

4 countries violate rights of 1000s of Honduran refugees / forced migrants

As 1000s of Hondurans continue fleeing across Mexico, and more are trying to get out of Honduras, the governments and military of Honduras, Guatemala, Mexico and the U.S. are, variously, violating their rights as refugees and forced migrants

<https://mailchi.mp/rightsaction/4-countries-violate-rights-of-1000s-of-honduran-refugees-forced-migrants>

- Below: article by Sandra Cuffe, AlJazeera news

Crackdown on Honduran migrant caravan 'against international law' Rights groups warn government responses to Central American migrants, refugees going to US may violate international law

by Sandra Cuffe, Oct.23, 2018, AlJazeera news

[Original: https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2018/10/crackdown-honduran-migrant-caravan-international-law-181023194538522.html?fbclid=IwAR1pjGld15V-cBZ2n0lv9HCotEuAEbNU22ZU5qM6GEAv2IX62n_skbmbOEg]



Honduran migrants, part of a caravan trying to reach the US, rest at the border checkpoint between Honduras and Guatemala last week [Jorge Cabrera/Reuters]

Agua Caliente, Guatemala/Honduras - It was the middle of the night when Kenia Sanchez set out. The border was closed, so sticking to the highway was not an option.

Sanchez, her partner and their baby daughter left Ocotepeque, Honduras on foot at 2am and arrived at the migrant shelter over the border in Esquipulas, Guatemala, shortly before mid-day on Monday.

"There was no way through. We went into the bush," Sanchez told Al Jazeera, her blistered feet resting atop worn shoes. "We passed through forest. We crossed rivers."

Sanchez, 30, and her family are among several groups of Hondurans attempting to make their way north, following in the footsteps of thousands of migrants and refugees who have made the trek over the past week. Most say they are fleeing unemployment and violence, but some told Al Jazeera they are fleeing political persecution and other targeted threats.

The initial wave, dubbed a migrant caravan, now has more than 5,000 participants and is making its way through southern Mexico.



Honduran migrants hike through the forest after crossing the Lempa river, on the border between Honduras and Guatemala, to join a caravan trying to reach the US [Jorge Cabrera/Reuters]

US President Donald Trump ramped up his threats against Central American countries on Monday, tweeting the US would begin cutting or substantially reducing aid to the region. He also said that had put the US military and Border Patrol on alert.

Amid the threats, the governments of Honduras, Guatemala and Mexico fortified parts of their borders, deployed police and military forces and held or returned migrants and refugees.

Some of these measures violate international law or risk doing so, according to human rights groups and international agencies.

'Trump's calls are illegal'

Trump on Sunday tweeted that people should first seek asylum in Mexico, "and if they fail to do that, the U.S. will turn them away". "The courts are asking the U.S. to do things that are not doable!" he said.

But there is no obligation to first apply for asylum in Mexico, legal experts and human rights organisations point out, and requiring Central Americans to do so would violate international law. "Congress adopted the Refugee Act of 1980 to bring the United States into line with its obligations to protect refugees under international law," Human Rights First, a US-based group, wrote in a statement Monday debunking several of Trump's tweets about the migrant caravan.

"The United States is obliged to provide protection to people fleeing persecution, including asylum seekers. These individuals are entitled to a screening interview to determine whether they have a credible fear of persecution," the group wrote.

For those who do plan on applying for asylum in Mexico, Amnesty International says they are essentially being detained in areas that authorities describe as a shelter. More than 1,000 people have already done so, Madeleine Penman, a researcher on Mexico for Amnesty based in Mexico City, told Al Jazeera via telephone. "At this stage, they're applying a regime of mandatory detention to [those] who even ask for asylum," she said. "So they have made available a shelter for members of the caravan. However, the reality of the shelter is that it is functioning as a detention centre."

Once people are inside, the only ways they can get out are deportation or a stay of weeks or months, Penman added. "The Mexican government has shown itself as routinely violating international law in the past by returning every year thousands of people who could be at risk of their lives in countries such as Honduras," she said.

Mexican President Enrique Peña Nieto issued a statement on Friday, declaring that, "like any other sovereign country, Mexico does not permit, nor will it permit, entry into its territory in an irregular manner, and much less in a violent manner," referring to the initial caravan group Friday, when thousands pushed past fences, resulting in a clash with police, who used tear gas on the crowd. "Members of the caravan may request entry according to the manners established by our laws and international law," Peña Nieto said.

The Mexican National Immigration Institute did not respond to Al Jazeera's repeated requests for comment.

Borders blocked

In Guatemala, caravan participants have been stopped by police checkpoints. Suspected migrants and refugees are asked to show a slip of paper granting permission to enter from Guatemalan immigration authorities. Many do not have the official document as Guatemala's immigration control centre at the Agua Caliente border cross was shut down last Tuesday, reopened Thursday, and has since been shut down.

Hondurans who cannot produce the small document are transported back to the Honduran side of the border, where police prevent their exit from the country, more than a dozen migrants, refugees, police officers and local taxi drivers confirmed to Al Jazeera.

The Honduran government announced on Saturday that its immigration control point at the Agua Caliente border crossing would be closed until further notice. The measure was due to a "crisis provoked by sectors outside of national interests", the Honduran National Immigration Institute said in a statement.

Days prior to the immigration control point shutdown, Honduran police blocked the way out for those looking to flee, using force to prevent their exit. On both sides of the border, there has been a heavy presence of security forces as Honduran police stop migrants and refugees from crossing into Guatemala.

Guatemalan soldiers were also in the area, as were US-donated Jeep J8 vehicles belonging to a border region task force. On the Honduran side, members of the US-trained TIGRES and Rurales special police forces stood with riot gear across the road, checking the identification of pedestrians who were let through because they were Guatemalan locals heading home. A handful of Honduran soldiers were also in the vicinity. According to a general of the Honduran police force, there were about 200 police and special forces resting nearby.

Undeterred caravan migrants: 'All of Honduras wants to come here'

Additional forces were sent following the incident Saturday when hundreds of people, as well as a semi-trailer, pushed through police lines after being forbidden to leave their country. "This blocking of the border between Honduras and Guatemala is completely unprecedented and violates international law," Penman told Al Jazeera.

UN Secretary-General Antonio Guterres was in touch with different leaders in the region over the weekend, Deputy Spokesman for the Secretary-General Farhan Haq said at a daily press briefing on Monday. "The thing [Guterres] has been stressing is the need for the leaders to work with the International Organization for Migration, the IOM, and the UN Refugee Agency, UNHCR. He believes that this situation needs to be dealt with in line with international law and with full respect for countries' rights to manage their own borders," Haq said.

Article 13 of the United Nations Declaration of Human Rights guarantees the right to freedom of movement and also states that "everyone has the right to leave any country, including his own," noted Penman.

Honduras, Guatemala, El Salvador and Nicaragua make up the C4 region and have border, immigration and customs agreements. Citizens of the four countries are supposed to have freedom of movement within the region using their national identification cards, with no passport or visa requirements. "Honduras cannot act as a closed country at the moment. Guatemala cannot undertake the unlawful return of people whose lives are at risk," Penman said.

Al Jazeera contacted the spokesman for the Guatemalan Ministry of the Interior, which governs the national police force, as well as the presidential spokesman, but neither responded to requests for comment by the time of publication. Al Jazeera also attempted to reach Honduran officials, but they were not immediately available for comment.

Humanitarian responses needed

Humanitarian, human rights and solidarity responses are needed from the Central American and Mexican governments, according to Penman. "We do not need these governments to be intimidated by Trump at this time. We also call on US Congress to block the unlawful decisions that Trump may make," she said.

But more than 5,000km by road from Washington, DC, migrants and refugees like Kenia Sanchez face the consequences of US pressure on Central American governments to shut the caravan down.

We do not need these governments to be intimidated by Trump at this time. We also call on US Congress to block the unlawful decisions that Trump may make.

At the Casa del Migrante Jose shelter in Esquipulas, Sanchez rested her feet, nursing her one-and-a-half-year-old daughter. She and her family had no choice but to leave their home in the Olancho department in eastern Honduras, she said. "Sometimes we do not eat. There is no work," she said, adding that her partner has been threatened by criminal gang members when he has visited his relatives in the capital.

Faced with a border shutdown, Sanchez and her family have one day of walking down. There are police and immigration checkpoints along the road heading north, so, for now, they plan to wait for more Hondurans to come join them before setting off again.

Honduran forced migrancy relief fund

Rights Action is raising funds to provide relief and human rights/ legal support to some of the thousands of Hondurans [and some Guatemalans] fleeing violence and government repression, endemic poverty and exploitation, organized crime, corruption & impunity. Relief and support are provided to migrants whether they continue fleeing or not. Forced migrants need support.

Tax-Deductible Donations (U.S. & Canada)

To support "Honduran forced migrancy relief fund", make check to "Rights Action" and mail to:

U.S.: Box 50887, Washington DC, 20091-0887

- Canada: (Box 552) 351 Queen St. E, Toronto ON, M5A-1T8
- Credit-Card Donations: <http://rightsaction.org/donate/>

Donations of stock? Write to: info@rightsaction.org

(Contributions can be made anonymously)

(On check memo-line, or in appropriate field, for credit card donations, write "Migrants")

Please re-post and publish this information

Rights Action: info@rightsaction.org

Subscribe to e-Newsletter: www.rightsaction.org

Facebook: www.facebook.com/RightsAction.org

Twitter: <https://twitter.com/RightsAction>, @RightsAction
