applications demonstrates this—14,596 people requested asylum in Mexico in 2017. That’s up from a meager 3,424 two years earlier in 2015.

There are only three migrant shelters in all of Mexico City with the joint capacity to house a few hundred individuals. The rest of the country’s shelters are mainly along Mexico’s northern and southern borders. I visited two of the capital’s shelters in March, both overcrowded and understaffed, overworked and underfunded. Despite hardships, of not only the shelter as a charitable institution but also of those living within it, I saw a distinct sense of determination and hope.

Who are these migrants and why are they fleeing to shelters in Mexico City?

On my way out from my visit to Casa de Acogida Formación y Empoderamiento de la Mujer Migrante y Refugiada (CAFEMIN by its Spanish acronym, House of Training and Empowerment for Migrant and Refugee Women), a family arrived. The parents, towing a few overstuffed suitcases, and their children, towing ragged stuffed animals, had just journeyed to Mexico with the few valued possessions they could carry.

The morning I visited Casa Tochan, seven young men had arrived. Two were minors, venturing out of their home countries for the first time in their lives, fleeing in the back of trucks and by foot along the infamous “La Bestia” train tracks. For many, by the time they reach a shelter in Mexico City, they’ve already endured a series of threats— from harsh terrain to organized crime. And that’s not even including what caused them to flee their home countries in the first place.

All from Central America, the migrants I met chose to leave insecurity and instability. Their stories are, unfortunately, not uncommon—situations LAWG has documented extensively in Between a Wall and a Dangerous Place report. People from the Northern Triangle of Central America—El Salvador, Guatemala, and Honduras—represented 59 percent of asylum applications in Mexico in 2017. And
that’s down from 92 percent in 2016, as last year witnessed a swell in applications from Venezuelans, a result of the growing instability and unrest in that country.

What’s their plan? The state of Mexico’s asylum system

Many of the shelter’s residents apply for asylum through Mexico’s refugee system (Comisión Mexicana de Ayuda a Refugiados, COMAR by its Spanish acronym). Despite funding from the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) to expand offices, personnel, and overall capacity, COMAR is still struggling to process the influx of asylum applications.

Of the over 14,500 applications COMAR received last year, as of the most recent public information, only 1,907 were approved and 7,719 remained unresolved. Reports confirm that asylum in Mexico is still the exception rather than the rule.

Considering Mexico’s responsibility to uphold international and national law to provide access to due process to seek protection, this shouldn’t be the case. The Mexican government blamed September’s earthquakes for increased times to process applications, but staff from both shelters pointed to lack of political will.

The Mexican government should be investing in its asylum system. Instead, it’s investing in border security and deterrence measures… largely on the dime and request of the U.S. government. Just last month, after pressure from Trump on the migrant caravan, the Mexican Secretariat of the Interior promised to “reinforce more elements of security with more elements of the gendarmery,” a sort of military “border patrol” that has been deployed previously under the Plan Frontera Sur and has jurisdiction in civil law enforcement. And that’s on top of millions in U.S. funding Mexico has received for border security and technology and is implementing with guidance from the United States.

How can we help?

“What I really want is for Tochan to not exist because that would mean migrants don’t need it anymore.”

-Volunteer at Casa Tochan

Yes, striving to eliminate the need for all migrant shelters is a bit utopian. But this outlook exemplifies the strong sense of determination and hope despite all the shelters’ residents have been through and continue to face. At CAFEMIN, kids ran up and down the courtyard, playing basketball and giggling. At Tochan, teenage boys took turns shaving new hairstyles and picking through pairs of donated jeans.

And it’s not just the current residents that show this unyielding strength but the past ones as well—in the form of murals they painted about their experiences. Covering the walls of the shelters and, in Tochan’s case, spilling over onto the walls of the neighborhood and streets. Colorful and powerful, when we talk about migration, these are the only walls I’m okay with.

So in the meantime, while we strive for utopia, here’s what we can do to help. Hold our government and the Mexican government accountable to international and national laws—ensure they provide due process and adequate services to all seeking asylum and a better life. Tell them to stop funding and implementing harsh deterrence and border enforcement that only increase the insecurity of the most vulnerable. Instead, insist they focus on why migrants are leaving home in the first place—from issues of violence to governance.
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