

Rights Action
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Dealing With The Honduran/Guatemalan Refugee “Crisis” We Helped Create

Even as the governments of United States and Canada maintain full military, economic and political relations with the military-back regime in Honduras that since the military coup in 2009 has become the 'Murder Capital of the World' and the 'Repression Capital of the Americas', the U.S. government is now considering refugee status for Hondurans fleeing the very same repression, violence and despair that the 2009 military coup and the post-coup regime are responsible for.

- What to do/ More info: See below

U.S. Considering Refugee Status for Hondurans

By [FRANCES ROBLES](#) and [MICHAEL D. SHEAR](#), JULY 24, 2014

URL: <http://www.nytimes.com/2014/07/25/world/americas/administration-weighs-plan-to-move-processing-of-youths-seeking-entry-to-honduras-.html>



(Sisters and a friend from Honduras, ages 13, 14 and 16, along Mexico's southern border this month, en route to the United States. Credit Meridith Kohut for The New York Times)

Hoping to stem the recent surge of migrants at the Southwest border, the Obama administration is considering whether to allow hundreds of minors and young adults from Honduras into the United States without making the dangerous trek through Mexico, according to a draft of the proposal.

If approved, the plan would direct the government to screen thousands of children and youths in Honduras to see if they can enter the United States as refugees or on emergency humanitarian grounds. It would be the first American refugee effort in a nation reachable by land to the United States, the White House said, putting the violence in Honduras on the level of humanitarian emergencies in Haiti and Vietnam, where such programs have been conducted in the past amid war and major crises.

Critics of the plan were quick to pounce, saying it appeared to redefine the legal definition of a refugee and would only increase the flow of migration to the United States. Administration officials said they believed the plan could be enacted through executive action, without congressional approval, as long as it did not increase the total number of refugees coming into the country.

Children at the Border: The number of children crossing the U.S. border alone has doubled since last year.



By moving decisions on refugee claims to Honduras, the plan aims to slow the rush of minors crossing into the United States illegally from El Salvador, Honduras and Guatemala, which has overwhelmed the border this year. More than 45,000 unaccompanied minors from those three nations have arrived since Oct. 1, straining federal resources to the point that some agencies will exhaust their budgets by next month, the secretary of Homeland Security has said.

Many of the children, particularly in Honduras, are believed to be fleeing dangerous street gangs, which forcibly recruit members and extort home and business owners. The United Nations estimates that 70,000 gang members operate in the three nations.

Administration officials stressed that no decision had been made to move forward, saying the idea was one of many being discussed by officials at the White House and the Departments of State, Homeland Security, Justice, and Health and Human Services.

Among the factors surrounding the decision are how many people in Honduras would be eligible to apply for the program, and how many would probably be approved.

The proposal, prepared by several federal agencies, says the pilot program under consideration would cost up to \$47 million over two years, assuming 5,000 applied and about 1,750 people were accepted. If successful, it would be adopted in Guatemala and El Salvador as well.

It is unclear how the administration determined those estimates, given that since Oct. 1 more than 16,500 unaccompanied children traveled to the United States from Honduras alone.

Children would be interviewed by American immigration employees trained to deal with minors, and a resettlement center would be set up in the Honduran capital, Tegucigalpa, with assistance from international organizations like the International Organization for Migration.

The plan would be similar to a recent bill introduced by Senators John McCain and Jeff Flake of Arizona, who proposed increasing the number of refugee visas to the three Central American countries by 5,000 each.

According to the draft, the administration is considering opening the program to people under 21. It also suggested offering entry on emergency humanitarian grounds — known as humanitarian parole — to some of the applicants who did not qualify for refugee status.



(A crime scene in San Pedro Sula, Honduras, where a 7-year-old was found tortured and murdered. Credit Meridith Kohut for The New York Times)

That would most likely cause an outcry among critics who believe President Obama has been too soft on immigration. But officials called it “highly unlikely” that people who were denied refugee status would be considered for parole, which is generally offered in isolated emergencies.

Mark Krikorian, the executive director of the Center for Immigration Studies, which supports tighter controls on immigration, said that the proposal would increase, not stem, the flood of migrants from Central America trying to get into the United States.

"It's clearly a bad idea," Mr. Krikorian said. "Orders of magnitude more people will apply for refugee status if they can just do it from their home countries."

He added that the proposal would allow people to claim to be refugees from their countries with "nothing more than a bus ride to the consulate. We're talking about, down the road, an enormous additional flow of people from those countries."

The preliminary plan could create a thorny challenge for the administration because the definition of a refugee is legally specific, and children fleeing street gangs could have a hard time qualifying. Under American law, refugees are people fleeing their country of origin based on fears of persecution by reason of race, religion, nationality, political opinion or membership in a particular social group.

The only category that would seem to apply is "social group," experts said, but there is disagreement on what that means. Some contend that children could count as a group, but others say the refugee requirements are stricter, and would not apply to people fleeing general crime and violence.

"What is a social group?" said Muzaffar Chishti, director of migration policies for the Migration Policy Institute's New York office. "This is going to create a huge deal of debate. You will see a lot of law developing on it."

Still, the draft of the plan noted that 64.7 percent of the unaccompanied minors who applied for asylum this year got it, which suggests that immigration officials have found their claims of imminent danger credible.



(Migrants traveling north through Mexico toward the United States on a northbound freight train known as "The Beast," because of rampant accidents and violent crime. Credit Meridith Kohut for The New York Times)

With that in mind, the draft proposal suggested that 35 percent to 50 percent of the applicants in Honduras could be considered for relief, a figure the White House said was inflated. The early draft, the White House said, was the most generous and least likely of the options the administration is considering. How many people are accepted is critical, because refugees qualify for public assistance upon arrival in the United States.

One of the issues under debate is whether the program should be limited to children who have at least one relative in the United States, so that the government would not be saddled with custodial issues. Whether that relative would have to have legal residency is another issue that was addressed but not resolved.

Under Senator McCain's proposal, refugee applicants would be processed at home, and child migrants arriving in the United States illegally could be deported quickly.

Kevin Appleby, director of Migration and Refugee Services at the United States Conference of Catholic Bishops, said the plan would be welcome, as long as it did not substitute for protections Central American children currently receive under American law.

“This program would certainly be a formal acknowledgment by the administration that these children are refugees,” Mr. Appleby said. “That’s huge, because they have yet to utter that word.”

When a similar plan was adopted in Haiti, as a way to keep people from taking to the high seas, he said, it was ultimately criticized because Haitians already in the United States did not receive help. “It ended up being counterproductive to the goal,” Mr. Appleby said.

Stacie Blake, the director of government relations for the U.S. Committee for Refugees and Immigrants, an advocacy group, said the processing of potential refugees in Central America could be handled by the United States or by the United Nations, which makes refugee determinations in many other countries. She said some of the people designated as refugees in Honduras could end up in countries other than the United States.

“It’s a way to help folks avoid life-threatening escapes and journeys,” Ms. Blake said. “It’s a good idea. It’s a tested idea.”

The Honduran Foreign Ministry referred requests for comment to its embassy in Washington, which said that, due to the president’s visit to Washington, its ambassador was not immediately available for comment.

On Friday, Mr. Obama is scheduled to meet with the presidents of Honduras, Guatemala and El Salvador at the White House in an effort to urge the Central American leaders to do more to help stem the flow of children fleeing their countries for the United States.

What To Do?

Short term/Immediately: U.S. citizens must work with local refugee/ migrant groups to pressure Senators and Members of Congress to ensure humane treatment of all migrants, with full due process of the law, whether in the U.S. in their home countries, or ‘en route’ to the U.S..

Medium/Long terms: U.S. citizens must get involved in efforts to hold the U.S. government, U.S. companies and investors, and U.S.-dominated institutions like the World Bank and IMF, full accountable when they help create, keep in place and profit from the very conditions – in countries like Guatemala and Honduras – that so many people are forced to flee.

- **“Harvest of Empire”** - Recommend viewing/ reading.

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