

US deal with El Salvador puts new roadblock to asylum seekers

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The Trump administration signed an immigration deal Friday with El Salvador as part of Washington's aims to prevent the flow of migrants seeking asylum in the US, by ramping up border patrol in Central America and Mexico, turning those countries into de facto border guards for US immigration.

The specifics of the agreement with El Salvador are still unknown, but will likely mirror the agreements with Guatemala and Honduras earlier this year, to force migrants passing through the so-called “safe third country” to apply for asylum in that country first and give the US authority to ship back migrants who travel through the country now designated as “safe.”

The attempt to label El Salvador as a “safe third country” is a deeply sadistic measure to undermine the rights of asylum guaranteed by international asylum law. The designation is entirely at odds with the reality of life in El Salvador, where police-state violence has been cultivated by decades of exploitation by US imperialism.

In 2018, about 46,800 Salvadorans sought asylum worldwide, ranking the country sixth in the world for new asylum seekers. In addition, according to a government study supported by the United Nations high commissioner for refugees, at least 71,500 Salvadorans have been internally displaced by violence. Overall, about 150,000 Salvadorans have become refugees or sought asylum in recent years.

The majority of migrants traveling north from Central and South America avoid passing through El Salvador, which has become synonymous with extrajudicial killings, gang violence, police brutality.

El Salvador has one of the highest homicide rates in the world. In 2015, the country recorded 103 homicides for every 100,000 residents, more than 20 times the rate in the US. It is deadliest country for youth under 19,

according the organization US Agency for International Development. Nearly 25 percent of children below the age of 5 live in extreme poverty.

The 2019 World Report by Human Rights Watch details the close connection between the country's brutal gangs and the political establishment, noting there are at least 60,000 gang members in the country's 262 municipalities, and that “all political parties have negotiated with gangs for conducting campaigns, voting, and daily operations.” Gangs extort and gather intelligence on population, focusing on markets, schools and areas around public transport.

A 2017 investigative report by the Salvadoran newspaper *Revista Factum* outlined the existence of death squads within elite units of the Salvadoran police that routinely engage in killings, sexual assault of teenage girls, robbery and extortion.

The majority of migrants detained at the US Southern border today are fleeing these very conditions in the Northern Triangle: Guatemala, El Salvador and Honduras. Since August, US border officials have detained 86,312 Salvadorans at the US southern border, as well as 258,635 Guatemalans and 244,928 Hondurans.

Homeland Security Secretary Kevin McAleenan stated in a press conference Friday the agreement is to prevent asylum seekers passing through El Salvador from claiming asylum in the United States.

McAleenan praised the Salvadoran administration of Nayib Armando Bukele Ortez on Friday, saying that the number of Salvadoran migrants reaching the US southern border has dropped by more than 62 percent since Bukele took office in June.

The drop in migrants arriving at the US southern border is the direct result of the brutality of El Salvador's new Border Patrol agency, Patrulla

Fronteriza, which will include 300 immigration agents and 100 agents from the Border Security Division of the National Police.

The agency has been bought and paid for by millions of dollars in aid from Washington, will carry out Trump's bidding and preventing desperate thousands from fleeing.

"Bukele has stated he intends to end forced migration in his term," McAleenan said. "El Salvador has stepped forward and made good on those efforts."

Jan Egeland, secretary general of the Norwegian Refugee Council, spoke out against the deal stating that "If the United States declares safe havens in [Central American] countries, it will be the end of the ancient symbol of civilization: the rule of asylum," Egeland said, emphasizing that Guatemala, Honduras and El Salvador are not safe. "This will encourage a new wave of boat refugees. People who take a boat to get to California or Texas. Imagine it."

"All these rules, agreements and procedural hurdles are creating a paper wall on the southern border, one that is just as inhumane, immoral, and illegal as one made of metal or bricks," said Eric Schwartz, the president of Refugees International, an advocacy organization. "When history looks back on this period in the United States, the judgment will be harsh and unsparing."

Washington is seeking to turn every country to its south into agents of US immigration policy. In Mexico, President Andres Manuel Lopez Obrador has deployed National Guard units to stop migrants at its southern border with Guatemala.

The Trump administration is pursuing both brute force along the southern border as well as extralegal means to undermine the right of asylum under international law.

This past week immigration authorities confirmed to CBS News that Customs and Border Patrol agents—rather than asylum officers—are now interviewing asylum seekers who express fear about returning to their home countries.

Initially introduced by an April 2019 White House memorandum, the CBP agents have begun replacing US Citizenship and Immigration Services (USCIS) asylum officers to conduct "credible fear" interviews. Only once claims are deemed "credible" are migrants allowed to present their asylum cases before an

immigration judge.

The policy was conceived by fascistic immigration adviser Stephen Miller to block refugees from proceeding with their claims. Trump has long advocated for this new role for the Border Patrol, making clear that its agents would not approve as many "credible fear" interviews as USCIS asylum officers.



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