

Central Americans under Trump: Uncertainty on Both Sides of the Border

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Since Donald Trump took office on January 20, 2017, immigrant communities have been under the threat of his campaign promises to deport more immigrants and build a wall at the U.S.-Mexico border. Central Americans, one of the fastest-growing populations of immigrants in the United States, are rightfully worried. There are 3.2 million Central Americans residing in the United States, the majority from the Northern Triangle: Guatemala, El Salvador, and Honduras. They account for 7 percent of the U.S. immigrant population of 41.3 million.¹ Executive orders have spread terror and panic among immigrant communities as this administration has ramped up the detention and expulsion of about over 700 immigrants in the past weeks, including Muslim immigrants, many of whom boast proper documentation. For youth, women, children, and lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, and intersex immigrants from Central America, the new enforcement policies and practices curb their hopes of safety, education, and health care. This contradictory yet clear triumph of right-wing protectionist politics unjustly and irresponsibly blames Central American populations for their forced migration and their conditions of poverty and internal strife. They assume no responsibility for the State Department’s role in the disturbances of democracy, the instigation of coups, and the destabilizing of the labor force and labor protections by promoting and imposing neoliberal and neoconservative policies on countries the United States has deemed less fortunate than itself.

This new era of restrictions in the United States is also reminiscent of the 1980s under President Ronald Reagan, when Central Americans were unwelcome in the United States. Then, Central Americans sought sanctuary in churches and among comrades, who hid them along with their children, memories, experiences, and their

lost loved ones. The concept of sanctuary, mostly associated with the religious groups that provided refuge to undocumented immigrants, speaks also of safe passage and harkens back to the time of the Underground Railroad run by pioneering feminist Harriet Tubman, as she helped slaves from the U.S. south find safe passage north. Then, as now, there were politicians who did not see black workers as humans, or as individuals entitled to rights, wages, and health care, let alone own their own land and homes. A sanctuary is a space of nonviolent resistance that refuses the unilateral obliteration of a group and is reminiscent of the U.S. civil rights movement, when black power organizers sought a seat in the front of the bus or at the lunch counter. The bold claim here is that those seeking sanctuary are actors in their own history and important contributors to U.S. society, not just because they pay taxes or are law-abiding neighbors, but also because their histories and lives form the rich texture of this society. The United States is not a black-and-white country; it is filled with hard-working people of all races, ethnicities, classes, and religious backgrounds, forming a cacophony of diverse voices and projects of nation that challenge every institution, academic or otherwise, to be bold and inclusive, to be just and fair. To deport 11 million immigrants, disassemble the Deferred Action for Childhood Arrivals (DACA) program, and destroy the fabric of safety net protections, such as health care, reproductive justice, and transgender rights, is to break down the country as well as to erase the very things that has made it great—its racial, ethnic, and gender diversity; migration; and cultural plurality.

Trump’s immigration policies demonstrate willful historical amnesia regarding the United States’ role in destabilizing the Central American region. Worse still, they

criminalize Central American families, women, and children fleeing from violent social environments that U.S. military aid helped to create.² For so many still in Central America, the United States has imposed neocolonial relationships economically and politically, supporting authoritarian regimes over the will of the people and voters, as in the cases of Honduras and Guatemala. The Northern Triangle's long history with heavy-handed U.S. politics of capital and diplomacy are coming to a head today, deployed upon the bodies of the most vulnerable actors: women and children; indigenous, Afro-descendants, and Garifunas; and lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, transvestite, and intersex communities.

Since his presidential campaign, Donald Trump has offered a decontextualized, dramatized vision of individual immigrants as dangerous criminals. He subtracts the historical context, as well as any notion of these individuals as human beings with social ties and with social value. With his most recent initiatives to curb immigration, Trump furthers this public rhetoric of decontextualizing migration and demonizing immigrants. His immigration plan, released by the Department of Homeland Security in late February, includes publicity campaigns against immigrants, in addition to ramping up nationwide security culture. He plans to "publicize crimes by undocumented immigrants; strip such immigrants of privacy protections; enlist local police officers as enforcers; erect new detention facilities; discourage asylum seekers; and, ultimately, speed up deportations."³ The administration's media smear campaign against undocumented immigrants will instill fear and hate in an already divided society. What purpose could it serve other than to engage citizens in policing

and reporting those suspected to be undocumented immigrants?

An unnerving aspect of this plan is the resurrection of the 287(g) Program, or the Delegation of Immigration Authority Section of the Immigration and Nationality Act, which forces local officials to report to immigration enforcement, encouraging a climate of persecution across the nation. According to the *New York Times*, former president Obama's program of expedited removal "was used only when an immigrant was arrested within 100 miles of the border and had been in the country no more than 14 days."⁴ Trump, however, is forcing local authorities to deliver immigrants for reasons of minor and arbitrary offences, even if they have been in the country for more than two years.⁵ In addition, Trump has ordered the Department of Homeland Security to hire 10,000 new immigration and customs agents and expand the number of detention facilities. Though immigrants' rights organizations and lawyers across the country are contesting these draconian initiatives, the already bloated state security apparatus continues to grow.

The contradictions abound in tandem with this severe crackdown on migration in Central America and Mexico and on immigrants in the United States, as the Trump administration uses foreign policy and diplomatic negotiation like a double-edged sword for opening Central America to foreign investment by transnational corporations. These policies tie in with the Alliance for Prosperity Plan, initiated by former president Obama and drafted by the presidents of El Salvador, Guatemala, and Honduras in 2014. Facilitated by the Inter-American Development Bank, the Alliance for Prosperity Plan's main policy goals include "promoting strategic sectors and attracting investment . . . modernizing

and expanding infrastructure, [and] boosting programs to prevent violence," thus seeking to reduce out-migration from the region.⁶ Given the history of government use of state-sponsored violence and *mano dura* policies against their own populations in Guatemala, Honduras, and El Salvador, however, this initiative will only exacerbate a macabre security system and police force against would-be migrants. The Alliance for Prosperity would most likely increase economic disparity without a sincere and thorough plan for education and reintegration of immigrants, including those deported.

At the same time, the Alliance for Prosperity Plan replicates U.S. foreign policy aimed at opening new markets for foreign investment. Indeed, the rise of parallel states and paramilitary groups go hand-in-hand with hypercapitalism in Mexico and Central America. It will be a vehicle to ensure new markets, new territories, and resource grabbing. Investments in hydroelectric plants, dams, and ecotourism projects are destroying indigenous communities, traditions, and cultural heritage, and contracts are often secured through murder and chaos wrought by paramilitary groups. Neo-interventionist U.S. foreign policy takes the form of "drug war capitalism," to use Dawn Paley's term, repeating in Central America the same strategies of militarization as practiced in Colombia, thus allowing for the opening of the country to increased transnational investment. As Paley explains, "The war on drugs is a long-term fix to capitalism's woes, combining terror with policymaking in a seasoned neoliberal mix, cracking open social worlds and territories once unavailable to globalized capitalism."⁷ Drug war policies are affecting Guatemalans, Hondurans, and Salvadorans profoundly, exacerbating the

number of military grade arms, money laundering and cash surpluses, as well as the plethora of paramilitary groups and extrajudicial security forces run by powerful capitalist elites.⁸ The increase in armaments and violence has only served to further criminalize indigenous and black activists and human rights defenders, who continue to struggle for human rights and land rights.⁹

Central Americans in the Northern Triangle are facing the worst violence ever recorded in history. According to the U.S. Department of State's Overseas Security Advisory Council (OSAC), in 2016 "Guatemala has one of the highest violent crime rates in Central America and is rated in the top 25 most dangerous places to live in the world. Violent crime is attributed to endemic poverty, an abundance of weapons, a legacy of societal violence, and overwhelmed and inactive law enforcement and judicial systems."¹⁰ This description could easily be applied to any of the three countries, which suffer from this multilayered threat of poverty, militarization, and impunity. Homicide rates in these countries make them some of the most violent in the entire world. Honduras reported a homicide rate of 74.6 per 100,000 people in 2014, while El Salvador reported a rate of 64.2 per 100,000 for the same year.¹¹ As we explore below, violent death reigns in these countries, due in large part to the legacy of the civil wars of the 1970s through 1990s. These were waged under a Cold War binary logic: social movements and armed guerrillas, labeled as communists, fighting against highly equipped government counterinsurgency forces. During these turbulent years, the United States aid and training to the militaries of the Northern Triangle encouraged two phenomena: (1) an influx of weapons technology, which resulted in a surplus of arms and increased

repressive capabilities on the part of these armies; and (2) an evolution in the organizational sophistication of armed groups, whose shifting alliances after the signing of the peace treaties—between the state, drug traffickers, private security, and the like—have forged a highly militarized but amorphous scenario of paramilitary violence.

The pacification and demobilization processes from the civil wars of the 1980s in these countries have been incomplete, due to the extreme repression and militarization of the Cold War period and the quick transition into exploitative neoliberal economic practices. There is extreme social fragmentation in the region, which can best be seen in the appearance of street gangs, the growing influence of paramilitary groups like the Zetas, and the continued persecution of journalists, activists, Human Rights workers, and judicial figures who attempt to address corruption and impunity. In the section that follows, we discuss the particular features of this persecution and the groups that have most often been targeted.

Today, much as in the environment of the civil wars, violent repression falls heavily on activists and social organizers. According to a Global Witness report, Honduras is the most dangerous for environmental activism, where there have been over 120 murders of human rights defenders who work to protect the environment since 2010. One of them was Berta Cáceres of the Civic Council of Popular and Indigenous Organizations of Honduras (COPINH).¹² The report also listed the collusion of big business owners in Honduras, whose transnational companies act against indigenous communities and campesinos attempting to protect the water sources and the forests. The Honduran

government, backed by transnational companies, has been blatantly ignoring ILO Convention 169, which stipulates that governments should consult and gain approval from indigenous communities before developing or exploiting their land.¹³ The results are disastrous for local indigenous communities, such as the Garifuna communities currently being displaced from their ancestral lands for the purposes of ecotourism development. Like Honduras, Guatemala has continued to criminalize and assassinate indigenous activists. It is the second Central American country with the highest murder rates of indigenous, LGBTTI, and women activists in the isthmus.

Since 2011, the most violent year in Honduras according to the Violence Observatory at UNAH, there has been an increase in migration to the United States of women and children, unaccompanied children, and LGBTTI people, the most vulnerable sectors of a society turning more violent by the moment. By 2014, hundreds of mostly Honduran, Guatemalan, and Salvadoran unaccompanied children, mothers, and families with small kids were at our borders, escaping the threat of violence, militarization, displacement, and lack of jobs. Despite this egregious situation, the U.S. government continues to fund a government that has unapologetically disregarded the life of human rights observers, where murders go unpunished.

Women, including transgender women, and children in the region are extremely vulnerable to violent death. Cases of gender violence reveal twisted new strands of brutality and misogyny, including torture and dismemberment and public dumping of the bodies. Particularly, femicide/feminicide, as expressed in contemporary Central America, represents

the ultimate expression of disdain for women, aggravated under conditions of militarization, extreme inequality, and economic disparity. *Femicide* refers not only to the fact that the victim of homicide is a woman, but rather that they are killed because they are women and perceived to be at the bottom of a gender-based power structure. Femicide as gender violence is both public and private, indicating the complicity of the state and of individual perpetrators.¹⁴ The Northern Triangle demonstrates alarmingly growing rates of femicide. The cases of femicide in Guatemala have reached more than 6,000. Women are often killed ritualistically and tortured or mutilated. In Guatemala the numbers continue to grow with an average of one to two women murdered daily; it is the country with the third highest femicide rate in Latin America, with only El Salvador and Jamaica surpassing it. The Guatemalan Prosecutor's Office reported 262 femicide cases between April 2015 and March 2016. Yet National Forensic Science notes that cases are much higher than the government figure, citing a total of 766 femicides in 2015 alone. The level of impunity is a contributor in the rise of femicide in Guatemala. The Prosecutor's Office reported that between 2015 and 2016 there were only 74 prosecutions. Although Guatemala passed the Law against Femicide and other Forms of Violence against Women in 2008, institutional inertia and constraints, as well as the amorphous and all-encompassing nature of gang violence, have made it extremely difficult to prosecute these crimes. Similarly, in Honduras, according to Centro de Derechos de la Mujer, femicides are skyrocketing. During the first six months of 2015 there were 438 murders of women, 189 of which are violent deaths; 40.6 percent were attributed to sexual violence.¹⁵ While not considered femicide in the regular context of reporting,

LGBTTI murders exhibit the same level of brutality and degradation as those of cisgender women in Honduras. From 2009 to the present there have been over 222 murders of LGBTTI people; the majority are transgender women. Of 37 cases of LGBTTI murders only 3 cases have been pursued for prosecution.¹⁶

Honduras is also a dangerous place for children. In 2013 there were 900 murders and executions of children under 23 years old in the country. The United States deported 7,109 children back to Honduras in 2015, making up 10 percent of all deportations (a total of 67,734 deportees). Of the unaccompanied minors apprehended at the U.S.-Mexico border between October 2014 and November 2015, 7,083 were Honduran. Of the women and children detained at the U.S.-Mexico border, 13,874 were from Honduras.¹⁷

It cannot be stressed enough that the extreme vulnerability of Central Americans in their home countries is a direct result of the political violence of the armed conflicts of the 1970–1980s. The military repression has morphed into criminal violence. As U.S. foreign policy rhetoric so readily disguises, U.S. military aid and intelligence assistance to authoritarian, military governments in that period makes the United States complicit in the criminal violence affecting Central America today.

The devastating impact of the civil wars in Guatemala and El Salvador appear today as a violent legacy of scars that refuse to heal. There were 80,000 murdered in El Salvador during the armed conflict and not one general or military commander has been brought to justice. There were over 200,000 murdered during the conflict in Guatemala. The UN-sponsored Historical Clarification Commission (CEH) stated

that the state was responsible for 93 percent of the human rights violations committed during the civil war. It also left 40,000 widows, and approximately 50,000 were forcefully disappeared. Similarly, over 450 Maya villages were obliterated and 1.5 million Guatemalans were forcefully displaced. According to the report, 83 percent of those killed or forcefully disappeared were Maya. For this reason the report, as well as many Latin American scholars, have noted that the Guatemalan armed conflict was also a genocide, since the state apparatus systematically aimed at eliminating Maya communities. The genocide was orchestrated by the U.S.-backed Guatemalan army influenced by over 55 U.S. officers providing training on strategy and tactics during combat.

The violence in both those countries led people to flee, many to the United States and Mexico, in record numbers. While the peace accords in Guatemala were signed in 1996, Central America continued to see growing inequality and joblessness during the transition governments. Now, Central America serves as a corridor for the passage of drugs moving from South America to the United States. The bountiful profit to be made from complicity or involvement with this trade has ensnared ex-soldiers, government officials, and businesspeople alike. Participation in the drug trade is one axis of the multiple and diffuse modes of participation in criminal organizations that function as parallel states in countries like Guatemala, Honduras, and El Salvador.

Another potent example of criminal networks is the exploitation of the *maras* by narco-traffickers and ex-soldiers. The *maras* are street gangs that were imported from Los Angeles in the mid-1990s, when the United States deported thousands of incarcerated Salvadoran, Guatemalan, and Honduran immigrant youth, many of

whom had no recollection of their home countries or social networks to receive them. Once deported, members of the Mara Salvatrucha and the 18th Street gangs from Los Angeles, many of them working class, joined with or recruited local young people to form the Central American versions of these gangs.¹⁸ Extortion constitutes the main source of income of the gangs, particularly targeting the transport sector as well as neighborhood businesses. In fact, cases of extortion involving minors has risen 120 percent in El Salvador.¹⁹ Wolf explains that the Salvadoran government's preferred method for dealing with gangs is suppression and incarceration, completely omitting prevention and rehabilitation programs.²⁰ Worsening the severity of armed violence, police have been implicated in extrajudicial assassinations not only of gang members but also of unarmed bystanders, as in the 2015 San Blas massacre, according to reporters from *El Faro*, an online investigative journalism newspaper based in El Salvador, who exposed the massacre.²¹

Ravaging the newest generation, much in the same way the civil wars did, criminal violence disproportionately targets young people in the gang-dominated countries of the Northern Triangle today. The recruitment tactics of the gangs often force these adolescents and teenagers to migrate, given that they must join a gang or else be constantly harassed and most likely killed. The targeting of young people for gang recruitment in part explains the massive surge of child migration witnessed in the United States since 2013. By the end of 2014, an influx of 40,000 unaccompanied Central American minors had flocked to the U.S.-Mexico border.²² And as they travel northward, these unaccompanied minors become particularly vulnerable to the plethora of dangers faced along the migrant trail: sexual assault, kidnapping,

being trafficked or picked up by migration officials and deported, or being maimed or killed riding the infamous northbound Mexican trains known collectively as *La Bestia*.

The current conditions facing Central American migrants constitute a grave humanitarian crisis. To name perhaps the most dire example, Central American migrants traveling through Mexico, who face countless dangers on the road, must also contend with the threat of kidnapping. These migrants make easy targets and are often converted into merchandise, as armed groups like the Zetas kidnap and traffic them with impunity.²³ The Zetas and other armed groups profit by extorting the families of the kidnapped, often demanding payments over and over again and then refusing to comply with their side of the bargain to safely return loved ones. Due to their almost complete lack of recourse to institutional support, the disappeared, kidnapped, and trafficked effectively vanish from the public eye, left to unspeakable fates at the hands of these armed groups. Based on a report by the National Commission for Human Rights in Mexico, activists claim that the number of disappeared noncitizen migrants in Mexico from 2006 to 2011 could be between 70,000 and 120,000.²⁴

Trump's promises of building a wall between the United States and Mexico will affect Central Americans the most, as in recent years the majority of those apprehended at the border are Central American youth, women, and children.²⁵ As we've argued, the displacement of these most vulnerable populations can in fact be traced back to the United States' continued support to authoritarian regimes, such as Honduras' nationalist president Juan Orlando Hernandez, and the Guatemalan president Jimmy Morales, both candidates

those countries' populations did not support. U.S. meddling with the elections in both those countries, against the voters' wishes, has led to an uptick in migration at rates never seen before. Women, children, and youth are the future of any nation, but they are fleeing Central America in droves due to government corruption. What will become of these nations without their future generations?

The Central American Section of the Latin American Studies Association strongly upholds the need for sanctuary spaces: not just symbolic but physical and material spaces to house and sustain communities, in churches, schools, cities, local establishments, hospitals, neighborhoods, and universities. We believe this new underground railroad of sanctuary will provide safe passage to a possibility of a new life, securing human rights for a new generation of Central Americans that deserve to live and thrive where they find themselves.

We call for the inclusion of all immigrants to be provided sanctuary no matter their status, including noncitizens disproportionately impacted at the intersection of the criminal justice system and immigration enforcement.

We oppose the federal government's bigotry and targeting of Latino/Latina, Central American, and Mexican communities via executive orders, in Congress's policies and in local and state laws, and in speeches coming from President Trump's ultra-right-wing cabinet.

We affirm and support DACA and other programs for 700,000 undocumented students (75,000 of whom are members of the LGBTQ community) and their families, many of whom are Central Americans and Mexican.

We oppose the expansion of federal collaboration among law enforcement agencies locally and nationally, as well as the expansion of the Border Patrol. We oppose the expansion of 287(g) and “Secure Communities” programs, or any other program that jeopardizes the safety and integrity of our local U.S. neighborhoods and our neighbors.

We call on our U.S. government for the expansion of refugee status for the over 68,000 Central American children, youth, women, and LGBTTI people at the U.S.-Mexico border, and those currently in deportation proceedings and/or fighting for asylum.²⁶ Currently, Central Americans apprehended at the borders are on expedited removal, even before the merits of their asylum cases are heard, and before they can be considered for refugee status eligibility. We call on our government to extend refugee status to Central Americans from the Northern Triangle.

We call for Central American governments that collaborate with the United States to demand protection for their citizens in Mexico and the United States and to advocate for changes in immigration policies to benefit Central American immigrants. We call on Central American nations to renounce their complicity with these inhumane U.S. policies, complicity that they demonstrate via their acceptance of financial and security funding, while their citizens are being exploited and maimed at hands of U.S. policy.

We call for Central American nations to pursue ending violence in their nations, to prosecute and bring to trial violent perpetrators of femicide and violence against women, children, and LGBTTI communities. Prosecution of crimes can send a strong message to stem violence

and discrimination against vulnerable populations.

We call on Central American nations to develop politics of inclusion for LGBTTI and working-class youth communities. We urge governments to train their police, military, and traffic police on hate crimes and gender violence and develop protection mechanisms for reporting and prosecution.

We call on Central American nations to end the exploitation of natural resources, rivers, forests, and beach waterfronts for the expansion of hydroelectric plants and ecotourism, because it is displacing people from their land and livelihood.

Lastly, we call on the U.S. and Central American governments to respect the sovereignty of indigenous peoples in our continent and their right to land, language, culture, and self-determination.

Notes

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