



PURPOSE OF THE VISIT

Ask Congress to commit to humane policies that respond to the realities of our hemisphere, particularly those who migrate as refugees seeking protection from violence, injustice, and impunity in the Northern Triangle of Central America.

WHAT OUR FAITH TELLS US

Catholic Social Teaching tells us that it is our “duty to welcome the foreigner out of charity and respect for the dignity and rights of the human person.” (U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops) As members of the Ignatian Solidarity Network, we stand with the U.S. Catholic Bishops and the Jesuit Conference of Canada and the United States in asking for humane migration and refugee policies toward those seeking refuge from violence, injustice, and impunity, in Central America.

PERSONAL TESTIMONY

Personalize the issue by sharing your story or the story of someone directly affected by our nation’s broken immigration system, who may be a family member, classmate, or friend.

CONNECTING THE ISSUE TO POPE FRANCIS’S VISIT TO THE BORDER

This month Pope Francis will make his first official trip to Mexico, which includes an historic visit to the U.S.- Mexico border. His presence there will highlight the violence, extreme poverty and human rights violations that have forced so many people to flee their homes on a perilous search for safety and freedom abroad. The Pope’s visit to the border will serve to remind the U.S. of the inherent dignity of the 11 million humans living in our country without documentation. These are our neighbors—people who make invaluable contributions to our communities and economy, but who are nonetheless forced to live in the shadows of society.

WHAT WE SEE IN CENTRAL AMERICA

Violence, Targeted Attacks and Displacement

The Northern Triangle of Central America (Honduras, El Salvador and Guatemala) has the dubious distinction of being one of the most violent regions on Earth, with homicide rates placing the three countries among the nations with top ten murder rates in the world for the fifth straight year.

At approximately [17,500](#) by official statistics, the death toll in the Northern Triangle of Central America was higher in 2015 than in all but three zones of ongoing armed conflict: Iraq, Afghanistan, and Syria. It was higher than the death toll in the four West African countries struggling with the Boko Haram insurgency. Higher than the death toll in Somalia, Libya and South Sudan. And this is in a geographic region the size of the state of Oregon, home to just under 30 million people.

To put this endemic violence into perspective, in 2014 Honduras alone had more homicides than the 28 states of the European Union combined. In 2015 El Salvador eclipsed Honduras as the nation with the highest murder rate in the world, with more people killed in 2015 than were killed during any year of El Salvador’s bloody decade-long civil war. At 104 murders per 100,000 inhabitants, El Salvador’s murder rate jumped by 67% just in the last year.

The causes of the violence are complex and are fueled by lack of government accountability, state institutions being overtaken by organized crime, impunity and widespread corruption, control of territory by organized criminal groups (cartels in rural areas and urban gangs), brutal militarized law enforcement practices, rampant inequality and weak democratic governance mechanisms.

Humanitarian Fall Out

The humanitarian fall out of the complex security crisis in the region has resulted in forced internal displacement and out-migration. While the majority of violence causing mass displacement has been attributed to gangs or other non-state actors, state actors have also been implicated in grave human rights abuses that have precipitated flight. In UNHCR's recent report, *Women on the Run*, 10% of the more than 160 women interviewed from the Northern Triangle and Mexico describe state authorities as the direct agents of persecution.⁽¹⁾

Certain sectors of Northern Triangle societies experience violence and abuse at higher rates, a fact many attribute to both targeting of certain social groups by gangs and the unwillingness of the state to offer protection to certain groups viewed as undesirable or not worthy of respect in society. Particularly excluded from the protection of the state are urban youth of lower socio-economic strata, street children, campesino farmers (particularly those from minority ethnic groups who hold land in common), and women and girl survivors of sexually predatory behavior and LGBTI individuals. Journalists, human rights defenders, and community activists who report or denounce state and non-state violence have also been the targets of death threats, assassination and attacks.

Targeting of Poor Urban Youth

Children and young adults in the "marginal" urban neighborhoods where poor families are forced to live are singled out as a target group for recruitment into the criminal enterprises of organized gangs. Gangs control such neighborhoods in the Northern Triangle, leveraging taxes on the population, controlling who is allowed to enter or leave the neighborhoods and even imposing curfews in some cases. Children as young as six are targets of gang coercion. The most dangerous age for boys and men in poor urban areas of the Northern Triangle is 15-25, with Honduras and El Salvador reporting that males of that age have an approximately 1 in 300 chance of being murdered.

Civil society groups have documented a number of cases where street children and children in gang-controlled neighborhoods are coerced into serving gang members' interests, at times forced to act as look-outs, prostitutes, and traffickers in illicit substances. Gangs in El Salvador, Honduras, and Guatemala wield enormous power at the street level and have increasingly been able to leverage connections with powerful transnational drug cartels and within the national police forces as well as prosecutors' offices. Business owners, taxi and bus drivers and residents of low-income urban communities are all targeted for gang extortion, variably called the "war-tax" the "quota" or the "rent" depending on the country. Those who refuse to cooperate are threatened with death, or are killed without any warning. The bodies of those who refused to cooperate and were murdered are often displayed in gruesome public ways to warn others of the consequences of failing to follow the orders of gang members. The bodies of murdered women and girls often show signs of sexual violence.

In response to spiking murder rates in El Salvador last year, the Sanchez Ceren Administration deployed army battalions on the street in May 2015 to confront gangs with military might. Media and Salvadoran government spokespeople openly speak of extrajudicial executions as "eliminations" of gang members. Forensic evidence in one recent case belied army and police

claims that gang members died in a shootout with armed forces, and instead appear to demonstrate that supposed gang members were lined up by police/military and executed.^[2] In other incidents, investigations after the fact have demonstrated that the youth targeted for unlawfully authorized execution by armed forces were not in fact involved in any gang-related activities.

In Honduras too there are substantiated reports of police forming and participating in death squads and committing unlawful executions in both San Pedro Sula and Tegucigalpa. The militarization of police in Honduras began in 2013 with often-masked Military Police (PMOP) deployed into some of the more violent sectors of the large cities. These police sit on top of the civilian national police structure (FUSINA), a force mistrusted both by those within the government and without because of the high rates of corruption and complicity with organized crime. Nonetheless, the Military Police are an extra-constitutional body^[3] and have been implicated now in a growing list of abuses made even harder to address because of their lack of civilian accountability and because they often cover their faces. Just recently, child advocacy organization Casa Alianza documented that the Military Police were involved in at least six extra-judicial executions of children and youth in the last couple of months.^[4] Abuses attributed to the Military Police and Civil Police force FUSINA include including beatings, harassment of rights activists, disappearances, sexual assaults and murders of low-income community members since their deployment.^[5]

Displacement of Rural Communities

Corporate actors including palm oil conglomerates, mining companies, and energy sector multinationals have profited off of the fragility of state institutions, at times illegally enlisting the police and military in resource rich regions to press local communities to relocate.^[6] Entire communities have been forcibly displaced by police, military and private mercenaries in favor of tourist ports, hydro-electric dams, palm and extractive companies.

Entanglement of the Political Class with Organized Crime

In all three countries, law enforcement and security force complicity in criminal activity, and the infiltration of the public sector by organized crime have eroded citizen security, and continue to undermine democracy and destroy citizens' trust in their own governments. In Honduras for instance the police are deeply infiltrated by organized crime. A Feb. 2014 report by the leading newspaper "El Herald" found that over 200 national police were implicated in killings for hire, drug theft, and corruption.^[8]

Political corruption scandals of the last year in both Guatemala and Honduras have demonstrated the extent to which the political elite have been compromised by corruption and criminal networks. The exposure of such rank venality has galvanized the advent of social movements against corruption, with hundreds of thousands of citizens joining nationwide protests to challenge the status quo.^[9]

In Guatemala, the country with the worst malnutrition in the Western Hemisphere, a recent widespread corruption scandal in which public funds were pilfered touched the highest echelons of the political class, finally forcing the resignation of the Vice President and the President after they were indicted as the head of the criminal conspiracy. While new elections are underway and a transition government is in place this is the most wide-reaching government corruption scandal in Guatemalan history and exposes the roots of the country's vast inequality and citizen's lack of confidence that public officials have their best interests in mind.

Meanwhile in Honduras the governing party has been implicated in a corruption scandal of its own. The country's social security system was robbed of hundreds of millions of dollars by nationalist party leaders, several hundred million of which were used to fund the presidential campaign of Juan Orlando Hernandez, the current President. The corruption scandal has sparked protests nationwide, and a popular appeal the same sort of international and independent anti-corruption body that has been so effective in investigating public corruption and working with the Public Ministry to hold politicians accountable for graft in Guatemala.

Interdictions and Forced Returns in Mexico

Between July 2014 and June 2015, apprehensions of Central Americans in Mexico increased by 70 percent as compared to the same period for the previous years. This increase evidences the humanitarian fall-out of the government of Mexico's Southern Border Program, launched in July 2014. As part of this Program, Mexico's migration agency reassigned over 300 additional agents to southern Mexico, established additional roving checkpoints, increased enforcement operations along the highways, train route, and in hostels and other lodgings where migrants were known to stay, and took steps to prohibit migrants from riding the trains (either through the physical presence of agents—including including armed and quick to shoot private security personnel hired by the Mexican government—around train stations and/or measures such as speeding up the train and increasing physical barriers which prohibit migrants from climbing on the trains). Migrants are regularly rounded up by Mexican migration authorities and deported within hours of apprehension, undermining the ability of the UN Refugee Agency, UNHCR, to ensure those detained are not refugees. Mexican officials routinely fail to inform Central Americans of their right to seek asylum under Mexico's asylum law of 2011.

The timing of the government of Mexico's announcement of its new Southern Border Plan coincided with what U.S. President Barack Obama termed the "urgent humanitarian situation" at the U.S.-Mexico border when over 100,000 children and families arrived from Central America, many seeking international protection. US Government officials including the Secretary of Homeland Security, Jeh Johnson, and the White House in a press release have extolled the Mexican government crackdown on Central American migrants/refugees and acknowledged US support for the efforts.

The result of this crackdown has been grave indeed. Social services providers in Honduras have identified hundreds of cases of children and adults who were deported despite having experienced persecution that should have made them eligible for asylum in Mexico. In some particularly tragic cases this has resulted in the assassination of deported children.

OUR REQUESTS

In solidarity with Pope Francis, we ask that you commit to humane policies that respond to the realities of our hemisphere. We urge you to support legislative actions that:

- **Use U.S. influence for good in Mexico and Central America** by insisting on the protection of human rights, accountability, good governance, anti-corruption mechanisms, and fair trade and labor standards;
- Ensure that U.S. policy **respects the right to family unity**, which would mark a major step toward overhauling our broken immigration system;
- **End U.S. support for Mexico's interceptions of Central Americans fleeing violence** and require Mexico to uphold its international and domestic legal obligations to refugees;
- **End border militarization and inhumane immigration enforcement actions**, including the recent nationwide raids conducted by the Obama Administration that have harmed vulnerable children and families.

- [1] "Women on the Run: First-Hand Accounts of Refugees Fleeing El Salvador, Guatemala, Honduras, and Mexico," A Study Conducted by the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees , Accessed October 28, 2015.
- [2] "Report Reveals Another Case of Summary Execution" El Faro, El Salvador <http://www.elfaro.net/es/201510/noticias/17481/Reportaje-revela-otro-caso-con-indicios-de-ejecuciones-sumarias-perpetradas-por-la-PNC.htm>, accessed October 26, 2015.
- [3] "Military Given Full Powers to Fight Crime in Honduras" <http://www.ipsnews.net/2013/09/military-given-full-powers-to-fight-crime-in-honduras/> accessed September 25, 2013.
- [4] Honduran Soldiers Have Killed at Least Six Civilians: NGO <http://www.globalpost.com/article/6714965/2016/01/05/honduras-soldiers-have-killed-least-6-civilians> January 5, 2016.
- [5] Status of Violence Against Women in Honduras <http://www.cipamericas.org/archives/12582>.
- [6] Conflict and Human Rights in El Salvador <http://www.fespad.org.sv/wp-content/uploads/2013/12/Dddhh2013final-2.pdf>; There are no Investigations Here, Human Rights Watch <https://www.hrw.org/report/2014/02/12/there-are-no-investigations-here/impunity-killings-and-other-abuses-bajo-aguan>; "There are no Peasants Here" Foreign Policy Magazine https://foreignpolicy.com/2015/10/23/there-are-no-peasants-here-honduras-zedes-land-grabs/?utm_content=buffer61&utm_medium=social&utm_source=twitter.com&utm_campaign=buffer
- [7] "There are no Peasants Here" Foreign Policy Magazine https://foreignpolicy.com/2015/10/23/there-are-no-peasants-here-honduras-zedes-land-grabs/?utm_content=buffer61&utm_medium=social&utm_source=twitter.com&utm_campaign=buffer; Report of the National Lawyers Guild Delegation Investigation of Zones for Economic Development and Employment in Honduras http://www.nlginternational.org/report/Final_NLG_ZEDE_Report.pdf.
- [8] Insight Crime <http://www.insightcrime.org/news-analysis/the-northern-triangle-the-countries-that-dont-cry-for-their-deadm>
- [9] "Wave of Protests Spreads to Scandal Weary Honduras," New York Times <http://www.nytimes.com/2015/06/13/world/americas/corruption-scandals-driving-protests-in-guatemala-and-honduras.html>, Accessed June 20, 2015.