

# Obama summit with Central American leaders plans “massive” deportation of immigrants

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President Obama met Friday at the White House with the presidents of three Central American countries, Juan Orlando Hernández of Honduras, Otto Pérez Molina of Guatemala and Salvador Sánchez Cerén of El Salvador, to discuss the political crisis in the US over the arrival of tens of thousands of immigrant children at the US-Mexico border. Three quarters of the children are from the three Central American countries, with the remainder from Mexico itself.

Pérez Molina said that US officials had told him to prepare for mass deportations in the coming months. Several flights have already brought dozens of mothers and children back from the US to Guatemala, and the flights would be greatly expanded in September, with what the *Post* called “a larger wave of unaccompanied minors.”

Hernández echoed this comment, telling *Time* magazine that he received a similar warning from US officials about a big wave of deportations. “They have said they want to send them on a massive scale,” he said.

Under a 2008 US law, the Department of Homeland Security cannot simply push unaccompanied children back across the border into Mexico, or immediately repatriate them to Central America. Each child must be transferred to the custody of the Department of Health and Human Services and then placed with relatives living in the US, before a hearing on possible refugee status. In the past, this process has led to most unaccompanied immigrant children remaining in the United States, as nearly all have some relatives here.

It is clear from the comments of Pérez Molina and Hernández that the White House expects this legal obstacle to quick deportation of unaccompanied children to be overcome shortly.

A statement issued by the White House after the

meeting with the Central American leaders reiterated the Obama administration’s commitment to enforcing US immigration laws and deporting “those who have crossed the border recently and have no relief from removal.” The statement emphasized that the children are not eligible to benefit from any future immigration reform legislation or from Obama’s 2012 order halting deportation of child immigrants who arrived before 2007.

The statement detailed the funds already made available by the US government to the three Central American countries, mainly for military and security forces to help stem the flow of immigrants. This includes \$161.5 million each year for the Central America Regional Security Initiative, \$130 million in bilateral assistance to the three countries, much of it for the military and government operations, and another \$9.6 million just allocated to deal with the current immigration emergency.

The White House has requested an additional \$300 million—effectively doubling the flow of funds to the three countries—as part of its \$3.7 billion emergency appropriation request that is now being discussed in Congress.

In an interview with the *Washington Post* published Friday, Honduran President Hernández said the three Central American leaders had “put together a blueprint for a plan ... something similar to what Colombia did with the United States, [and] Mexico and the United States.”

This has an ominous ring to it, as both Plan Colombia and the Merida Initiative, as the US-Mexico agreement was dubbed, involving militarizing the struggle against drug trafficking in the two countries, with the US supplying finance, training, heavy weapons and intelligence information. The result was a sharp escalation in the ongoing guerrilla war in Colombia, and a dramatic increase in violence in Mexico, with tens of thousands

killed in the past eight years.

Hernández told the *Post* that some legal changes needed to authorize such a US-backed war were already in place in Honduras. “We decided to work with the United States in the process to extradite Hondurans who’ve been involved in these crimes,” he said. “Well, we modified the constitution to begin with. We have already extradited the first Honduran. There are four capture orders in process right now.”

Guatemalan President Pérez Molina confirmed that the three Central American officials were seeking much greater funding than the \$300 million offered in the Obama administration bill. He said at least \$2 billion was needed “to attack the root of the problem,” which he blamed on expanded drug trafficking due to high demand from the US market.

There is considerable political significance in the apparent agreement of all three Central American presidents on a US-financed military response as the solution to the immigration crisis in their countries. The three represent the entire spectrum of bourgeois politics in the region, from Sánchez Cerén of El Salvador, a former commander of the Farabundo Martí National Liberation Front, which battled a US-based ultra-right regime in the 1980s, to Pérez Molina of Guatemala, a former commander in the US-backed military dictatorship that conducted a genocidal war against insurgent indigenous peoples for three decades, to Hernández of Honduras, a supporter of the US-backed military coup that overthrew the reformist government of Manuel Zelaya in 2009.

All three take their marching orders from Washington, symbolized by their joint appearance at the White House Friday in response to a political summons from the United States.

While the Central American presidents will do what they are told, there remain sharp divisions within the US political establishment over how to deal with the crisis.

House Republicans have rebuffed Obama’s request for \$3.7 billion, presenting instead a plan that would cost only \$1.5 billion, with most of the savings achieved through amending the 2008 law to mandate swift deportation of the Central American children, eliminating the cost of housing and caring for them during any transitional period. The bill would also mandate use of the National Guard to supplement the Border Patrol in Texas.

Senate Democrats, on the other hand, offered a \$2.7 billion plan that would make no change in the 2008 law, originally passed to curb sex trafficking of immigrant children by giving them greater legal protection than adult

immigrants.

The White House also confirmed Wednesday that it has sent a team of officials from the Pentagon and the Department of Homeland Security to assess the use of the National Guard along the Texas-Mexico border. Texas Governor Rick Perry ordered 1,000 National Guard troops to the region on Monday, but this deployment has only limited scope, since he only has the power to order the soldiers to enforce state laws, and immigration laws are the province of the federal government.

The Democratic candidate to succeed Perry as governor, Wendy Davis, called for Perry to summon an emergency session of the state legislature to consider sending additional sheriff’s deputies to the border instead of National Guard troops. “If the federal government won’t act, Texas must and will,” she said in a statement.

Most governors of states further removed from the border area have told the White House they are opposed to receiving groups of immigrant children for housing, even on a temporary humanitarian basis. Statements came from both Democrats and Republicans.

Colorado Governor John Hickenlooper, a Democrat, said state residents saw the children as “another burden come into their state,” adding that “however we deal with the humanitarian aspects of this, we’ve got to do it in the most cost-effective way possible.” Another Democrat, Connecticut Governor Dan Malloy flatly rejected a federal request to house up to 2,000 immigrant children.

Six Republican governors sent a letter to Obama urging mass deportations. “The failure to return the unaccompanied children will send a message that will encourage a much larger movement towards our southern border,” read the letter, which was signed by the governors of Alabama, Kansas, North Carolina, Pennsylvania, Utah and Wisconsin.

In a number of towns and cities, particularly in the south and southwest, there has been an effort by ultra-right groups to whip up a lynch mob atmosphere against the Central American children. A half dozen towns and counties have adopted resolutions barring the emergency housing of immigrants, although such measures are unenforceable under federal law.



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