

White House outlines policy for deepening intervention in Central America

Matthew Brennan
19 February 2015

In the FY 2016 budget proposal presented to Congress earlier this month, the White House included a request for tripling US aid to Central America to \$1 billion. The funding would be channeled through the Alliance for Prosperity in the Northern Triangle, which was formed last November in Washington at a conference convened by the Inter-American Development Bank (IDB). It will be directed primarily toward the governments of Honduras, Guatemala, and El Salvador.

The Obama administration's budget proposal was followed by a campaign on its behalf in the *New York Times*—by both the newspaper's editorial board and Vice President Joseph Biden, who is overseeing the initiative. Both made the case that the Central American aid, coupled with an increase in the budget for the Department of Homeland Security, would promote the White House's purported goals of "comprehensive immigration reform" and "stemming systemic violence" in the region.

The *Times*'s editorials were quick to point to the approximately 70,000 unaccompanied children who fled to the United States last year, largely from Honduras, Guatemala and El Salvador. These child refugees, and the violence and poverty rampant in the regions they were fleeing, are the supposed impetus to, as Biden cynically put it, Washington's drive to "stem the dangerous surge in migration." Or as the *Times*'s editorial board dishonestly framed the issue, the increase in aid will "meaningfully tackle the root causes of instability that over the decades have led to thousands of people to embark on dangerous journeys to the United States searching for a better life."

However, as is the case with US foreign policy everywhere else in the world, there is a political chasm between the public statements of the White House and

the real aims of US imperialism.

On the one hand, there is a massive social crisis in Central America. Honduras, Guatemala and El Salvador account for the world's first, fifth, and sixth highest murder rates, respectively.

According to the World Bank, at least 60 percent of Hondurans, 54 percent of Guatemalans, and 35 percent of El Salvadorans live below the official poverty line. Nearly a third of the Honduran population and a quarter of the Guatemalan population live on less than two dollars a day. At least 30 percent of the Honduran population is officially unemployed, the highest rate in all of Latin America.

Gang and state violence are rampant in all three countries. According to a 2013 United Nations report, over 60 percent of the unaccompanied children who were interviewed by their representatives while being held in US immigration detention centers cited violence by gangs, drug cartels and state security forces, and fear of being recruited into gangs, as their reasons for fleeing.

On the other hand, there is the source of this enormous instability, delicately described by the *Times* as the "root causes," which are overwhelming bound up with decades of brutal US imperialism-directed "dirty wars" against the populations of all three countries.

A CIA-orchestrated coup in 1954 against the, the democratically elected Guatemalan government of Jacobo Arbenz began more than four decades of carnage in the region. Arbenz's government was overthrown by CIA-organized military forces in 1954, at the behest of the United Fruit Company, which adamantly opposed a limited land reform. That country's dirty war continued until 1996. Guatemalan security forces, trained and directed by the Pentagon

and US intelligence agencies, systematically suppressed and terrorized the working class and peasantry, killing more than 200,000 Guatemalans during this genocidal period.

In El Salvador, Washington funneled at least \$6 billion in aid to support and arm military juntas that terrorized workers and peasants over the last quarter of the twentieth century. These juntas employed “death squads” as a form of counter-insurgency against the FLMN guerrilla group. At least 75,000 people were murdered by the military in the peak years of repression, between 1980 and 1992, when a peace accord was signed and the FMLN transformed itself into a bourgeois party.

More recently in Honduras, the democratically elected government of President Manuel Zelaya was overthrown by US-backed military forces in 2008, after it turned to Venezuela for cheap oil and loans. In her book *Hard Choices*, then-secretary of state Hillary Clinton admits that she ensured Zelaya would not return to office after he was kidnapped and flown out of the country by the Honduran military. Since 2008, under a government controlled heavily by the coup leaders, the murder rate has increased by over 50 percent, several opposition political leaders have been assassinated, and gang membership has increased to more than 65,000 by some estimates.

There is also the larger historical context of US “aid” to Central America. Historically, this money has been funneled through state agencies such as the National Endowment for Democracy (NED), the Agency for International Development (USAID) and the American Institute for Free Labor Development (AIFLD)—which all provided economic and political support for the repressive military dictatorships. William Blum points out in his book *Killing Hope* that “(t)hese organizations with their reassuring names all contributed to a program to greatly expand the size of Guatemala’s national police force and develop it into a professionalized body skilled at counteracting urban disorder...with officers sent for training in Washington...and Los Fresnos, Texas.”

When Joseph Biden speaks of “confronting the interlocking security, governance, and economic challenges” in Central America through the Alliance for Prosperity, this is the sort of “interlocking” partnerships he has in mind.

The White House budget proposal is in line with similar US-led initiatives such as Plan Colombia and the Merida Initiative in Mexico.

Taken together, these aid initiatives, while cloaked in rhetoric about “fostering democracy” and “combating narco-trafficking,” have been overwhelmingly used as a wedge to open up new markets for US investment, exploit cheap labor and crush emerging opposition movements to US-backed right-wing governments.

The new initiative is also driven by challenges confronting US imperialism in the region: the encroachment of economic rivals, on the one hand, and the threat of social upheavals within the working class, on the other. China as well as Russia have made significant trade deals and capital investments across Latin America over the last 15 years. China increased trade in the region by 1,200 percent between 2000 and 2009, and has plans to build a \$50 billion canal in Nicaragua in 2019 that will dwarf the Panama Canal.

Internally, the bourgeoisie is overseeing virtually unprecedented levels of social inequality, wage stagnation, and an assault on democratic rights across the board. Social unrest related to these developments is already on display among the working class throughout the region—most recently in the mass protests over the disappeared students in Mexico.

Partnerships such as the proposed Alliance for Prosperity, with its emphasis on the increased militarization of the southern borders of the US and Mexico, are at their heart a preparation by the US ruling class to repress social upheavals and scapegoat immigrants for the inherent crisis of global capitalism.



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