

Shithole countries: U.S., Canada & international community helping produce forced migrancy from Honduras & Guatemala

By Grahame Russell, Rights Action, October 2019, <https://mailchi.mp/rightsaction/shithole-countries>



*"Our privileges are located on the same map as their suffering, and may
- in ways that we prefer not to imagine - be linked to their suffering.
As the wealth of some may imply the destitution of others."
(Susan Sontag)*

As a guilty verdict is handed down in New York City against former Honduran member of Congress Tony Hernandez, brother of the Honduran president (named as a co-conspirator of Tony's drug trafficking enterprise), for state-sponsored cocaine drug trafficking, it is ever more obvious why there is no end in sight as to why tens of thousands of Hondurans and Guatemalans will continue to flee home and country, year after year. In 2018-2019, the numbers spiked to 100s of thousands.

People anywhere would leave all behind for the same reasons: unchecked government and private sector violence against the general population, and against human rights, environmental and land defenders; inter-generational exploitation, poverty and destitution; infiltration of organized crime (including drug-trafficking) into all branches of the state and government (executive, legislative, judiciary, military, police); close to complete impunity for the wealthy and powerful sectors (national and international) when they commit crimes and violate human rights.

Living without legal documentation in the U.S. or Canada, cut off from family and friends, taking whatever underpaid job one might find, receiving no public benefits, living in fear of jail and deportation, are better life options than what Hondurans and Guatemalans are forced to flee.

Mediterranean Blue

Naomi Shihab Nye - 1952-

If you are a child of a refugee, you do not
sleep easily when they are crossing the sea
on small rafts and you know they can't swim.
My father couldn't swim either. He swam through
sorrow, though, and made it to the other side
on a ship, pitching his old clothes overboard
at landing, then tried to be happy, make a new life.
But something inside him was always paddling home,
clinging to anything that floated —a story, a food, or face.
They are the bravest people on earth right now,
don't dare look down on them. Each mind a universe
swirling as many details as yours, as much love
for a humble place. Now the shirt is torn,
the sea too wide for comfort, and nowhere
to receive a letter for a very long time.

And if we can reach out a hand, we better.

Media not reporting on complicity of U.S., Canada & international community

The mainstream media in Canada and U.S. have been reporting on the huge numbers of Hondurans and Guatemalans trying to cross Mexico and enter the U.S. to apply for asylum or residency, or to get any jobs they might find.

Media coverage divides generally into two camps.

One camp vociferously and sometimes racistly denigrates the forced migrants as criminals, rapists, gang members, people coming to steal jobs from U.S. citizens, etc. This camp encourages all measures to physically keep forced migrants out of the U.S., or to criminalize, jail and then deport them.



The second camp focuses (sometimes quite movingly) on the suffering of forced migrants: they had to flee gang violence (the most common explanation provided); they suffer harsh conditions crossing Mexico and attempting entry into the U.S. - many are killed, suffer violence, die of hunger and dehydration; children are illegally and harmfully separated from parents; many forced migrants are now (many illegally) detained in U.S. jails and temporary-becoming-permanent detention centers and jails, or living precariously in makeshift refugee camps in Mexico.

This camp argues that migrants and asylum seekers deserve humane treatment and a clear process through which to apply for political asylum or some other legally recognized immigrant status.

Recently, a few media outlets have reported on how “climate change” is devastating parts of Guatemala and Honduras, particularly in the ‘dry corridor’ that passes through both countries, and how this also is forcing impoverished and desperate people to flee home and country. (“Hunger driving migration in drought-hit Central America: U.N.”, August 14, 2019, www.reuters.com)

Yet it is astonishing and tiring to read, month after month, media reports about the forced migrancy situation and not read a single explanation about how the U.S. and Canadian governments and other actors in the so-called international community maintain full and beneficial economic, political and military relations with the very regimes and economic elites in Guatemala and Honduras responsible for the conditions forcing people to flee.

It is astonishing to read about “climate change” worsening the now-permanent-crisis-situation in Central America, with no explanation of the underlying political and economic causes of it.

Community defense struggles - versus - the global economy

Since 1995 in Guatemala and 1998 in Honduras, Rights Action has been funding and working with land, human rights and environmental defenders resisting forced evictions, human rights violations and environmental harms caused by different sectors of the global economy in partnership with corrupt and repressive governments, military and police in both countries.

Each of these struggles illuminates why Hondurans and Guatemalans are forced to flee home and country, year after year.

Chixoy dam

For over 15 years, Rights Action supported victim-survivors of the 1982 Chixoy dam massacres that killed over 440 people from the Mayan Achi village of Rio Negro, forcibly evicted 32 communities and, since then, devastated living habitats and the environment along and around the Chixoy river. This 'economic development project' repression was carried out by the U.S.-backed military regimes of generals Lucas Garcia and Rios Montt in partnership with the World Bank and Inter-American Development Bank. No justice was done for the atrocities caused by this economic development project. The World Bank and IDB - that profited from their investments - avoided any political and legal accountability for the death and destruction they caused.

Dams

Beyond the Chixoy dam massacres and destruction, Rights Action has supported other communities in Guatemala and Honduras suffering and resisting evictions and repression caused by internationally-financed dam projects. The most known struggle is that of the Lenca people in western Honduras resisting evictions, repression and criminalizations due to the Agua Zarca dam that resulted in the assassination of Berta Caceres and attempted killing of Gustavo Castro.

The trial against the 'material authors' of Berta's assassination and shooting of Gustavo Castro goes painstakingly forward. To date, no justice has been done whatsoever for the 'intellectual authors' - the Honduran economic and political elites (with links to drug trafficking linked President's office) who planned and paid for the assassination team.

Mining

Since 2005, Rights Action has supported Indigenous and non-Indigenous communities suffering and resisting forced evictions, killings and repression, environmental and health harms linked to Canadian and U.S. companies: Goldcorp Inc. in Guatemala and Honduras; Aura Minerals in Honduras; Hudbay Minerals/ Skye Resources/ INCO in Guatemala; Tahoe Resources/ Pan American Silver in Guatemala; KCA/Radius Gold in Guatemala. Investors in these mines include: U.S. and Canadian pension funds, shareholders, private investors, trusts, endowments, the World Bank, etc.

Except for the landmark Hudbay Minerals and recently settled Tahoe Resources/ Pan American Silver lawsuit, working their ways through Canadian courts, no justice or accountability has been done in Honduras, Guatemala, Canada or the U.S. for any mining-caused violence and killings, harms and evictions.

Tourism

Since before the U.S. and Canadian-backed military coup in Honduras in 2009, and worsening considerably since then, tourism investors from Canada and the U.S. have used corruption, violence and forced evictions to get control of lands of the Indigenous Garifuna people, to then build condos and holiday enclaves for North American and European tourists.

African palm & sugarcane

Since 2010 in the Aguan region of northern Honduras, and Polochic region of eastern Guatemala, Rights Action has provided emergency funding to family members of people killed and evicted by wealthy elites using military, police and hired gun violence to take their lands for the expanded production of African palm and sugar cane. The demand for both has spiked as food products and as a source of “green energy” biofuels. The World Bank is a major investor/ profiteer.

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Global economy exports consumer products and desperate people

The oppression and violence of the global economy can be seen most clearly in the for-export production of African palm, sugar cane, cotton, cattle-for-meat, bananas and pineapples.

Hundreds of thousands of acres of Guatemala’s and Honduras’s richest lands – mainly lowlands with access to fresh water year round – are controlled by the ruling economic-political elites and their international partners, and used to export consumer products while, at the very same time, forcibly exporting caravans of desperately poor, landless people.

There is no dry season, there is no drought in the for-export sectors of the global economy.

As policy, the U.S. and Canadian governments and international community support – via “free trade” agreements, government aid programs, World Bank and IMF loans, etc. - the continuing expansion of global corporate and investor interests in all these sectors of the economy, ignoring human rights violations, forced evictions, crimes and other harms, ignoring how these sectors of the global economy control (oftentimes violently and illegally) the best lands of both countries, forcing impoverished campesinos onto dry, uncultivable lands, forcing many, sooner or later, into forced migrancy.

Shithole countries

During a January 2018 meeting the U.S., president Trump said: “Why do we want all these people from shithole countries coming here?” (<https://www.cnn.com/2018/01/11/politics/immigrants-shithole-countries-trump/index.html>)

While the president’s denigrating, racist comments were denounced, in many ways this is how the U.S., Canada and other international community actors treat the majority populations and environments of Honduras and Guatemala. For global companies and investors and their home country governments, Honduras and Guatemala are places where:

- they can exploit cheap, non-unionized labor, paying few or no benefits;
- they can have entire communities evicted from homes and lands;
- they can pay little to no attention to environmental or human rights standards;
- they know that if they harm the environmental or violate rights, there is no way to hold them accountable.

Captive labor: No human rights, environmental or labor standards, no mobility

Companies, investors, countries and persons involved in the production, export and consumption of these products from Honduras and Guatemala are contributing to and benefitting from the reasons why people are forced to flee home and country.

What is happening in Honduras and Guatemala is a race-to-the-bottom-global-capitalism, where the brutalized, evicted and destitute are not even allowed to “take their labor” and go elsewhere.

When forced to flee home and country, in search of a bare minimum peaceful life, they are criminalized, jailed, and forced home to the same conditions that forced them to flee.

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Connecting the dots: ‘Regime change’ military coups, for-export production and forced migrancy

To complete the picture, this unjust global economic order is kept in place by undemocratic, corrupt, violent governments in Honduras and Guatemala that have been put and/or kept in place to large degree by the U.S. and Canada and other international community actors.

On June 27, 1954, the Guatemalan government led by Jacobo Arbenz – Guatemala’s last truly democratic government – was forced from office by a U.S. orchestrated military coup against his government.



“Glorious Victory” is Mexican painter Diego Rivera’s depiction of the 1954 U.S.-orchestrated military coup that ousted the democratically elected government of President Arbenz on behalf of investor interests tied to the United Fruit Company. In the foreground, CIA director Allen Dulles shakes the hand of the coup leader (as selected by the U.S.) Colonel Castillo Armas. Allen Dulles’ left hand rests on a bomb with the face of President Dwight Eisenhower. Behind Allen, brother John Foster Dulles, head of the State Department, and John Peurifoy, Ambassador to Guatemala, hand out cash to Guatemalan military commanders. A Catholic priest officiates over the killing of Mayans and other poor Guatemalans, while exploited workers carry United Fruit Company bananas.

At the time, both Dulles brothers had extensive links to the United Fruit Company and its major investor banks in Boston. (“Bitter Fruit: The Story of the American Coup in Guatemala”, by Stephen Schlesinger & Stephen Kinzer.)

It was after the 1954 coup that the Canadian government established diplomatic relations with Guatemala. Soon after that, INCO, the Canadian International Nickel Company and world’s largest producer of nickel at the time, acquired from the post-coup military regime a vast nickel mining concession in the Mayan Q’eqchi’ territories of eastern Guatemala, kicking off a 51 year history (culminating with Skye Resources and Hudbay Minerals, 2004-2011) of Canadian mining-linked violence and corruption, forced evictions and environmental harms.

On June 28, 2009, Mel Zelaya – president of Honduras’ last democratically elected government – was forced out of the country in a military coup legitimized and supported by the U.S. and Canada.



Depicted here, Berta Caceres the widely respected Indigenous rights, anti-patriarchy, anti-imperialist, Mother Earth defender and organizer. Berta was assassinated March 2, 2016 by sectors of Honduras’ economic and military elites with links to the drug-trafficking linked president’s office. Depicted here also is Edwin Espinal, who was recently released from his illegal detention. For over 18 months, Edwin – husband of Canadian human rights activist Karen Spring - was held as a political prisoner in a max-security military jail, “awaiting trial” on a laundry list of trumped up charges. (Image: Honduras Solidarity Network)

After the 2009 coup, the U.S. and Canada were the only governments to accept as fair and democratic three sets of fraudulent and violent elections in Honduras - November 2009, 2013 and 2017. In 2011, Canadian Prime Minister Stephen Harper was the first leader of another country to visit Honduras (<https://www.cbc.ca/news/politics/canada-reaches-free-trade-deal-with-honduras-1.1073681>). Arriving with a high-level Canadian business delegation, Harper’s visit served to ‘legitimize’ the corrupt, repressive, post-military coup government of Honduras, and set in place a bilateral “free trade” agreement that came into power October 1, 2014.

Over these ten years, the U.S. and Canada, the World Bank, and scores of international companies and banks maintained or expanded investments in the sectors of mining, hydro-electric dams, tourism, and the production of African palm.

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The 'regime change' military coups of June 27, 1954 and June 28, 2009 mark the ends of short periods of peaceful, democratic governments that were implementing necessary economic, land, political and social reforms - more broadly in Guatemala, 1944-1954, less so in Honduras, 2005-2009.

These violent regime change dates mark the return of "open for global business" policies benefitting the Guatemalan and Honduran economic elites and multinational companies and investors in the sectors of sugarcane and African palm, bananas and pineapple, mining and privatized hydro-electric dams, tourism and "sweatshop" garment factories.

These dates mark a return to extreme exploitation in each sector of the economy whose operations are characterized by evictions, human rights violations and repression.

"Democratic allies" in illegal regime change efforts in Venezuela

Not only are Honduras and Guatemala profitable places for global companies and banks, not only are the U.S. and Canadian governments responsible – directly and indirectly – for military coups that brought back to power corrupt, repressive, pro-global business regimes in both countries, but over the past two years Guatemala and Honduras are considered "democratic allies" in support of the illegal U.S. and Canadian-led efforts to economically strangle, isolate and overthrow Venezuela's government.

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Fundamental inter-connectedness and co-responsibility

This is where we are today, in many ways.

By design and operation, Guatemala and Honduras are violent, corrupt, refugee-producing countries. What is never addressed is the complicit role of the U.S., Canada and other actors in the international community.

No matter how courageously the Honduran and Guatemalan people work to have their land and human rights, and environment protected, to restore fair elections and real democracy, to restore the rule of law and have justice done, as long as their economic, political and military elites maintain empowering relations with other governments and a host of international community actors, these regimes will continue to manipulate or openly steal elections, and use repression, corruption and impunity to keep in place exploitative, violent economic models ... that force 10s of thousands of people to flee every year.

Work in support of refugees and forced migrants in the U.S. and Canada must continue:

- to open more public discussion about the underlying causes of forced migrancy from countries like Honduras and Guatemala, and how our public and private sector policies oftentimes contribute to this;
- to hold our governments accountable for when their policies and actions in Honduras and Guatemala contribute to exploitation and destitution, violence and repression, corruption and impunity;
- to increase consumer awareness and accountability work so that Canadian and U.S. citizens take responsibility for where our imported consumer products come from, and in what conditions they are produced;
- to increase political and legal accountability work against our companies and investors, and our governments, when and where their business and political activities contribute to and profit from exploitation and destitution, repression, corruption and impunity.

“Economic migrants” are refugees

There is a long-overdue challenge to work related to forced migrancy and refugee rights. One is repeatedly told that “economic migrants” cannot apply for political asylum. Yet in many regions of the world, particularly in exploited, abused countries of the global south such as Honduras and Guatemala, the global economy is imposed illegally and violently on vast numbers of impoverished, destitute people.

The violence, poverty and destitution that the global economy forces people into are life-threatening conditions, are political violence.

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