



A Refugee Crisis: Why Children, Men and Women Are Fleeing the Northern Triangle of Central America

Lisa Haugaard, Executive Director, Latin America Working Group

Briefing on “Representing Traumatized Central American Children and Mothers: Updates from Experts and Efforts to End Family Detention”

Rayburn House Office Building, Sponsored by Catholic Legal Immigration Network, Inc., American Immigration Council, Refugee and Immigrant Center for Education and Legal Services, and American Immigration Lawyers Association, partners in the CARA Family Detention Pro Bono Project, March 29, 2016

The Northern Triangle of Central America (Honduras, El Salvador and Guatemala) is currently one of the most dangerous areas in the world. Honduras led the world in murders per capita for several years until 2014. El Salvador just bested Honduras in 2015 as the country with the highest murder rate, with an astounding 103 homicides per 100,000 people.

The violence in Northern Triangle comes from many directions. Organized crime, gangs that control territory, common crime, domestic abuse, and corrupt and abusive state agents are some of the factors. The inability of governments to address this violence effectively, and the corruption and capture by organized crime of some parts of the state, leaves the population unprotected.

In many neighborhoods, gangs control territory and levy a “war tax” or “rent” on business owners, including small street vendors, taxi and bus drivers. Those who refuse to pay can be threatened or killed, their businesses or houses can be burned down, and their families are often targeted. Children and teenagers are pressured under threat of death or harm to their families to participate in gangs as lookouts, traffickers, or full-fledged gang members. Young women, teenage and pre-teen girls are sometimes forced into prostitution or forced into relationships with gang members. In El Salvador and Honduras, whole neighborhoods have been forced to displace due to gang violence. Young people in gang-controlled neighborhoods lack the support, jobs and opportunities, and protection that can shield them from gang recruitment.

Large-scale development projects are another source of displacement in Central America. Mining, tourism, African palm plantations, dam projects—large-scale economic projects that are not consulted with communities—have resulted in displacement of poor communities,



some of which are indigenous or Garifuna. Private company security or government security forces have at times threatened, evicted, or otherwise forced small farmers to flee or relocate, as with palm projects in Honduras's Bajo Aguán region or mining projects in Guatemala.

Among those also at particular risk are journalists reporting on corruption and human rights defenders of all descriptions, including environmental activists and labor organizers. Prosecutors, judges, and honest police men and women are also victims of threats and violence. LGBTI Central Americans, especially transgender women and men, suffer violence not only from criminal gangs, but from members of the police.

Too often, government officials and security forces are part of the problem rather than the solution. In Honduras, some members of the Military Police, Tigres, army, and other security forces have been implicated in extrajudicial executions of young men, threats against and mistreatment of human rights defenders and journalists, and other serious abuses. In El Salvador, after violence escalated following the breakdown of the gang truce, the state's increasingly hardline response has been accompanied by reports of possible extrajudicial executions by police or soldiers of suspected gang members. In all three countries, local officials linked to organized crime contribute to violence and impunity.

Militarized policing strategies, with military accompanying police on joint patrols in Guatemala and El Salvador and deployment of Military Police in Honduras, are strategies that raise the risk of human rights abuses in the communities where they patrol, and do not provide the real solution—which must include effective investigations by police and prosecutors, community policing, community violence prevention programs, and education, afterschool and jobs programs for at-risk youth.

El Salvador, Honduras, and Guatemala currently also do not offer anywhere near adequate programs to help the victims of common crime, organized crime, and forced displacement. There is little available in terms of witness protection programs. There are not relocation programs for victims of forced displacement—not that there could be programs large enough to cover the scope of the problem. There are few safe houses for victims of domestic violence. Child protection agencies lack resources. Even human rights defenders who have received precautionary measures from the IACHR are not provided with adequate protection, as we saw with the murder of Honduran activist Berta Cáceres last month. Crimes are often not properly investigated and prosecuted, so the victims are forced to run the risk of reporting without the confidence that their attackers will be punished. Many do not report the crimes against them. While the countries' ombudsman's offices register complaints, they are unable to connect



victims with services needed to protect them from danger. This means victims of violence and forced displacement often need to take the next step—to flee their country.

One estimate from the University of Central America in San Salvador shows that as many as 275,000 people fled their homes in El Salvador due to violence in 2014. [1.8 percent](#) of these were forced to change homes six times during that year to escape “unrelenting threats and fears of violence.”

Of course, Central Americans are not only fleeing violence, some are leaving due to poverty and lack of opportunity in terms of education and jobs. But violence is driving a large share of the flow of people leaving the Northern Triangle. A UN High Commissioner for Refugee study, [Children on the Run](#), interviewed over 400 unaccompanied children who had arrived in the United States during or after October 2011 from El Salvador, Honduras, Guatemala, and Mexico. The study identified over half, 58 percent, as potentially having protection needs. Forty-eight percent of those interviewed had been personally affected by violence by organized crime, gangs, or state actors. Twenty-one percent had suffered abuse at home.

This explains why toughened borders and messaging campaigns warning of the dangers of the journey are not stopping the flow of children, women, and men from the Northern Triangle of Central America. Messaging campaigns highlighting the dangers of migrating may be increasing awareness of the dangers of the journey and the likelihood of being sent back. But they are not deterring migration, according to a study by Vanderbilt University’s Latin American and Public Opinion Project (LAPOP), as cited by the [American Immigration Council](#). Their findings based on a poll of 3,000 Hondurans suggests that Hondurans were increasingly aware of the dangers of the journey and increased enforcement in the United States, but decided that “no matter what the future might hold in terms of the dangers of migration, it is preferable to a present-day life of crime and violence.” Many of those turned back in Mexico or the United States simply try again soon.

What can be done to help? There are no easy or short-term solutions. The United States can provide human rights focused aid and diplomacy, encouraging comprehensive rights-based solutions to protect citizen security. U.S. assistance should focus on opportunities for at-risk youth and community violence prevention. It should encourage strengthening of judicial systems and improving controls over law enforcement, not militarized policing strategies that can exacerbate the violence. The human rights and anti-corruption conditions on U.S. assistance are an important tool that Congress was wise to provide—and those need to be enforced. U.S. aid can help those at risk of displacement by supporting shelters, witness protection programs, and strengthening child welfare systems.



Support for UN human rights and anti-corruption mechanisms, like the CICIG in Guatemala and the offices of the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights in Honduras and Guatemala, is also very helpful. U.S. support should also include support for the UN High Commissioner for Refugees to strengthen access to protection in the Northern Triangle and Mexico.

But bottom line, the U.S. response must include a realistic assessment that many of those leaving the Northern Triangle of Central America now and in the last few years are not economic migrants, they are refugees fleeing violence. In the region, the United States can expand its in-country processing program for children to have access to asylum and should encourage other countries, including Mexico, to ensure adequate protections for asylum seekers and migrants.

Here at home, strengthening access to asylum, ending family detention, extending Temporary Protected Status for Northern Triangle countries, and eventually comprehensive immigration reform should be part of any response that is humane—and realistic.

***For more information, contact the Latin America Working Group, (202) 546-7010,
lisah@lawg.org.***