

Rights Action
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The Central American Refugee “Crisis” Is Not A “Crisis”: “How the U.S.-Backed Genocide in Guatemala Drove the Child Refugee Crisis”

“Decades of U.S. policy in Guatemala alone have turned the country into a land of wreck and ruin. This is the ultimate reason migrants have been crossing into the United States in increasing numbers in recent months. ... It is indisputable that the U.S. shares significant responsibility for the genocide of tens of thousands of Guatemalans -- mainly indigenous Mayans who comprised a majority of the (at least) 150,000 killed in the 1980s alone.”

There will be no end to hundreds of thousands of people fleeing poverty, exploitation, repression, corruption and impunity, if there is no change to the global economic and military policies that empower and keep in place the unjust regimes.

- **What to do / How to get involved:** See below.

How the U.S.-Backed Genocide in Guatemala Drove the Child Refugee Crisis

By [Gabriel M. Schivone](#) [2], July 28, 2014

<http://www.alternet.org/world/how-us-backed-genocide-guatemala-drove-child-refugee-crisis>

For once the Republicans got it right. But not in the way they think. Indeed, President Obama carries the representative blame for the debacle (including reports of [sadistic abuse](#) [3] by U.S. Border Patrol) of largely Central American migrant children long overwhelming shelters at the border. But the guilt is much broader, ranging from successive administrations all the way down to us, as American taxpayers.

Decades of U.S. policy in Guatemala alone have turned the country into a land of wreck and ruin. This is the ultimate reason migrants have been crossing into the United States in increasing numbers in recent months.

Harsh immigration enforcement policies, such as the ones the Obama administration has been [championing](#) [4], add insult to injury as the U.S. punishes migrants when they arrive when it should be paying people like those of Guatemala massive reparations.

"They Owe It to Us"

It is indisputable that the U.S. shares significant responsibility for the genocide of tens of thousands of Guatemalans--mainly indigenous Mayans who comprised a majority of the (at least) 150,000 killed in the 1980s alone. A 1999 [UN Truth Commission](#) [5] blamed Guatemalan state forces for 93 percent of the atrocities. That same year, former President Bill Clinton admitted the wrongness of U.S. support for Guatemalan State violence.

U.S. culpability for Guatemala's plight [endures](#) [6] to this day. The problem is --then and now-- the United States is in denial as a nation over what to do about its complicity.

Just ask Clinton. The day of his apology in Guatemala City, he looked genocide survivors in the face, voiced regret for the U.S. enabling their suffering, and then [rejected](#) [6] their impassioned pleas for U.S. immigration reform because, he said, "we must enforce our laws." Today, many continue to [call](#) [4] on the U.S. for reform measures like temporary protected status. And still, U.S. officials meet them with silence or dismissal.

Some Guatemalans, particularly the young generation living unauthorized in the U.S., know who's responsible for the origins of their current troubles and aren't confused by what to do about it. Erika Perez, an indigenous Mayan student in New England, told me: "My role in the U.S. is to tell [fellow Guatemalans], 'Take advantage of all the opportunities around us.'" After all, "They owe it to us."

Perez says the Guatemalan economy for most of the population hasn't recovered from the genocidal wreckage of the 1980s and continues to be subjugated by U.S.-led neoliberal economic reforms like NAFTA and CAFTA. The desperate situation keeps sending Guatemalans like her migrating as a necessary means of decent survival.

Erika crossed the Arizona/Mexico desert, the [deadliest area](#) [7] for migrants along the border, when she was eighteen in 2002. An indigenous Mayan who then spoke Spanish but no English, she faced sexual violence and dehydration along the way--and survived. So many other Guatemalans, a majority of them from the Mayan highland areas hit hardest by the genocide, remain missing while trying to cross the same part of border, according to data acquired from the Pima County medical examiner's Missing Migrants Project (now the [Colibrí Center for Human Rights](#) [8]).

Escaping a "Silent Holocaust"

"Opportunity," the young Antonio Albizures-Lopez recalls, was the purpose of his family's unauthorized migration to the United States, as well as "to escape the violence that was influenced directly by U.S. intervention" -- including the murders of four of Antonio's aunts. Albizures-Lopez grew up in Providence, RI since he was 1 year old in 1992, shortly after his mother crossed the Rio Grande River with Antonio strapped to her back.

International legal experts [describe](#) [9] the social climate in the U.S. at the time of the genocide as a "Silent Holocaust". In Antonio's case, the term couldn't be more appropriate. He was born in Huehuetenango, Guatemala, where one of the military bases set up with U.S. support "maintained its own crematorium and 'processed' abductees by chopping off limbs, singeing flesh and administering electric shocks," according to veteran journalist Allan Nairn who [interviewed](#) [10] a former agent of the G-2 secret intelligence service--the notorious Guatemalan agency long on the payroll of the U.S. State Department.

Meaningful forms of justice and accountability would have a long reach. They would provide restitution following the stories of Guatemalan youth like Antonio and Erika, two of many who are carrying the burden of genocide from their parents' generation. True accountability would also address, among other cases, the 16,472 [DREAM-ers](#) [11] who have listed Guatemala as their country of origin when they [registered](#) [12] for President Obama's 2012 [deferred action](#) [13] program ([DACA](#) [14]). Justice and accountability would lead to fundamental changes in U.S. policies toward the Guatemalan state.

Instead, Washington offers programs such as the Central American Regional Security Initiative ([CARSI](#) [15]), a \$496 million endeavor since 2008 to train and assist local security forces to counter, among other perceived threats, "border security deficiencies." Along with the Department of Homeland

Security (DHS), the US Southern and Northern Commands, the Drug Enforcement Agency (DEA), the Bureau for Alcohol, Tobacco and Firearms (ATF), and the Federal Bureau of Investigation (FBI) have all [expanded](#) [16]activities in the region [under the auspices](#) [17] of the war on drugs, gangs, and other criminal activity.

The U.S. formally cut off military aid to Guatemala in 1977, though U.S. funding flowed at [normal levels](#) [18]through the early 1980s and Guatemala enjoyed enormous military support, by [proxy](#) [19], through U.S. client states such as Israel, Taiwan, and South Africa.

All in all, U.S. militarization in Guatemala has altered only in wording, shifting predominantly from anti-communist to currently anti-drug and counter-terror rhetoric. The policy trend continues through the present day, spanning across the Guatemalan boundary with Mexico as the "new southern border" of the United States, in the [words](#) [20]of Chief Diplomatic Officer for DHS Alan Bersin.

The official U.S. position on supporting Guatemalan military activities is that it "was wrong" in the past, and is no longer permissible to support Guatemalan militarization except in relation to "homeland security." In other words, Washington exercises the "doublethink" practice of "holding two contradictory beliefs in one's mind simultaneously, and accepting both of them," to [quote](#) [21]George Orwell.

Not Waiting For U.S. Immigration Reform

Meanwhile, as we've seen here lately in Arizona, Guatemalans are still fleeing a constant renewal of U.S.-caused duress. Reviewing the most visible case, the plight of migrant children at the border has relentlessly gripped the nation. "Many of the parents of these children are in the United States,"[explained](#) [22] Guatemalan ambassador to the U.S., Julio Ligorria, "and the children go to find them." The children also are reportedly suffering the same sorts of Border Patrol abuses [long familiar](#) [23] to their parents' generation, whose mistreatment often goes unnoticed.

So what next? Recognizing guilt is a crucial first step. Even more important is what comes after that recognition. Relevant here, Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. described the function of a "guilt complex" in the American conscience regarding past and ongoing abuses. In a 1957 interview with NBC, King [remarked](#) [24]: "Psychologists would say that a guilt complex can lead to two reactions. One is acceptance and the desire to change. The other reaction is to indulge in more of the very thing that you have the sense of guilt about."

Recognition of U.S. guilt over the Guatemalan genocide should translate into concrete forms of remedial action which, to the degree possible, corresponds with the scope of the crime.

But Guatemalans like Erika aren't waiting. She's teaching Guatemalans in her community crucial skills like English, advocating to cancel deportation orders against fellow migrants, putting herself through college. She says her philosophy of "empowering people in my community is: 'Don't be afraid anymore.'"

[Click on original for footnotes]

What To Do?

- **Short term / Immediate:** 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 they are in the U.S. in their home countries, or 'en route' to the U.S..
- **Medium / Long term:** U.S. and Canadian citizens must get involved in efforts to hold the U.S. and Canadian governments, companies and investors, and institutions like the World Bank and IMF, fully accountable when they help create, keep in place and profit from the very economic and violent, repressive conditions – in countries like Guatemala and Honduras – that so many people are forced to flee.

“Harvest of Empire” - Recommend viewing/ reading.

Rights Action

Rights Action funds grassroots organizations in Guatemala and Honduras (and in southern Mexico and El Salvador) working for community controlled development, environmental protection, truth, justice and human rights, and for democracy and the rule of law. Rights Action does education and activism work concerning how the United States and Canada sometimes contribute to and benefit from endemic harms and violations in these countries. Rights Action (Canada), founded in 1999, is independent from Rights Action (USA).

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