

October 21, 2014

The Honorable Patrick J. Leahy, Chairman
Senate Appropriations Subcommittee on State, Foreign Operations, and Related Programs

The Honorable Lindsey Graham, Ranking Member
Senate Appropriations Subcommittee on State, Foreign Operations, and Related Programs

The Honorable Kay Granger, Chair
House Appropriations Subcommittee on State, Foreign Operations, and Related Programs

The Honorable Nita Lowey, Ranking Member
House Appropriations Subcommittee on State, Foreign Operations, and Related Programs

Dear Chairman Leahy, Madame Chair Granger, and Ranking Members Graham and Lowey:

As faith-based, humanitarian, diaspora, labor and human rights organizations, we are greatly troubled by the humanitarian crisis in the Northern Triangle of Central America that has compelled the migration of families and children, often unaccompanied, to the United States. This crisis deserves a response that is both compassionate and sustainable. As you finalize your conference negotiations of the omnibus legislation, we urge you to retain provisions of the FY15 State and Foreign Operations bills that seek to address some of the factors driving children, families, women, and men to abandon their homes in the Central American region.

A major factor driving migration from Northern Triangle countries is the failure of government institutions to protect the rights and safety of their citizenry. Facing gang and organized-crime related violence, citizens have little recourse in nations with weak judicial systems and, particularly in Guatemala and Honduras, corrupt and abusive police forces. For children and young people, the fear of being recruited by or preyed upon by gangs, compounded by the lack of job and/or educational opportunities, are compelling reasons to take the enormous risks of crossing borders.

U.S. aid and policies towards Central America that invest in community- and evidence-based violence prevention programs, strengthen judicial systems' ability to reduce impunity, improve governments' ability and political will to uphold and protect the human rights and labor rights of their citizens, expand protection for children and women, and improve opportunities for employment and education, especially for youth, would help to address this humanitarian crisis in a sustainable way. Accountable and well-staffed child protection systems and safe shelters for victims of violence are urgently needed. Likewise, for migrants who are not at risk of persecution, abuse or trafficking, who can safely return to their home countries, investments in

well-resourced and monitored repatriation and reintegration programs that effectively allow returnees to reunite with family, and access skills-training or scholarships can reduce the likelihood the children and youth will feel compelled to migrate again.

Therefore we respectfully urge the conference committee to accept the Senate provisions which call on the Secretary of State and USAID to create a strategy and spending plan “to address key indicators of poverty, lack of educational, vocational and employment opportunities, and the high rates of criminal gang activity, other violent crimes, narcotics and human trafficking, family dissolution, child abuse and neglect, and other factors in countries that are contributing to significant increase in migration of unaccompanied, undocumented minors to the United States.” We ask that such a strategy address violence against children, including violence linked to organized crime, and sexual and gender-based violence. The provision calling on the Secretary of State and USAID to consult with civil society representatives in these countries in developing this strategy, along with its goals and benchmarks, is particularly important. The strategy ought to include clear and adequate criteria for defining and measuring progress. We strongly urge the conferees to include the \$100 million designated in the Senate version for implementing this strategy and to focus on the kinds of assistance listed above.

In addition, we urge the conferees to adopt specific Senate measures that strengthen human rights in these countries, including:

- human rights conditions on security assistance for Honduras and Guatemala, and for Mexico and Colombia as well, along with \$5 million in funding for implementing Leahy Law human rights vetting worldwide. These indispensable human rights conditions, when tied to security assistance and strictly implemented, provide leverage for the U.S. government to encourage aid-receiving governments to investigate and sanction gross human rights abuses and prevent U.S. tax dollars from being misspent on crime, abuse and corruption.
- the provisions that require international financial institutions to include rigorous human rights due diligence in connection with loans, grants, and policies, and that call for reparations for communities affected by Guatemala’s Chixoy Dam.

We strongly support funding for specific international institutions to strengthen the rule of law and respect for human rights in Central America, including:

- funding for the International Commission against Impunity in Guatemala (CICIG), which has made vital contributions towards the struggle against organized crime, corruption and impunity in Guatemala (we recommend the higher \$5 million total in the House bill);
- no less than \$7 million for the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees to expand its activities in Central America and Mexico and build emergency shelters and regional protection systems;

- funding (in the Senate version) to open an office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights in Honduras, urgently needed to address the deterioration of human rights and rights-protecting institutions in that country, along with continued funding for these offices in Colombia and Mexico; and
- \$2 million (in the Senate report) for the Inter-American Commission on Human Rights, a strong voice encouraging Central American and other regional governments to strengthen the rule of law and often the most important recourse for human rights defenders at risk.

We urge that funding for these activities not come at the expense of other effective humanitarian and development assistance, which work together to serve the common goal of building a safer and more prosperous world.

We emphasize that additional funding to corrupt or abusive security forces will not provide sustainable security and indeed may lead to increased human rights abuses. We highlight the Senate report language regarding CARSI INL assistance, which cautions that: “CARSI assistance should be made available only for governments that the Secretary of State determines demonstrate a clear and convincing commitment to punishing corruption and reforming their security forces.”

We are concerned that authorities in Mexico and Central America tasked with border security and immigration control are plagued by corruption and abuse. Increased U.S. assistance for these institutions could place already vulnerable migrants at greater risk of human rights violations, particularly if assistance does not prioritize efforts to strengthen accountability, curb corruption and improve respect of human rights within these agencies. Furthermore, we are disturbed that Central American victims of persecution and trafficking apprehended in Mexico or intercepted at the borders of Guatemala and Honduras are routinely being deported or turned-back placing them at risk of further persecution, death, trafficking and exploitation in violation of international law.

Children would not be fleeing Central America alone and in such numbers without serious situations that compel them to undertake this dangerous journey. We must do our utmost to ensure that the United States seeks to address the factors driving this migration in a compassionate, reasonable and sustainable manner. Thank you for your consideration of our requests.

Sincerely,

Amnesty International – USA

Bread for the World

Central American Resource Center (CARECEN) DC

Church of the Brethren, Office of Public Witness
Club Morelia en USA
Columban Center for Advocacy and Outreach
Covenant House/ Casa Alianza
Emmanuel Mennonite Church of Gainesville, Florida
The Episcopal Church
Evangelical Lutheran Church in America
Faith in Florida
Fanm Ayisyen Nan Miyami, Inc. (FANM) - Haitian Women of Miami
Federación de Clubes Michoacanos en Illinois FEDECMI/Casa Michoacán
Florida Center for Fiscal and Economic Policy
Florida Immigrant Coalition
Franciscan Action Network
Frente Binacional Michoacano (FREBIMICH)
The Friends of Miami-Dade Detainees
Gainesville Interfaith Alliance for Immigrant Justice
The Guatemalan-Maya Center
HIAS
Human Rights First
International Rescue Committee
Jesuit Conference of the United States
Jesuit Refugee Service, USA
Kids in Need of Defense
Latin America Working Group
Leadership Conference of Women Religious
Lutheran Immigration and Refugee Service
Lutheran World Relief

Maryknoll Office for Global Concerns

Mennonite Central Committee U.S. Washington Office

Miami Workers Center (MWC)

Missionary Oblates of Mary Immaculate

National Advocacy Center of the Sisters of the Good Shepherd

National Alliance of Latin American and Caribbean Communities (NALACC)

National Council of Jewish Women

National Immigrant Justice Center

NETWORK, A National Catholic Social Justice Lobby

Oxfam America

Palm Beach County Coalition for Immigrant Rights (PBCCIR)

Pax Christi USA

Presbyterian Peace Fellowship

Red Mexicana de Organizaciones y Lideres Migrantes

Salvadoran American National Network

Save the Children

Southeast Immigrant Rights Network

Unitarian Universalist Service Committee

United Church of Christ, Justice and Witness Ministries

US Committee for Refugees and Immigrants

Washington Office on Latin America (WOLA)

Women's Refugee Commission