Vice-President Pence threatens immigrants, Assange, and Venezuela during Latin America tour

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2 July 2018

Last week, US Vice President Mike Pence visited South and Central America to pressure Latin American governments to back Washington's efforts to tighten its control over the region.

Announcing an escalated offensive against democratic and social rights, Pence negotiated with Ecuador over the expulsion of Julian Assange from Quito's embassy in London. He also coordinated with Brazil and Ecuador to intensify the US intervention in Venezuela's crisis and pressed Central American governments to build up their armed forces to prevent immigrants from trying to escape the desperate social conditions in their countries of origin.

On Thursday, Pence stopped in Quito, Ecuador, the highest ranking US official to visit the country in three decades. Given that President Lenín Moreno's government seeks a rapprochement with Washington, a group of ten US Democratic senators sent an open letter to Pence ahead of the trip pushing for him to force the expulsion of Julian Assange, the editor of WikiLeaks.

The White House announced that Pence and Moreno "agreed to remain in close coordination on potential next steps going forward." This announcement raises the imminent prospect of a cowardly reneging on Assange's asylum and his potential extradition to the US, where he faces a life sentence for charges of espionage, after making public thousands of leaked files exposing US war crimes and diplomatic intrigues around the world.

The vice-president faced some echoes of the outcry in the US over the administration's torment of refugees. Arthur Virgílio Neto, the mayor of Manaus of the right-wing Brazilian Social Democratic Party (PSDB), decided not to host Pence, who staged a visit to a center for Venezuelan refugees. Neto urged him to "go home," tweeting, "Don't try to teach me about solidarity. The Mexicans can speak about the treatment your country gives them."

On Thursday, plans for Pence to visit shelters for survivors of the deadly Fuego Volcano eruption earlier this month in Guatemala had to be scrapped, reportedly due to fears about public condemnations over US anti-immigrant policies.

At the joint press conference with Brazilian President Michel Temer, Pence indicated that the US will give Brazil $1.2 million for the 50,000 Venezuelans who have fled there, as part of a meager $10 million disbursement regionally for governments dealing with the 1.5 million Venezuelans who have left their country.

In the last five years, the Venezuelan economy has shrunk 45 percent, according to the IMF. During this period, poverty has risen from 48 percent to 87 percent, according to a 2017 poll carried out by Venezuelan universities. Sixty-four percent responded that they lost at least 24 pounds in 2017, while medicines and health care are severely scarce.

Instead of coordinating production and services to provide for the food, medicines and services urgently needed by Venezuelans, Washington has deepened sanctions on the lifeline of the country, the state oil companies, and led efforts internationally to further isolate the country politically and economically.

Pence congratulated Temer—the most unpopular president in Brazil's history—for his efforts to expel Venezuela from the trade organization Mercosur and suspend Venezuela from the Organization of the American States. Then, he made the same call in Brazil

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and Ecuador: “But now is the time for even stronger action” to further “isolate” Venezuela.

The former commander of US military forces in Europe, James Stavridis, who was a potential vice-presidential candidate for Hillary Clinton and secretary of state nominee for Trump, penned an opinion for *Bloomberg* on May 23, calling for preparations for a US military intervention in a civil war context to overthrow the Maduro government. Other top former and active US officials have made clear their objective of compelling factions of the Venezuelan armed forces and ruling elite to overthrow Maduro.

These policies to deliberately deepen the crisis in Venezuela and prepare for direct intervention expose the level of cynicism of Pence when he told Central Americans: “Just as the United States respects your borders and your sovereignty, we insist that you respect ours”.

Moreover, Pence boasted about investing $2.6 billion in the last four years in Guatemala, Honduras and El Salvador—the Northern Triangle of Central America—chiefly going to build up their “law enforcement” agencies. He called on Central Americans seeking to escape their desperate conditions, “don’t come at all… be confident that your neighbors in the United States and across this New World are all working together to ensure a brighter future.”

Speaking in Guatemala on Thursday, he essentially criminalized all refugees. “This exodus must end. It’s a threat to our security”, he said, calling on Northern Triangle governments to take a law-and-order approach to dismantle criminal organizations and prevent refugees from leaving in the first place. The three subservient governments, including the Salvadoran government led by the former radical nationalist guerrilla movement, the FMLN, all vowed to increase efforts to fence in future immigrants.

The violence and desperate social conditions that immigrants are fleeing are the result of a century of US imperialist exploitation of the region’s workers, peasants and resources, including through the support of right-wing military dictatorships and the creation of death squads in the 1980s to kill and disappear hundreds of thousands.

Not only were major drug-trafficking networks set up during this period, with the oversight of the CIA, but mass deportations under the Clinton and George W. Bush administrations of gang members in the US to these ravaged societies created the conditions for today’s levels of organized crime and violence linked to the state.

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