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Trump’s Immigration Policies Raise Concerns in Central America

by George Rodríguez

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US President Donald Trump kicked off his four-year term at the White House last month by implementing some of the most dreaded components of his government plan.

Trump started by focusing on immigration, which he regards as an easy way for criminals from countries such as Mexico and specific Muslim nations to enter the US. His generalization has been repeatedly put to question by outraged immigrants as well as US citizens, and by human rights organization both in the US and abroad.

On Jan. 25, just five days into the new job, Trump signed an executive order green-lighting the building of a long, allegedly migrant-proof wall along the 3,145-km US-Mexico border, a third of which is already marked by a 1,050-km metal fence put up in 1994 (SourceMex, Jan. 18, 2017).

Beyond the Americas

On the heels of that decree came the executive order of Jan. 27 denying entry into US territory to citizens of seven Islamic countries. This measure sought a temporary entry ban for citizens of Iran, Iraq, Libya, Somalia, Sudan, Syria, and Yemen, and a reduction from 120,000 to 50,000 the number of refugees to be accepted per year.

Within hours, several judges suspended the order, including US District Judge James Robart, in Seattle, who noted that the government had no evidence to back its assertion that the executive order would protect the US from terrorist attacks originating in those countries. The Justice Department took the case to the San Francisco-based U.S. Court of Appeals for the 9th Circuit, where a panel of three judges upheld Robart’s ruling, denying the administration’s request to restore the ban.

The presidential moves led to popular demonstrations in cities throughout the US and abroad. Thousands of protesters have taken to the streets, chanting slogans and carrying placards with statements such as “We Are All Immigrants,” “Build Kindness Not Walls,” or in the case of one march in New York City, “Our New York Is Immigrant New York.”

Concern in Central America

The anti-immigration orders have also deepened concern—voiced as early as the day Trump became president-elect—in Central America, particularly in the violence- and poverty-ridden Northern Triangle, which is made up of El Salvador, Guatemala, Honduras (NotiCen, May 12, 2016, Aug. 4, 2016, Sept. 1, 2016, and SourceMex, Nov. 16, 2016).
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One of the earliest expressions of concern came from the office of Honduras’ human rights commissioner (Comisionado Nacional de los Derechos Humanos, CONADEH). In a statement released Nov. 15, two months before the change of government was scheduled to take place in the US, CONADEH spoke up regarding people’s right to seek abroad the opportunities and the protection they cannot find in their home countries.

“Migration must not be criminalized by the host states,” it pointed out, adding that migration, “seen as a human need, must be treated as such and [must be] characterized by the observance and full respect of the migrants’ human rights and fundamental freedoms, regardless of their immigration status.”

CONADEH was referring to the fact that most of the northbound migrant flow from the Northern Triangle is made up of undocumented persons, including a high proportion of women and unaccompanied minors. Most of the people leaving El Salvador, Guatemala, and Honduras do so to escape the massive violence caused by rampant organized crime—mostly drug-related activities—and action by violent youth gangs known as maras, whose members number in the thousands.

“Many Hondurans are displacing themselves internally or migrating to other countries because they are victims of violence, threats and intimidation, relatives being murdered, extortion, rape and murder of women and girls, and uncertainty and insecurity, frequently as a result of illicit activities by gangs, maras, and organized crime,” it said.

Besides fleeing from violence and insecurity in their home countries, migrants from the Northern Triangle also seek the human development opportunities and the income not available to them at home.

CONADEH sounded the alarm, it said, because “Honduras does not advance in preparing its communities and in providing its youth with more incentives … Sustained attention is needed to achieve better conditions for the people in each village and in each municipality.”

Citizens of Northern Triangle countries make up the bulk of the northbound migrant flow from Central America. Advocates say the migration benefits both the US, by providing an often-exploited labor force, and their home countries, via the remittances the migrants send, mostly to relatives left behind.

Data for 2016 show that Guatemalan migrants sent close to US$7.2 billion in remittances, followed by El Salvador with US$4.6 billion, and Honduras with just over US$4 billion.

President Trump’s policies are a cause of worry for the area’s governments, which are faced with critical economic and social realities that would worsen should the administration fulfill Trump’s campaign promise to return millions of undocumented immigrants to their home countries (SourceMex, Feb. 22, 2017).

“A decrease in the flow of migrants could reduce de number of remittances,” Guatemala’s Finance Minister Julio Héctor Estrada told reporters on Jan. 29. Either that or “a brief increase by people who could send more money thinking that there will be more persecution” (SourceMex, Feb. 15, 2017).
The flow of migrants from the Northern Triangle is bound to continue despite the hardships along the perilous journey. No wall seems long or high or thick enough to stop the movement of people whose critical, usually life-threatening situation in their home countries pushes them out in search of safety and opportunity.

The land border shared by Mexico and the US hides underneath a network of tunnels, mostly dug for trafficking drugs, that are also used by coyotes, gavilanes, and polleros, as human traffickers are known in the region.

Most of those underground passages—many equipped with electricity and air conditioning, among other features—have been burrowed for hundreds of meters by the Sinaloa Cartel, the drug-trafficking organization headed by Mexican drug lord Joaquín “El Chapo” Guzmán, who was recently extradited to the US.

On Jan. 16, just four days before Trump’s inauguration, NBC quoted Ev Meade, director of the University of San Diego’s Trans-Border Institute, on the ineffectiveness of anti-immigrant border obstacles.

“There’s so much talk about the border wall,” he said, but the talk “misses all the other ways in which people and goods get into the US without permission ... the tunnels are one of them, [and] there’s also airports and seaport entries.”

Eight days after President Trump’s inauguration, UN agencies directly involved in watching out for migrants and refugees issued a joint statement expressing the hope that the new administration would maintain the country’s historic leadership in protecting people escaping from violence.

“The needs of refugees and migrants worldwide have never been greater, and the US resettlement program is one of the most important in the world,” the International Organization for Migration (IOM) and the office of the UN High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) said in the statement. “Resettlement places provided by every country are vital.

The organizations expressed their hope “that the US will continue its strong leadership role and long tradition of protecting those who are fleeing conflict and persecution.” They also stressed their continued commitment “to work with the US administration toward the goal we share to ensure safe and secure resettlement and immigration programs.”

A ‘win-win’ situation

The longstanding US policy to welcome migrants and refugees has created what the organizations described as a “win-win” situation. “It has saved the lives of some of the most vulnerable people in the world who have, in turn, enriched and strengthened their new societies,” the statement said. “We will continue to engage actively and constructively with the US government, as we have done for decades, to protect those who need it most, and to offer our support on asylum and migration matters.”

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for decades, to protect those who need it most, and to offer our support on asylum and migration
matters.”

Simultaneously, Mexico’s bishops spoke out regarding Trump’s anti-immigrant measures,
especially the border wall, which they described as inhuman.

“With deep sorrow, through the media, we received the news about the executive order the United
States of America President Donald Trump signed for the start of the construction of a border wall,”
Mexico’s Conference of Bishops (Conferencia del Episcopado Mexicano, CEM) said in a nine-
paragraph press release.

The Mexican bishops stated their commitment to “continue to support, closely and caringly, so
many of our brothers coming from Central and South America, on transit through our country
toward the United States.”

The bishops added, “We respectfully invite deep reflection on ways to provide security,
development, job creation, and other measures, needed and fair, without causing more harm than
that which the poorest and most vulnerable already suffer.”

The Mexican bishops made clear that they respect the US government’s “right to protect its borders
and its citizens,” adding, “We do not believe that rigorous and intensive law enforcement is the
means to reach its goals … on the contrary, these actions cause alarm and fear among immigrants
… We ask our authorities that in talks and in search of agreements with the United States, they
advocate for fair ways to safeguard dignity and respect for people, regardless of their nationality.”

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