

White House seeks to cover up Central American migrant crisis

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The Obama administration announced on July 26 a deal with the Costa Rican government, which has agreed to receive 200 asylum-seekers at a time for six-month periods from the Northern Triangle of Central America (NTCA), which includes El Salvador, Honduras, and Guatemala.

While the press and some advocacy groups have treated this measure as either a symbolic gesture or a promising step towards a resolution to the migrant crisis, it is actually an effort to cover up the current escalation in the attacks against social conditions in Central America, which goes hand-in-hand with the US-led militarization of their repressive governments.

As part of the deal, the UN High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) has offered to carry out the selection process; however, the refugees will still have to go through a security screening by their local governments for consideration.

A State Department representative commented: “By themselves, today’s actions will not solve this challenge, but are steps in the right direction and are a further example of the United States’ commitment to resolve the situation.” Similarly, the UNHCR expressed that the “announcement puts forward a solid foundation for a regional response.”

The *New York Times* praised Obama’s expansion of “its efforts to protect migrants fleeing dangerous conditions” and criticized Democratic presidential candidate Hillary Clinton’s rival on this topic. “The expansion was denounced by Republicans, and it sharpened a contrast with Donald J. Trump, who has centered much of his presidential campaign on a call to shut out immigrants,” the paper stressed.

The *Times* does report, however, that only 600 Central Americans have been allowed to come into the US as refugees since the large influx began in 2014.

Meanwhile, Washington continues to fuel the humanitarian crisis in the NTCA, forcing thousands more to seek shelter and better living conditions, just as they do in the Middle East and Africa.

UNHCR estimates at least 146,000 applicants for asylum this year from the Northern Triangle, compared to 109,800 for 2015. The figures include tens of thousands of children. The publicity stunt of taking in 200 temporary refugees makes the Costa Rican government a direct accomplice in the inhuman treatment of NTCA refugees by US imperialism, for which the deterrence and criminalization of migrants is only a means to securing a more vulnerable and exploitable immigrant workforce domestically in the US and south of the border.

The same occurs in Costa Rica on a smaller scale. Over 400,000 immigrant workers, close to 10 percent of the total population and mostly from Nicaragua, are deliberately kept by employers to work informally so as not to have to pay them decent salaries or make contributions to their social security. Migration laws passed in the country since 2010 to expedite legalization of their work status have done virtually nothing to change this; for instance, the Migration Policy Institute reports that less than 2 percent of agricultural employers have registered for the program.

After Costa Rica and other Central American governments closed their borders to Cubans and limited the flow of African and Haitian migrants trying to reach the United States in March, about 3,000 were forced to use dangerous routes and risk getting killed, kidnapped, assaulted, or scammed by *coyotes* to continue on their way. Last week, ten African migrants were found dead in Lake Nicaragua. Hundreds of others are living in exposed and unsanitary shelters scattered across the impoverished regions next to the borders in Costa Rica, leading to the death of one of them in May from pneumonia.

Announcing the deal with Obama, Costa Rican public officials have focused on asserting that no criminals are coming, that this supposedly charitable action will cost the heavily indebted state little to nothing and that the refugees will be leaving quickly. The minister of the interior, Sergio Alfaro, emphasized that this is just a temporary measure until the applications for refugee status in the US, Canada and Australia get processed.

“The profile of people that will come is part of an arrangement of the environmental, community, and LGTB leaders that are being persecuted and threatened in their countries by criminal organizations like gangs,” commented Carmen Muñoz, vice minister of the interior.

This casts some serious doubts about the claims by the UNHCR that their selection will be based on the most vulnerable asylum seekers. It seems that the selection will be a response to the scandals surrounding the murders of activists, particularly that of Honduran activist Berta Cáceres and two of her colleagues killed this year.

Last month, the Brussels-based International Crisis Group (ICG) published a study on the increasing pressures on migrants and communities in the NTCA, particularly due to US immigration policy and the worsening violence and poverty at home.

It reports that the United States has outsourced most of its border control efforts to Mexico, which deported 166,000 Central

Americans compared to about 75,000 from the US.

Mass migration is fueling sexual slavery, the study mentions, estimating 50,000 current victims just from Guatemala, and thousands others being kidnapped for ransom, while authorities intentionally deport rescued victims quickly to avoid criminal proceedings.

During the past three years, the NTCA countries have suffered more homicides than the US, which has more than 10 times their population. The ICG report quoted a Salvadoran woman migrating: "Now there are gangs everywhere. Only the rich people are safe."

A 2015 UN survey found that 64 percent of women migrating from Central America and Mexico said they or a close relative had been directly threatened.

Because of the large boost that remittances give to the NTCA countries' GDPs, preventing migration is not "functional" for their political agendas, according to Danilo Rivera, a Guatemalan economist. The remittance income of 17 percent worth of GDP for Honduras and El Salvador and 10 percent for Guatemala contrasts with the less than 2 percent of GDP in social spending for youth by each government.

The ICG's recommendations, however, are either counterproductive or ignore the interests of the ruling elites and the vulnerability of most NTCA migrants and communities.

The organization's proposal for reducing detentions and deportations and expanding "community-based violence prevention programs" clashes with the reality of imperialist super-exploitation and the militarization of the state forces. Only increasing "prosecutorial capacity" against corrupt officials and criminal groups is viable and already underway. The latter efforts are led by the US State Department chiefly to secure legitimacy of its client regimes in response to mass protests during the last two years against impunity and corruption.

US imperialism has consistently sought to cover up its role historically and at present in creating the social crises that have pushed thousands to seek refuge outside of the NTCA, with the Costa Rican and other Central American ruling elites as accomplices.

The 1984 Cartagena Declaration on Refugees was adopted by all Central American countries and Mexico in response to the humanitarian crisis provoked by the civil wars between the US-backed dictatorships and the bourgeois nationalist guerrilla movements in El Salvador and Guatemala, as well as between the CIA's contra mercenaries and the Sandinista government of Nicaragua. The document came to define those fleeing from "generalized violence" as refugees, but none of the agreements were binding and they failed to even mention the US responsibility for the mass flight.

During the 1980s, the massacres of entire villages in those three countries, mostly by the US-backed contras and regimes, reached levels of genocide against the Mayan population in Guatemala and intensified the mass impoverishment of the population, leading to a large amount of people seeking refuge.

During this period, the number of migrants fleeing was reflected in a massive growth of Nicaraguan immigrants in Costa Rica, from 45,918 to 226,374 between 1984 and 2000.

In 1987, Costa Rican President Oscar Arias led the talks that resulted in the Esquipulas II Declarations, formally initiating the peace negotiations to end the Contra war. Arias won the Nobel Peace Prize that same year.

The Reagan administration rejected an initial version of the agreement in 1987 because it legitimized the Sandinista government, but it came to accept a second version in February, 1988, which called for the "definitive halt" of US military assistance to the contras. However, this didn't stop the CIA from continuing to supply the contras until the Sandinistas lost the elections in 1990 to a conservative coalition, which included the Communist and Socialist parties.

Nicaraguan president and Sandinista leader Daniel Ortega wrote a book during this period of negotiations in 1988, where he pleaded: "Before responding to my proposal for bilateral dialogue, don't precipitate yourself President Reagan, reflect, and let God show you the way towards peace and to stop harming Nicaraguan people. Thank you."

The ICG study states that between the 1990s and 2000s, the US deported 250,000 convicted criminals back to the NTCA. The gangs formed by those deported, the continued impoverishment and militarization of the regimes, particularly in the NTCA, along with the drug-trafficking routes built during the civil war and the empowerment of drug barons with the aid of the CIA, have brought back civil-war levels of violence and migration.

A recent study, published by Costa Rican state universities, titled "The State of the Region," reveals that US-led militarization and regional impoverishment have intensified in recent years. They found that US military and police assistance increased gradually from \$16 million yearly in 2004 to \$125 million in 2015, bringing the total during the decade to \$768 million.

In turn, all the US client regimes, including those led by the former "anti-imperialist" guerrillas in El Salvador and Nicaragua, have continued to buy large amounts of weapons and military equipment from Washington, amounting to over \$2 billion regionally between 2004 and 2014. While 75 percent of these arms were purchased by Honduras, the second buyer was Costa Rica with \$142.6 million.

At the same time, the percentage of socially excluded homes (insecure or no jobs, low schooling, and little to no access to social security) in Central America increased from 36 to 39 percent between 2009 and 2014. Regionally, six out of every ten households are poor, suffering from unsatisfied basic needs and/or living under the official poverty line.



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