

## U.S. government-led “Alliance for Prosperity” intensifies Central American forced migrancy and refugee reality

By Dawn Paley (dawnpaley@gmail.com)

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(Carlos Chen and father Nicolas, survivors of the Chixoy Dam/Rio Negro massacres in Guatemala in 1982, that killed over 440 Mayan Achi people. They have been struggling for truth, reparations and justice since then. The World Bank and Inter-American Development Bank, primary investors in this genocidal development project, have yet to accept responsibility for the dam related massacres and other crimes; both banks profited financially. Nicolas died in late 2016, in poverty, surrounded by family and community, fighting for family and community, truth and reparations.)

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## **The U.S. Government's "Alliance for Prosperity" Will Intensify the Central American Refugee Crisis**

**Conceived without the participation of civil-society groups, the chief goal is to advance elite US and Northern Triangle business interests.**

By Dawn Paley, December 21, 2016

[\[https://www.thenation.com/article/the-alliance-for-prosperity-will-intensify-the-central-american-refugee-crisis/\]](https://www.thenation.com/article/the-alliance-for-prosperity-will-intensify-the-central-american-refugee-crisis/)

It took a few tries before the taxi driver taking me to meet Lorena Cabnal found his way to her address. We drove up and down streets along the outskirts of Guatemala City, directions made confusing by the profusion of closed-off neighborhoods. Here, residents simply block streets and put up barriers to prevent cars from circulating, paying a guard to monitor who goes in and out. These aren't the private gated communities of the rich, but rather survival strategies of the poor and working class in Central America's largest metropolis.

Finally, we found Cabnal's apartment, and I called up to where she was staying. I was buzzed in and climbed a flight of stairs, where I waited on a modest loveseat in the narrow entryway. A lit candle burned beside a printed photograph of murdered Honduran activist Berta Cáceres.

Cabnal is a Maya-Xinca woman who considers herself a communitarian feminist. She works with a network of healers in Guatemala, and she lives in this unlikely location, far from the buzzing core of activism in downtown Guatemala City, for her own protection after threats related to her political activism.

"It's not true that in [Guatemala, Honduras, and El Salvador] there has been an economic stimulus that has developed and strengthened education, health, and infrastructure," said Cabnal, looking at me from behind thick framed glasses. "Quite the contrary: Impoverishment has gotten worse, and the big security problems haven't been resolved."

In addition to performing traditional healing work for activists and others seeking aid, Cabnal works to support political prisoners in Guatemala, most of them incarcerated because of their role in land defense. Today, she's speaking out against the Alliance for Prosperity, a new US-backed aid program that is supposed to stem the flow of migrants from Central America toward the north.

In 2014, people around the United States began to learn that thousands of unaccompanied children from Central America were turning up at the US-Mexico Border. In June of 2014, the ACLU and others filed a complaint on behalf of 116 youth against US Customs and Border Protection. According to the complaint, one young woman was raped by a border agent, and another was held in a freezer and forced to drink water from a toilet.

By the spring of 2015, a record number of children had crossed the border, most of them from El Salvador, Guatemala, and Honduras. To shift the narrative, the US government had to come up with a response to the crisis.

As if on cue, the Alliance for Prosperity was announced by the presidents of Guatemala, El Salvador, and Honduras at an event at the Inter-American Development Bank (IDB) headquarters in November of 2014.

“Officially, the Alliance for Prosperity is not a US creation. Officially, it was created by these three countries; they came together and asked the IDB for help in putting the plan together,” said Alexander Main, the senior associate for international policy at the Center for Economic and Policy Research. “It just very much looks like the US played a big role in facilitating this plan and moving it forward, and was quite possibly completely behind this plan since the beginning. We don’t quite have evidence of that, but it came at the exact moment when the administration was talking about tackling the root causes of migration.”

For Cabnal, the timing is more than a coincidence. It’s perverse. “I think that justifying the Alliance for Prosperity in the context of what happened in 2013 and 2014, when they talked about a huge migration of unaccompanied boys and girls to the US, I think it is twisted,” said Cabnal. “Really, what they want to justify is a neoliberal reconfiguration of these governments.” It is the long-term economic concerns of the elite that drive the Alliance for Prosperity, in Cabnal’s view, not the systemic change Central America needs if migration is to be meaningfully reduced.

The Alliance for Prosperity “is about creating continuity with already signed agreements. I’m talking about the Plan Puebla Panama,” said Cabnal. She sees the Alliance for Prosperity as operationalizing these previous plans, but without sparking the same level of social protest or debate. Elite business federations from all three countries were involved in drafting the plan, which was completed without participation from migrant organizations or civil society groups.

And the Alliance for Prosperity is likely to carry on through the presidency of Donald Trump: When outgoing Vice President Joe Biden [traveled](#) to Guatemala to advance the plan in 2015, he was joined by Gen. John Kelly, then commander of US Southern Command who is now Trump’s [pick](#) to head the Department of Homeland Security.

Total investment over the five years of the plan was initially set at \$22 billion, most of it coming from host governments. The United States promised to provide \$1 billion per year over five years, but in 2016, total US funding for all of Central America was shy of \$750 million. The US government counts funding for development, military assistance, and the continuation of the Central America Regional Security Initiative, which is Washington’s anti-narcotics strategy in the region, as part of the Alliance for Prosperity.

[The Alliance for Prosperity] vision of combating migration from Central America sees increased foreign investment and new infrastructure tied to police training and militarization as the solution to the crisis. For many, it sounds like the same policies that have made the Northern Triangle into such an unequal and violent place.

Fernando Solís, who is a journalist and editor of the Guatemalan magazine *El Observador*, thinks that the ongoing security and economic crises in the region tend to obscure the fact that the Northern Triangle is a key political and economic enclave for the United States. We spoke in his office in Guatemala City, at a long table under glaring fluorescent lights.

“On the one hand, it is a security strategy based on contention and social control, which attempts to create governance mechanisms in these countries,” said Solís, who sees the Alliance for Prosperity as a mechanism for US and local elites to maintain commercial and political influence in the area. “The second part, which I think is a long-term plan that is connected to the first, is the investment plan, the US economic plan.”

A few days after I first met Cabnal, I saw her again. This time, she was under a small tent washing the feet of women who had walked hundreds of kilometers from their hometowns into Guatemala City’s central park. With a mix of herbs and warm water, Cabnal massaged heels and toes, soothing injuries and easing pain.

The occasion was a national March for Water, a massive protest that brought together indigenous people and peasants denouncing industry and insisting on their right to access clean water in Guatemala. It was the first major mobilization since anti-corruption protests and a complex corruption scandal sent former President Otto Perez Molina, Vice President Roxana Baldetti, and three ministers from the halls of congress into prison cells in 2015.

“The marches that took place last year were centered on corruption in the political system,” said Jovita Tzul Tzul, a Maya K’iche’ lawyer based in Guatemala City. Tzul Tzul said longstanding concerns of indigenous and rural people were not given the weight they deserved in anti-corruption marches. I spoke with her as we awaited tens of thousands of people who were entering the city on Reforma Avenue, a wide street lined with prestigious hotels and banks, and home to the US embassy and the Guatemalan defense ministry. “Today is the day that we join together to demand the protection of water,” said Tzul Tzul.

Hundreds of participants in the March for Water walked for three weeks to arrive at the capital, most of them from communities along the western part of the border with Mexico. By the time the march reached the capital, it had swollen to include delegations from around the country, and easily filled the city’s central square. The protesters ranged from mothers carrying their infant children to elders and teenagers, together denouncing the construction of new dams, the overuse of water by agro-industry, and the increase in dirty maquiladoras dumping waste into rivers. “They have made money, while we in the general population have ended up without water,” said Gaspar Lobo, a 73-year-old Maya Poqomam leader from near the city of Escuintla. He complained of invasions of communal land, a wave of new maquilas, and rumors of a new oil pipeline in the region.

The demands of the marchers fly in the face of proposals laid out in the Alliance for Prosperity, which is in large part a plan to build new infrastructure that will benefit transnational corporations. A key plank in the plan is to build a new gas pipeline from Salina Cruz, in the Mexican state of Oaxaca, approximately 650 kilometers south along the west coast to Escuintla, Guatemala. This key pipeline route will connect Mexico to Central America, opening a new market for natural gas producers in the United States to export piped gas to Central America.

The Alliance for Prosperity proposes eight new logistics corridors to speed the flow of goods through the region, as well as new energy interconnection infrastructure and doubling the capacity of the electrical grid. Overlaying the maps of Plan Puebla Panama, later called Plan Mesoamerica, and the Alliance for Prosperity, it is immediately evident that the latter truly is an updated version of the former. In short, the centerpiece of the Alliance for Prosperity involves tax breaks for corporate investors and new

pipelines, highways, and power lines to speed resource extraction and streamline the process of import, assembly, and export at low-wage maquilas.

These are the very things that community leaders in Central America are risking their lives to prevent. Environmental conflicts have burned strong in Honduras and El Salvador as well. In March, people around the world were shocked to learn of the death of indigenous leader and Goldman Environmental Prize winner Berta Cáceres in Honduras. Cáceres was an activist involved in a variety of local and regional social movements, but it is believed that it was her involvement as a leader in the struggle against a hydroelectric dam on Lenca territories that made her a target.

It is just this kind of project that the Alliance for Prosperity sets forth as a way out of poverty. The London-based human rights organization Global Witness [documented](#) 18 killings of environmental activists in Guatemala and Honduras last year, many of which were linked to anti-dam organizing. In El Salvador, community opposition to large-scale mining has also led to the killing and disappearance of activists.

“There is a very strong repression toward communities who resist what is basically the privatization of their water and their lands, and there’s a very strong conflict between the way of life and the economic model,” said Juan Jeremías Castro Simón, a lawyer with the Association of Mayan Lawyers and Notaries of Guatemala (Nim Ajpú). “There is a community-based economic model, based on buen vivir [living well or good living], and there is an economic model that individualizes and appropriates [shared] goods.” Castro Simón is involved with numerous cases involving reclamation of communal lands by indigenous communities in Guatemala. He and his colleagues at the Nim Ajpú have litigated successfully for the return of communal lands, and achieved the cancellation of mining concessions and other contracts in various parts of the country.

Guatemala’s new president, Jimmy Morales, who was voted in during an election that was already scheduled when the corruption scandal hit last year, has done little to reassure Guatemalans that he’s going to turn things around. Rather, he’s made agreements with hard-line military factions and jumped to do Washington’s bidding.

Morales is akin to a Central American version of Donald Trump, basing his candidacy on his past as a comedian and political outsider offering a clean break from the political class. In April, Morales extended an olive branch to Trump. “To the gentleman who wants to build a wall, I offer cheap labor,” he told *The New York Times en Español*.

The number of unaccompanied minors apprehended in the United States spiked to 68,541 in 2014, dropped by nearly half in 2015, and in fiscal year 2016, which ended September 30, climbed back up to just shy of 60,000. But it isn’t the Alliance for Prosperity that changed conditions on the ground. Rather, the 2015 drop was due to the Washington’s increased cooperation with Mexican border guards in efforts to keep Central Americans from coming north. “In 2011, Mexico apprehended some 4,000 adolescents and children from northern Central America. That rose to about 23,000 in 2014 and nearly 35,000 in 2015,” according to a July 2016 report by the International Crisis Group. In 2015, Mexico deported 165,000 Guatemalans, Hondurans, and Salvadorans, more than twice the number deported from the United States.

Activists say migrants who are detained by Mexican agents are routinely subjected to torture. Migrants detained by organized criminal groups, often working closely with state officials, often fare much worse.

Even massive investments, like the Alliance for Prosperity, are small in comparison to the amount of money migrants working abroad send home.

“The US is going to put up \$750 million, or something like that, for the three countries, if we pass a series of laws as a condition,” said Sandra Morán, who was elected to congress last year as part of a minute leftist bloc. According to Morán, this year in Guatemala alone, it is estimated that migrants working abroad will send back \$6.6 billion. “We are drowning, and this is what is causing more migration to the United States, and that has become a problem for the US,” said Morán. “These remittances are for survival.”

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