Civil Society Organizations Express Concern Over CBP Commissioner McAleenan’s Statements on Drivers of Central American Migration; Call for Recognition that Violence Continues to Propel Central Americans to Flee
October 9, 2018

On the occasion of U.S. Customs and Border Protection Commissioner Kevin McAleenan’s trip to Central America last week, the undersigned organizations express grave concern over comments made by the Commissioner that completely disregard violence as a major push factor in driving forced migration from Guatemala, Honduras, and El Salvador, and as a reason to seek international protection. While acute poverty is also a significant concern in the Northern Triangle of Central America, it is inaccurate and dangerous to ignore the violence forcing so many to leave behind their homes in search of safety.

As numerous reports and testimonies of migrants from the region have shown, violence remains a major driver of forced migration from the Northern Triangle of Central America. Despite slight decreases, national level homicide rates in Guatemala, Honduras, and El Salvador from 2017 remain above the minimum number of homicides identified by the United Nations as constituting an epidemic of violence, and are among the top six highest homicide rates in Latin America. Violence is perpetuated not just by non-state actors including gangs and organized crime, but also by state security forces. Increasing rates of internal displacement last year, as seen in El Salvador and Honduras also point to individuals’ efforts to relocate due to violence by gangs or law enforcement.

Crises of corruption and rule of law in the region are also drivers of migration and result in governments’ inability to protect their citizens or offer them basic services in the face of this violence. Citizens are forced to migrate not just because of the human rights violations they suffer but also because they lack trust in their authorities to investigate and prosecute these crimes. In both El Salvador and Honduras, the police commit serious abuses including extrajudicial executions that often go unpunished. The armed forces have also been used in all three countries to legitimize the expansion of executive power, threaten advances in investigating corruption, and to repress citizens.

All of these factors result in further violence to marginalized populations such as women, children, youth, LGBTI, Afro-descendant, and indigenous communities. Women and girls continue to face increasing rates of sexual and gender-based violence in all three countries, including domestic violence, sexual assault, sexual violence by gangs, human trafficking for the purpose of sexual exploitation, and femicide. LGBTI people are subject to severe and widespread hate-based violence, as well as frequent abuse by police and other authorities. Government institutions fail to provide access to protection and justice for survivors.

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of these forms of violence and, in many cases, subject them to further victimization when they report violence and during the judicial process. As Acting Principal Deputy Assistant Secretary in the Department of State's Bureau of Western Hemisphere Affairs recently testified before Congress to the pervasive violence and insecurity for women and girls in the Northern Triangle: “Young women and girls often face intimate partner violence and experience sexual assault or abuse by gang members, forcing them to drop out of school or relocate. Lack of accountability perpetuates existing patterns of violence and abuse. Persistent social exclusion, ingrained socio-cultural attitudes, heightened levels of generalized violence, high levels of impunity, inadequate legal frameworks, and weak institutions contribute to the insecurity of women and girls in the region.”

Meaningfully addressing the root causes of migration from the three Northern Triangle countries requires comprehensive rights-based policies focused on reducing violence and poverty, combating corruption, and strengthening human rights and the rule of law in the region. These efforts should be led by the governments of the region in collaboration with civil society organizations, and the U.S. State Department and Agency for International Development (AID), not the Department of Homeland Security (DHS). Further, any U.S. assistance must be targeted at building sustainable, inclusive economies that expand livelihoods for many, reducing poverty, supporting community-based violence prevention strategies, addressing sexual and gender-based violence, strengthening child welfare systems, and improving justice, accountability, and human rights protections. U.S. foreign assistance must be transparent and implemented in partnership with a diverse group of civil society organizations.

U.S. assistance should not be used to prevent Central Americans fleeing for their lives from seeking protection in the United States, or to support military involvement in law enforcement activities. And U.S. foreign assistance should be contingent upon governments making meaningful progress in addressing human rights violations by security forces. Border cooperation, too, should not prevent individuals fleeing violence from seeking protection outside of their home countries.

Finally, U.S. immigration policy must not contribute to exacerbating the crisis in the region. Practices such as turning potential refugees and migrants back to Mexico, separating families and deporting parents without their children, and denying individuals access to a credible fear interview or to full and fair due process violate U.S. and international law, increase vulnerability, and do nothing to deter future forced migration. Repatriating individuals in need of international protection will put them at risk, render reintegration programs ineffective, and force people to flee their homes again. This also applies to individuals who have long resided in the United States that are now at risk for removal, such as the over 300,000 TPS beneficiaries with origins in Central America at risk for removal. For them, returning to their countries of origin could mean exposure to danger and significant risks to their livelihoods and assets.

The U.S. State Department and AID, not the Department of Homeland Security, should lead U.S. engagement to address forced migration from Central America and ensure that it is rooted in diplomacy and human rights. Efforts to address the root causes of migration in the region should consider the intersection between push factors and not punish families and children for seeking international protection. All individuals have the right to seek asylum in the United States or in the country where they feel safe under international law.

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Signed

United States
Alianza Americas
Al Otro Lado
Central American Resource Center (CARECEN) DC
Domesticas Unidas
Evangelical Lutheran Church of America, Advocacy Office
Global Exchange
Human Rights First
Kids in Need of Defense
Latin America Working Group
Mennonite Central Committee U.S. Washington Office
Oxfam
Univ of California-San Diego
Washington Office on Latin America
Women’s Refugee Commission

El Salvador
FUNDAHUMANIDAD
GMIES
Servicio Social Pasionista SSPAS

Guatemala
ACCSS
Asociación Pop No’j
Unidad de Protección a Defensoras y Defensores de Derechos Humanos - Guatemala

Honduras
La Asociación Para Una Vida Mejor de Personas Infectadas/Afectadas por el VIH-Sida en Honduras (APUVIMEH)
Casa Alianza de Honduras

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