June 9, 2016

President Barack Obama The White House 1600 Pennsylvania Avenue, NW Washington, DC 20500 The Honorable Jeh Johnson Secretary U.S. Department of Homeland Security Washington, DC 20528

Dear President Obama and Secretary Johnson,

As faith leaders and faith-based organizations from many different traditions, we write out of grave concern for the dramatically escalating violence that has precipitated a humanitarian crisis of refugees fleeing El Salvador, Guatemala, and Honduras (an area known as the "Northern Triangle"). Together, we call on the U.S. government to grant Temporary Protected Status (TPS) to those in the U.S. who have fled El Salvador, Guatemala, and Honduras and immediately cease detaining and deporting children, families, and individuals from these families seeking protection here. TPS affords the Administration an important tool to extend temporary protections, and a shield from deportations, to extremely vulnerable populations. We cannot sit idly by while our Central American brothers and sisters are returned to the very violence that has forced them from their homes. Instead of continuing unnecessary detention and dangerous deportation policies, we must carry on our nation's proud history of hospitality and moral leadership.

As people of faith, our concern stems from shared values rooted in our sacred texts that remind us to love our neighbor and welcome the sojourner among us. The Torah tells us: "The strangers who sojourn with you shall be to you as the natives among you, and you shall love them as yourself; for you were strangers in the land of Egypt" (Leviticus 19:33-34). In the New Testament, Jesus tells us to welcome the stranger, for "what you do to the least of my brethren, you do unto me" (Matthew 25:40). The Qur'an tells us that we should "do good to...those in need, neighbors who are near, neighbors who are strangers, the companion by your side, the wayfarer that you meet" (4:36). The Hindu Taitiriya Upanishad tells us: "The guest is a representative of God" (1.11.2).

Children, families, women, and men are fleeing violence, forced gang conscription, human trafficking, and sexual exploitation in the Northern Triangle.¹ Human rights violations in El Salvador, Guatemala, and Honduras are compounded by the inability of these governments to protect their own citizens.² **The Northern Triangle's death toll in 2015 tallied nearly 17,500, the highest global homicide rate outside of a war zone.**³ From 2005 to 2012, in Honduras alone, murders of women and girls increased by 346

http://www.usccb.org/about/migration-policy/upload/Mission-To-Central-America-FINAL-2.pdf

¹ See U.N. High Commissioner for Refugees, Children on the Run: Unaccompanied Children leaving Central America and Mexico and the Need for International Protection (2014), <u>http://www.refworld.org/docid/532180c24.html</u>.

² U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops, *Mission to Central America: The Flight of Unaccompanied Children to the United States* (2013),

³ Central America's violent Northern Triangle registers 17,422 homicides in 2015, The Tico Times News, Jan. 5, 2016, http://www.ticotimes.net/2016/01/05/central-americas-violent-northern-triangle-registers-17422-homicides-in-2015.

percent, and murders of men and boys grew by 292 percent.⁴ Recent findings show that, with a homicide rate of 57 per 100,000 people, Honduras suffers 10 times more homicides than the world average and four times the number of homicides than the average country in the Americas.⁵ El Salvador and Guatemala have the top two highest homicide rates in the world for children.⁶ Indeed, El Salvador recently overtook Honduras as the murder capital of the world. Officials recorded 6,657 people murdered in El Salvador in 2015, a 70 percent increase from 2014.⁷ In El Salvador, the homicide rate of 104 people per 100,000 people is the highest for any country in nearly 20 years.⁸ Guatemala, too, faces soaring levels of violence due to serious and pervasive armed conflict with the fifth highest homicide rate in the world.⁹ These extreme levels of violence encompass all corners of society and those who are deported after seeking asylum are at exceptionally high risk because they fled specific threats or attempts on their lives.

Due to the obvious need for legal recognition of these severe circumstances in the Northern Triangle, we call on the U.S. government to fully recognize these trends as a humanitarian crisis deserving of Temporary Protected Status. The region's neighboring countries – in particular, Belize, Costa Rica, Mexico, Nicaragua, and Panama – already face a 1,185 percent increase in asylum applications from El Salvadorans, Guatemalans, and Hondurans.¹⁰ The United States has moral and legal obligations under international and U.S. law to "non-refoulement," which ensures that individuals seeking protection are not returned to territories where their life or freedom would be threatened.¹¹

The risk of deportation from the United States to the Northern Triangle countries is tangible and profound, and faith communities across the Northern Triangle struggle to protect returning individuals, while also addressing the root causes of violence. The Department of Homeland Security (DHS) / Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE) has made women and children from this region, who recently fled to the U.S. and were not granted asylum, a priority for enforcement.¹² DHS/ICE has already sent many of

http://www.unicef.org/publications/index_74865.html; Ami Sedghi, The world's most dangerous countries for young people: homicide rates for under 20-year-olds mapped, The Guardian, Sept. 5, 2014, http://www.theguardian.com/news/datablog/nginteractive/2014/sep/05/the-worlds-most-dangerous-countries-for-young-people-homicide-rates-for-under-20-year-olds-mapped.

⁷ Alan Gomez, El Salvador: World's new murder capital, USA Today, Jan. 8, 2016,

⁴ Observatory of Citizen Security, La Violencia Contra Las Mujeres. 2012.

http://www.observatoriodeseguridadciudadanadelasmujeres.org/materiales/INFORME_VCM_C.A..pdf; Washington Office of Latin America, Three Myths about Central American Migration to the United States. 2014.

http://www.wola.org/commentary/3 myths about central american migration to the us.

⁵ Joshua Partlow, Why El Salvador became the hemisphere's murder capital, The Washington Post, Jan. 5, 2016, <u>https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/worldviews/wp/2016/01/05/why-el-salvador-became-the-hemispheres-murder-capital/</u>.
⁶ United Nations Children's Fund, Hidden in Plain Sight: A statistical analysis of violence against children, UNICEF, Sept. 2014,

http://www.usatoday.com/story/news/world/2016/01/07/el-salvador-homicide-rate-honduras-guatemala-illegal-immigration-to-unitedstates/78358042/.

⁸ Id.

 ⁹ We continue to see this pattern of violence since this data was collected and published in 2013. United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime, *Global Study on Homicide 2013: Trends, Contexts, Data* (April 2014), <u>http://www.unodc.org/gsh/</u>.
 ¹⁰ UNHCR documented a 1,185% increase in asylum claims from 2008 to 2014. United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees,

 ¹⁰ UNHCR documented a 1,185% increase in asylum claims from 2008 to 2014. United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees, Children on the Run: Unaccompanied Minors: Humanitarian Situation at US Border. 2014. http://unhcrwashington.org/children.
 ¹¹ UNHCR, *The Scope and Content of the Issue of Non-Refoulement*, http://www.unhcr.org/publications/legal/419c75ce4/refugee-protection-international-law-scope-content-principle-non-refoulement.html.

protection-international-law-scope-content-principle-non-refoulement.html. ¹² U.S. Department of Homeland Security, Statement by Secretary Jeh C. Johnson on Southwest Border Security. Jan. 4, 2016. http://www.dhs.gov/news/2016/01/04/statement-secretary-jeh-c-johnson-southwest-border-security.

them back to a region with endemic violence and persecution¹³ where they face the imminent threat of being murdered just days or months after they return. Between January 2014 and September 2015, several nationals deported back to El Salvador, Honduras, and Guatemala were reported to have been subsequently murdered.¹⁴ The United States has already taken important steps to recognize the need for protection for citizens of Northern Triangle countries by collaborating with the UN High Commissioner for Refugees to expand screening and admissions for gualified Central American refugees. However, this program is not yet fully operative, and families and individuals whose lives are at immediate risk often have no other option than to seek protection by fleeing. In the midst of this humanitarian crisis, scaling up enforcement efforts, limiting access to due process, and expanding detention of vulnerable populations is the wrong approach.

The United States has a legal and moral responsibility to not return children, families, and individuals that have been subject to persecution to extremely violent territories. We pray that you may find compassion and ask you to immediately stop the detention and deportation of children, families, women, and men seeking protection from El Salvador, Honduras, and Guatemala and extend TPS designations for these countries. Now is the time to respond to this humanitarian crisis with fair and humane solutions. As people of faith, we urge you to think about the moral imperative to love our neighbor, welcome the sojourner, and care for the most vulnerable among us.

Sincerely,

Faith-based Organizations

Adorers of the Blood of Christ Adrian Dominican Sisters Ainsworth United Church of Christ All Souls Parish Berkelev American Baptist Churches American Friends Immigrant Service Miami American Friends Service Committee (AFSC) Anti-Defamation League Anti-Defamation League, South-Central Region Arlington Street Church Social Action Committee Auburn Seminary Augustinians, Province of St. Thomas of Villanova **Baker Interfaith Friends** Bakhita Initiative Berkeley Organizing Congregations for Action **Boston New Sanctuary Movement** Brother Jacoba Fraternity Secular Fransiscan Order

¹³ U.N. High Commissioner for Refugees, UNHCR warns of "looming refugee crisis" in the Americas. Oct. 28, 2015. http://www.unhcr.org/print/5630fc6a9.html. ¹⁴ Sibylla Brodzinsky and Ed Pilkington, *US government deporting Central American migrants to their deaths*, The Guardian, Oct.

^{12, 2015.} http://www.theguardian.com/us-news/2015/oct/12/obama-immigration-deportations-central-america.

Casserly House Center for Spirituality at Work Central Conference of American Rabbis Church and Society The United Methodist Church Church Women United in New York State **Church World Service** Circle of Mercv Clergy and Laity United for Economic Justice (CLUE) Community Relations Council of the Columbia Jewish Federation Compassion, Peace and Justice Team, Ridgefield-Crystal Lake Presbyterian Conference of Major Superiors of Men Congregation of St. Joseph **Crossing Borders - Dubuque** Daughter of Charity of St.Vincent de Paul Daughters of Charity/Sisters of Charity Federation Daughters of Wisdom **Disciples Home Missions** Division of Overseas Ministries, Christian Church (Disciples of Christ) Division of Overseas Ministries, Global Ministries, Disciples of Christ and United Church of Christ Dominican Center of Marywood **Dominican Sisters Dominican Sisters Grand Rapids Dominican Sisters Ministry of Presence Dominican Sisters of Houston Dominican Sisters of Peace** Dominican Sisters of San Rafael East Bay Interfaith Immigration Coalition **Ecumenical Peace Institute** El Pueblo, Inc. Evangelical Lutheran Church in America, Advocacy Office Faith in New York FaithAction International House FAST - Faith and Action Together Fe y Justicia Worker Center First Congregational Church of Berkeley First Congregational Church UCC, Sarasota, FL First Parish UU Needham, MA First Unitarian Church of Denver Florida Council of Churches Fools Mission Fr. Bill O'Donnell Social Justice Committee Friends Committee on National Legislation Gainesville Interfaith Alliance for Immigrant Justice Gospel Justice Committee, Srs. of the Most Precious Blood, O'Fallon, MO Grand Rapids Dominican Sisters

Greater New York Labor-Religion Coalition HIAS **HIAS Chicago** HIAS Pennsylvania Holy Spirit Missionary Sisters - USA-JPIC IAIJ Ignatian Solidarity Network IHM Sisters, Immaculata, PA Immigrant Justice Advocacy Movement Institute of Sisters of Mercy of the Americas, South Central Community Interfaith Alliance for Immigrant Justice Interfaith Center for Worker Justice of San Diego County Interfaith Community Services Interfaith Movement for Human Integrity Interfaith Movement for Immigrant Justice - Portland, OR Interfaith Welcome Coalition InterVarsity Christian Fellowship Iowa Unitarian Universalist Witness/Advocacy Network Islamic Center of Naperville Jesuit Refugee Service/USA Jesuit Social Research Institute/Loyola University New Orleans Jewish Community Action Jewish Community Relations Council of New Haven Jewish Council for Public Affairs Jewish Labor Committee Jewish Voice for Peace Jewish Women International JPIC Network Office (Justice, Peace, and the Integrity of Creation) JPIC of the Sisters of St. Francis of Philadelphia JustFaith Justice Action Ministry at First UU Church of Columbus, Ohio Justice and Peace Committee Sisters of St. Joseph of Chambery, West Hartford Justice and Peace for HSOSF Justice Coordinator, Sisters of Mercy West Midwest Community Justice, Peace and Reconciliation Commission, Priests of the Sacred Heart, US Province Kehilla Community Synagogue Kino Border Initiative Lawrence Coalition for Peace and Justice Leadership Conference of Women Religious Leadership Council Leadership Team, Mid-Atlantic Community of the Sisters of Mercy Little River UCC Lutheran Immigration and Refugee Service Lutheran Office of Public Policy - California Madison Trinity United Methodist Church Missions Team

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