

InterReligious Task Force on Central America
3606 Bridge Ave
Cleveland OH 44113
(216) 961-0003
www.IRTFcleveland.org

IRTF calls together the people of NE Ohio—and across the US—to walk in solidarity with the oppressed peoples of Central America and Colombia to achieve peace, justice, human rights, and systemic transformation through nonviolence.



POLICY PACKET
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Co-Coordiators

Chrissy Stonebraker-Martínez
Brian Stefan-Szittai

Volunteer Associates

Marc Alvarado
Line-Marie Eichhorst
Quin Galvin

Summer 2019 Interns

Carrie Bifulco (Laurel School)
Katherine Cassese (Laurel School)
Nick Leberer (Case Western Reserve University)
Maggie Malley (Allegheny College)
Sean Patterson (John Carroll University)
Kevin Poe (College of Wooster)
Caroline Ware (Ursuline College)
Ben Woodside (Cleveland Heights High School)

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1- Introduction

The InterReligious Task Force on Central America (IRTF)

The InterReligious Task Force on Central America (IRTF) was founded by people of faith and conscience after the assassinations of Archbishop Oscar Romero and four US church women (two from Cleveland) in El Salvador in 1980. IRTF calls together the people of Ohio and across the US to walk in solidarity with the oppressed peoples of Central America and Colombia to achieve peace, justice, human rights, and systemic transformation through nonviolence.

Immigration from Central America

Over the past several years, migration from Central America has been the focal point of significant media and public policy attention, as the number of unaccompanied children and families fleeing from entrenched violence and poverty has risen.

Civil wars, political instability, and economic hardship first drove significant numbers of Central Americans northward in the 1980's, which caused the population of that region in United States to more than triple. Despite the end of political conflicts in the early 1990s, additional migration was driven by family unification, natural disasters, and persistent political and economic volatility, with many individuals entering the U.S. without documentation. In 2018, approximately 3.4 million Central Americans resided in the United States, representing about 8% of the 44.5 million U.S. immigrants. Eighty-seven percent of Central Americans in the United States come from the region known as the Northern Triangle, formed by El Salvador, Guatemala, and Honduras. El Salvador is a leader in immigrant origin with 1.4 million immigrants in the United States. Guatemala follows with 815,000, followed by Honduras with 623,000.

The Northern Triangle suffers from poor political and socioeconomic conditions, including widespread gang violence and some of the world's highest homicide rates. Since 2011, a growing number of unaccompanied alien children (UACs) and families from Central America, largely from the Northern Triangle, have arrived at the U.S.-Mexico border, due to these tensions.

Migrants from the Northern Triangle are escaping long entrenched systems of violence. Much of that violence is the legacy of the armed conflicts of the 1980s, fueled by US foreign and military policies. Central Americans struggle to survive day in and day out against many forces of violence: the violence waged by US-sponsored militaries and militarized police forces, the violence of organized crime, gender-based violence, and the violence of incredibly unjust economic systems. These forms of structural violence place massive pressures on them, pushing them to make the very difficult decision to migrate north in order to feed themselves and their families. They should be seen as refugees and treated with mercy and compassion. Their right to apply for political asylum, without the threat of detention, should be upheld.

Many are seeking political asylum. In recent years, individuals from the Northern Triangle accounted for nearly one third of all individual asylum recipients; El Salvador, Guatemala, and Honduras claimed three of the top four countries of origin among affirmative asylum allocations.

The numbers of Central American migrants reaching the U.S. southern border are continuing to decrease; this is largely due to increased immigration enforcement in Mexico, which is primarily funded and equipped by the United States. Parts of the southern states of Chiapas, Oaxaca, and Tabasco now

resemble border communities of Arizona and South Texas, with an influx of federal agents, militarized highway checkpoints, and raids on hotels frequented by migrants. The militarized immigration enforcement strategy is providing the desired effect for the United States: Mexico is now detaining and deporting more Central American migrants than the U.S. Border Patrol.

- Zong, Jie, et al. "Frequently Requested Statistics on Immigrants and Immigration in the United States." *Migrationpolicy.org*, Migration Policy Institute, 14 Mar. 2019, www.migrationpolicy.org/article/frequently-requested-statistics-immigrants-and-immigration-united-states
- Linthicum, Kate. More Central Americans are giving up on the U.S. and looking instead to a Mexican dream. Los Angeles Times, 2016. <http://www.latimes.com/sdhoy-more-central-americans-are-giving-up-on-the...>
- Congressional Research Service, U.S. Strategy for Engagement in Central America: Policy Issues for Congress, 8 January, 2019. <https://fas.org/sgp/crs/row/R44812.pdf>
- US Customs and Border Protection, U.S. Border Patrol Southwest Border Apprehensions by Sector, 11 July 2018. <https://www.cbp.gov/newsroom/stats/usbp-sw-border-apprehensions>
- "Central American Immigrant Population Increased Nearly 28-Fold since 1970." *CIS.org*, Center for Immigration Studies, 1 Nov. 2018. cis.org/Report/Central-American-Immigrant-Population-Increased-Nearly-28Fold-1970.
- Mosaad, Nadwa, and Ryan Baugh. *Annual Flow Report: Refugees and Asylees: 2016*. DHS Office of Immigration Statistics, 2018, *Annual Flow Report: Refugees and Asylees: 2016*, www.uscis.gov/sites/default/files/DHS_2016_Refugee_and_Asylee_Report.pdf.

Rapid Response Network: Protecting Democratic Principles and Civilian Safety

Democratic liberty and the right to agency in one's life are human rights on which the United States places a great deal of importance. Such democratic pursuits as public assembly, press, speech, and movement should be officially protected by our neighbors and allies. In Central America and Colombia, however, there is a startling number of deaths and disappearances of social leaders, environmental defenders, political organizers, human rights defenders, and many more. Too often, state law enforcement and military forces are responsible for, or complicit in, human rights crimes. Private corporations are also to blame.

IRTF volunteers on our Rapid Response Network (RRN) team write six letters each month to government officials in Latin America in response to human rights crimes (with copies to officials in the U.S. and the O.A.S.) The purpose of these letters is to: protect people living under threat, demand investigations into human rights crimes, and bring human rights criminals to justice. For those who have been assassinated, these letters serve to acknowledge and honor those who have died at the hands of human rights abusers and to ensure that their deaths are not forgotten nor left unpenalized. Our 200 RRN members sign their names to these crucial letters to bring human rights crimes to light and human rights criminals to justice.

2- Keep Families Together

We need more humane immigration policies. We must not be punitive in our treatment of people crossing the border into the U.S. and away from a life of instability, insecurity, and fear of bodily harm. When we criminalize migrants and detain them, we separate family members from each other. When we deport people who have made the United States their home, we tear families apart: separating mothers and fathers from their children, denying families their primary means of income, and disrupting the lives of children, causing psychological distress. When we deport people, we banish human beings to places which they once feared so strongly that they risked their personal safety in an attempt for something better.

Permanent Legal Status for DREAMers

DACA-eligible (Deferred Action for Childhood Arrivals) young people must be given a pathway to citizenship to end the uncertainty of their futures. In 2012, President Obama signed an Executive Order implementing DACA, protecting 1 million young people across the country and thousands in Ohio. In September 2017, President Trump canceled the DACA program, telling Congress it was their responsibility to make DACA a permanent law.

DACA recipients are valuable members of our communities; students, teachers, service members, business owners, and workers. In fact, the 9,000 DACA recipients in Ohio contribute over \$12 million in local and state taxes. Deporting Dreamers would have a devastating effect on the economy while ripping families apart across the state.

“Summary of Dream and Promise Act of 2019 (H.R. 6).” *National Immigration Law Center*, 28 Mar. 2019, www.nilc.org/issues/immigration-reform-and-executive-actions/summary-of-dream-and-promise-act-of-2019/.

Permanent Legal Status for TPS-holders

Adults with TPS (Temporary Protected Status) have lived, worked, and raised their US-born children here for the past 15-20 years. They must be recognized as de facto legal residents and be provided a pathway to citizenship. The inclusion of TPS holders in U.S. society is beneficial not only to the United States economy but also to the economies of the TPS holder’s country of origin. TPS holders support their families and communities back home by sending regular remittances; this helps to stifle the need for additional immigration northward.

TPS must be included as part of an effective and comprehensive response to the humanitarian crisis in the Northern Triangle. Individuals originating from El Salvador, Nicaragua, and Honduras make up over 80% of all TPS holders. A new designation would expand TPS to Guatemala, and provide a much-needed re-designation to the TPS status of El Salvador and Honduras, which are set to expire soon. Designating the Northern Triangle for TPS is both necessary and fully within the existing authority of the Secretary of Homeland Security.

Temporary Protected Status: Overview and Current Issues. Congressional Research Service, 2019, *Temporary Protected Status: Overview and Current Issues*, fas.org/sgp/crs/homesecc/RS20844.pdf.

*Although TPS has not been renewed by DHS, removal proceedings (i.e., deportation) have been put on hold because of court rulings. On October 3, 2018, Judge Edward Chen of the Northern District of California issued a preliminary injunction to halt any deportation proceedings—temporarily. The ruling holds the status quo in place until the courts have issued a final ruling in the case *Ramos v. Nielsen*, on whether the Trump administration violated the law when it ended TPS for these countries. On Feb 28 2019, DHS extended TPS for people from 4 countries: Sudan, El Salvador, Haiti, and Nicaragua. This is only temporary relief from deportation. Legislation to make the legal status of TPS holders permanent is still needed

Ending Family Separation and Detention

There has been an increase in the number of family units coming into the U.S., often mothers with their small children. These families should not be detained or separated.

In fiscal year 2018, U.S. Customs and Border Protection intercepted 58,660 unaccompanied children and 161,113 “Family Units” (denoting individuals apprehended with a family member) arriving at the U.S.-Mexico border. Of those apprehended, 82% of UACs (unaccompanied minors) and 95% of all family units originated from a Northern Triangle country. Although family units arrive together, they

certainly do not remain together, as it is common practice to arrest and detain families in separate areas in one center or even in separate facilities altogether, a practice which had the support of former Department of Homeland Security Secretary Kirstjen Nielsen.

“Southwest Border Migration FY2018.” *Southwest Border Migration FY2018 / U.S. Customs and Border Protection*, 9 Nov. 2018, www.cbp.gov/newsroom/stats/sw-border-migration/fy-2018.

“Reviewing the Administration’s Unaccompanied Children Program.” *CIS.org*, Center for Immigration Studies, 27 Feb. 2019, cis.org/Testimony/Reviewing-Administrations-Unaccompanied-Children-Program.

Schultz, Marisa. “Homeland Security Chief Defends Separating Families at Border.” *New York Post*, New York Post, 18 June 2018, nypost.com/2018/06/18/homeland-security-chief-defends-separating-families-at-border/.

We Ask U.S. Policymakers to:

1. Support introduction and passage in the Senate of a companion measure to **HR 6 - American Dream and Promise Act of 2019**

This bill provides conditional permanent resident (CPR) status and a roadmap to lawful permanent resident (LPR) status and, eventually, U.S. citizenship for a) immigrant youth (Title I) and b) current or prospective TPS or DED holders (Title II). HR6 would allow individuals who meet various criteria to apply for LPR status and eventually for U.S. citizenship.

The bill was passed in the House on June 4, 2019. **The IRTF is asking both US senators from Ohio to urge Senate leadership to allow introduction of and debate on a companion measure to HR 6, and would ask that both US Senators from Ohio co-sponsor such a bill.**

2. **Become a co-sponsor of HR 1069 - Shut Down Child Prison Camps Act**

The bill prohibits the Department of Health and Human Services from operating unlicensed temporary emergency shelters for unaccompanied alien children, including the previously operational shelter in Tornillo, Texas and the shelter in Homestead, Florida.

The bill was introduced on February 7 by Rep. Chu, Judy [D-CA-27] and has been co-sponsored by 15 House members. As of July 25 there are three co-sponsors from Ohio, Beatty [OH-3], Kaptur [OH-9], Ryan [OH-13]. **The IRTF is asking all US representatives from Ohio to co-sponsor.**

3. **Become a co-sponsor of S. 388 – Families, Not Facilities**

This bill reduces the ability of U.S. Immigration and Customs Enforcement to engage in inappropriate civil immigration enforcement actions that harm unaccompanied alien children and to ensure the safety and welfare of unaccompanied alien children.

The bill was introduced to the senate and was referred to the Judiciary Committee on February 7 by Sen Harris, Kemala D. [D-CA] and has been co-sponsored by 11 Senators, none of which are from Ohio. **The IRTF is asking both US Senators from Ohio to co-sponsor.**

4. **Renew*** TPS for designated countries

1. Nicaragua: TPS was scheduled to terminate Jan 5 2019
2. El Salvador: TPS was scheduled to terminate September 9, 2019
3. Honduras: TPS is scheduled to terminate January 5, 2020

5. **Extend and expand** TPS beyond regions affected by natural disaster to designated countries experiencing conditions of extreme entrenched violence and human rights violations: El Salvador, Guatemala, Honduras.

3- Better Use of Immigration Enforcement Dollars

There are a finite number of budget-allocated dollars that go into the enforcement of immigration policy. It is proven that some policy enforcement strategies are more effective and efficient than others.

Reinstatement of Discretion in Immigration Enforcement and Prosecution

In its interior (non-border) immigration enforcement, ICE should only pursue noncitizens who have been convicted of serious violent crimes; others should be low priority. ICE should not be targeting noncitizens who have no serious criminal record. Those immigrants should be allowed to continue living, working, and raising their children until broader immigration changes are put in place.

By ICE's own reports, the majority of incarcerated individuals in ICE detention facilities pose absolutely no threat to the community. In the first month of 2018, 71% of detainees were subject to mandatory detention, "51 percent of which were marked as 'non-criminal,' and 51 percent also were classified as posing 'no threat.' Twenty-three percent were classified as the lowest 'Level 1,' having been charged with low-level and nonviolent criminal convictions. Only 15 percent were classified at the highest threat level."

Tidwell Cullen, Tara. "ICE Released Its Most Comprehensive Immigration Detention Data Yet. It's Alarming." *National Immigrant Justice Center*, 13 Mar. 2018, immigrantjustice.org/staff/blog/ice-released-its-most-comprehensive-immigration-detention-data-yet.

Decrease Detention Beds

In November 2017, ICE reported that its total average daily population for FY 2018 was 39,322 people. Furthermore, according to ICE's FY 2018 budget, on average it costs \$133.99 a day to maintain one adult detention bed; however, immigration groups have pegged the number closer to \$200 a day per person, meaning that each day the detention of innocent people, including children, totals up to \$7,864,440.

With more than 40,000 detention beds funded per day, ICE has incentive to apprehend more immigrants and jail them. This increases the incentive to pick up anyone who is undocumented, rather than prioritize noncitizens who may pose a risk to public safety (i.e., violent criminal offenders). Meanwhile, taxpayer dollars go to profit private prison security and infrastructure companies.

In Ohio, ICE has contracts with four county jails (Butler, Geauga, Morrow, and Seneca) and a contract with the private prison NorthEast Ohio Correctional Center (NEOCC), owned by CORE Civic.

Tidwell Cullen, Tara. "ICE Released Its Most Comprehensive Immigration Detention Data Yet. It's Alarming." *National Immigrant Justice Center*, 13 Mar. 2018, immigrantjustice.org/staff/blog/ice-released-its-most-comprehensive-immigration-detention-data-yet.

Urbi, Jaden. "This Is How Much It Costs to Detain an Immigrant in the US." *CNBC*, CNBC, 21 June 2018, 6:58 PM, www.cnbc.com/2018/06/20/cost-us-immigrant-detention-trump-zero-tolerance-tents-cages.html.

Stop Building Border Barriers

With hundreds of miles of border fencing constructed since the 1990s, thousands of migrants have lost their lives trying to circumvent those barriers. The barriers force them to go into more remote desert areas where they face increased risk of death due to the harsh elements, lack of water, and lack of humanitarian assistance. More fences equals more deaths.

The vast majority of individuals who are in this country in an undocumented status (i.e. illegally) entered through proper legal channels but then overstayed their visas. This demographic amounts to nearly 70% of all undocumented immigration but it is rarely talked about, particularly by those who support the funding of a hard southern border. In FY 2017, the number of individuals that had been apprehended at the southern border was less than a third of all immigration violation cases.

McMinn, Sean, and Renee Klahr. "Where Does Illegal Immigration Mostly Occur? Here's What The Data Tell Us." *NPR*, NPR, 10 Jan. 2019, 4:58 PM, www.npr.org/2019/01/10/683662691/where-does-illegal-immigration-mostly-occur-heres-what-the-data-tell-us.

Rethink Border Security

Border security at all costs is a deadly mindset. At the Nogales, AZ, steel fence in 2012, U.S. Border Patrol Agent Lonnie Swartz shot 16-year-old José Antonio Elena Rodríguez ten times through the steel slats. Swartz claimed he was under threat by the Mexican teenager who, standing 50 feet away from the steel fence on the Mexico side, was throwing rocks. In 2018, a migrant from Guatemala, 20-year-old Claudia Patricia Gómez Gonzáles, was shot in the head and killed by a Border Patrol agent in Rio Bravo, TX, after she crossed into the US.

Chavez, Nicole. "Border Patrol Agent Acquitted in Fatal Shooting of Mexican Teen." *CNN*, Cable News Network, 22 Nov. 2018, www.cnn.com/2018/11/22/us/border-patrol-agent-acquitted-mexican-teen-killing/index.html.

Cut the budgets for ICE and USCBP

Having more enforcement agents on the ground means more homes and workplaces are raided, more families are torn apart, and more people are jailed like criminals for the nonviolent offense of residing here in an undocumented status. (As mentioned above: Most of the undocumented immigrant population in the US did not cross a border illegally; most entered legally with tourist or student visas and have overstayed their visas.)

ICE spent an average of \$10,854 per deportee during FY 2017, according to ICE spokeswoman Yasmeen Pitts O'Keefe. "This includes all costs necessary to identify, apprehend, detain, process through immigration court, and remove an alien." From FY 2017 to 2018, there was a rise in deportation arrests, mostly of non-criminals. While arrests of criminals jumped 14 percent to 25,626 (from 22,484), arrests of non-criminals nearly tripled to 13,548 (from 4,918).

According to a July 15 exposee of Customs and Border Patrol in *Politico* magazine "...scandals followed months of worrisome headlines concerning CBP: At least 12 migrants have died in the agency's custody since September, and its agents have been accused of everything from sexual abuse of migrant children, to trafficking firearms, to running down a border crosser with a truck. One Border Patrol agent was arrested and charged with being a serial killer."

Other examples of scandal and corruption within CBP include:

"CBP recruited that new army by lowering its hiring standards—already the lowest among top federal law enforcement agencies—and shoveling agents through the academy and into the field before even completing background checks."

“Corruption among CBP’s ranks got so bad that in Obama’s first year, CBP and DHS leadership ordered the agency to change its definition of “corruption” to downplay the number of total incidents; sexually assaulting detainees was no longer considered “corruption” worthy of reporting to Congress.”

“The situation continued to deteriorate as the Obama administration went on. A CATO Institute study found that from 2006 to 2016, CBP and the Border Patrol’s misconduct and disciplinary infractions outstripped all other federal law enforcement. **Border Patrol agents were six times as likely as FBI agents to be fired for disciplinary infractions or poor performance and “12.9 times as likely as Secret Service agents.”** Moreover, CATO found “it is virtually impossible to assess the extent of corruption or misconduct in U.S. Customs and Border Protection ... because most publicly available information is incomplete or inconsistent.” As I totaled up in 2014, there were 2,170 misconduct arrests of CBP officers and agents—ranging from corruption to domestic violence from 2005 through 2012—meaning that **one CBP officer or agent was arrested every single day for seven years.”**

Carranza, Rafael. “How Much Does It Cost to Deport Someone?” *USA Today*, Gannett Satellite Information Network, 28 Apr. 2017, www.usatoday.com/story/news/nation-now/2017/04/28/deportation-costs-immigration/307548001/.

“Deportation Officers Are Increasingly Arresting People with No Crime Records.” *NBCNews.com*, Associated Press, 26 Feb. 2018, 10:22 AM, www.nbcnews.com/news/latino/us-deportations-targeting-more-people-no-crime-records-n851196.

Graff, Garrett. “The Border Patrol Hits a Breaking Point” *Politico Magazine*, POLITICO LLC, 15 Jul. 2019, <https://www.politico.com/magazine/story/2019/07/15/border-patrol-trump-administration-227357>

We Ask U.S. Policymakers to:

1. **End detention** and block the further expansion of detention centers, such as the construction of new detention centers or increased contracts with the private prison industry.
2. **Reject budgets** that allocate funding for a hard U.S.-Mexico border.
3. **Reject budgets** that allocate funding for population surveillance by ICE and USCBP with the intention of identifying, apprehending, and detaining non-criminal immigrants.
4. **Oppose budget** increases for apprehension, detention, and deportation.
5. At the local level, send staff to **accompany undocumented people** to their required check-ins at ICE offices.
6. **Become a co-sponsor of HR 1630/S 716 – Guatemala Rule of Law Accountability Act**
This bill imposes sanctions under the Global Magnitsky Human Rights Accountability Act to combat corruption, money laundering, and impunity in Guatemala, and for other purposes. IRTF believes that by combating corruption at the state level, this will support popular well being in Guatemala and begin to combat some of the causes of mass migration to the southern border, thus conserving immigration enforcement dollars.
On March 7, 2019, this bill was introduced by Rep. Torres, Norma J. [D-CA-35] to the House and was referred to the House Committee on Foreign Affairs, the House Judicial Committee, as well as the House Judiciary Subcommittee on Immigration and Citizenship. This bill has been co-sponsored by 31 Representatives including one Representative from Ohio, Kaptur [OH-9]. **The IRTF is asking all US representatives from Ohio to co-sponsor.**
On March 7, 2019, this bill was introduced by Sen. Cardin, Benjamin L. [D-MD] to the Senate as well as the Senate Committee on Foreign Relations. This bill has 8 co-sponsors, none of which are from Ohio. **The IRTF is asking both US senators from Ohio to co-sponsor.**

4- Protect Civilians, Social Leaders, and Military and Law Enforcement Personnel

Between FY 2018 and FY 2019, the amount of aid being allocated for Latin American security assistance increased by 24% to nearly 1.5 billion dollars. However, despite the overwhelming challenges of poverty in these countries, humanitarian and development aid is facing a decrease of 4% while military and police aid is increasing by an astounding 70%.

“Latin America and the Caribbean.” Security Assistance Monitor, Center for International Policy, [securityassistance.org/latin-america-and-caribbean](https://www.securityassistance.org/latin-america-and-caribbean).

Security Assistance through WHINSEC

Ohioans became aware of WHINSEC, formerly known as the School of the Americas (SOA), in the 1990s. Through a FOIA request (Freedom of Information Act), it was learned that soldiers trained by the US at the SOA were responsible for the rape and murder of the four US church women on December 2, 1980 in El Salvador. Two of those women--Jean Donovan and Ursuline Sister Dorothy Kazel-- were part of the mission team of the Cleveland Catholic Diocese. For the past 20 years, Ohioans have been angered that this combat training school for Latin American soldiers is still in operation at Fort Benning, Georgia.

Since 1946, the SOA has trained more than 64,000 Latin American soldiers and police in counterinsurgency techniques, psychological warfare, military intelligence, and interrogation tactics. Many who were trained at the SOA/WHINSEC have committed human rights abuses against civilian populations. They have tortured, raped, assassinated, and massacred hundreds and thousands of Latin Americans.

WHINSEC is an expensive government sanctioned and funded institute, costing U.S. taxpayers approximately \$18 million annually. This is incredibly problematic as there are very few oversight and accountability measures in place for WHINSEC, prohibiting the implementation of tracking mechanisms of graduates and preventing any tracking by independent research by human rights groups as well.

Graduates of WHINSEC include current head of Honduran Armed Forces, Carlos Antonio Cuéllar, four of the six army generals tied to the 2009 Honduran Coup, and two of the eight arrested in the 2016 murder of environmental and indigenous rights defender Berta Cáceres. In 2017, WHINSEC trained 108 Honduran soldiers and 566 Colombian soldiers.

Security Assistance to the Northern Triangle*

The U.S. motivation for security and humanitarian assistance to Central America comes from a desire to stem the flow of migrants that are fleeing their home countries, especially Northern Triangle countries (El Salvador, Guatemala, Honduras). Many of the individuals and families who migrate north are escaping from incredibly high rates of poverty, homicide (including femicide), and gang violence. Because of economic instability and domination by foreign (including US) tourism and agribusiness corporations, there is also a large trend toward organized crime and drug trade.

The U.S. sends between \$500 million and \$750 million to El Salvador, Guatemala, and Honduras to support programs that, according to the State Department, are designated to combat drug and human trafficking, combat gang violence, and promote good governance, the rule of law and anticorruption. While these are important pursuits, the reality on the ground finds that many law-abiding citizens are being negatively impacted. With more police, military, and joint police-military forces on the ground,

governments mobilize them to interrupt freedom of assembly and expression. Marches and rallies are stopped with militarized weaponry. Pro-democracy leaders, labor organizers, and environmental defenders are injured, sometimes killed. Leaders of social movements are unjustly arrested and prosecuted.

This emphasis on security ignores the fact that corruption and impunity remain high in Northern Triangle countries; supporting them with security assistance does not ensure safety for the people.

Security assistance plans such as the Alliance for Prosperity Plan are misguided in their attempts to effectively stem migration; they address security initiatives rather than the root causes of migration. The U.S. must recognize our role in creating poor conditions in Central American countries and take actions to rectify peace and stability rather than perpetuate violence and insecurity. This is explained by Laura Carlsen, Director of the Center for International Policy America's Program: "this [plan] creates a vicious but lucrative circle of investment-displacement-repression, as populations are forced from their lands and then criminalized as migrants, justifying enormous security contracts."

Lubold, Gordon. "Trump Officials Try to Defend Plan to Cut Aid to Three Central American Nations." *The Wall Street Journal*, Dow Jones & Company, 31 Mar. 2019, www.wsj.com/articles/trump-officials-try-to-defend-plan-to-cut-aid-to-three-central-american-nations-11554073841.

Carlsen, Laura. "'Biden Plan' for Central America Continues the Crackdown on Kids." *Truthout*, Truthout, 3 Apr. 2015, truthout.org/articles/biden-plan-for-central-america-continues-the-crackdown-on-kids/.

*This section excludes comment on the impact of the recent proclamation by President Donald Trump that his administration will cut off all aid to the Northern Triangle.

HR 1945 – Berta Cáceres Human Rights in Honduras Act

On March 2, 2016, the world-renowned Honduran indigenous leader and recipient of the Goldman Environmental Prize, Berta Cáceres, was assassinated in her home. Cáceres was a longtime organizer and human rights defender, who had most recently been leading the resistance against construction of the Agua Zarca Dam, an internationally funded hydroelectric dam to be built on the Gualcarque River, an ancestral waterway sacred to the indigenous Lenca people. Her prominent status and precautionary measures from the Inter-American Commission for Human Rights were not enough to shield her from the militarized Honduran state. Within four months of her assassination, two other prominent members of her organization COPINH were also murdered. Berta's murder is only one of many in a systematic pattern of impunity, corruption, and human rights violations.

Since President Zelaya was forced from office in the June 2009 coup d'état, violence in Honduras has skyrocketed. Considered one of the most dangerous countries in the world, the general climate of violence has been used by the government to repress human rights defenders. In January 2017, the London-based watchdog group Global Witness reported: "since 2010, there have been more than 120 documented cases of activists murdered for standing up to the government and companies that grab land and destroy the environment."

Honduran security forces are highly involved in these cases. For example, the Honduran Military Police were accused of involvement in at least 9 killings, more than 20 cases of torture, and about 30 cases of illegal arrests between 2012 and 2014. Due to widespread impunity, more than 90% of abuse and killings go unsolved. More than 100 peasant land rights defenders have been recognized by the Inter-

American Commission on Human Rights as needing special protective measures because their lives are in danger. Many have already been killed because of the Honduran government's failure to protect them.

Berta Cáceres' case is just one of numerous cases in which police, military and former public security forces are in the service of private companies seeking to undermine and suppress legitimate social protest related to their companies' operations.

The Berta Cáceres Act states that "the Honduran police are widely established to be deeply corrupt and to commit human rights abuses, including torture, rape, illegal detention, and murder, with impunity."

The bill was reintroduced on March 28, 2019 by Rep. Johnson, Henry C. "Hank," Jr. [D-GA-4] and was subsequently introduced to the House Foreign Affairs Committee and the Financial Services Committee. The bill currently has 65 cosponsors in the House of Representatives. The IRTF is asking all US representatives from Ohio to co-sponsor; as of July 25, the only Ohio co-sponsors are Rep. Marcy Kaptur [OH-9] and Rep. Tim Ryan [OH-13].

Security Assistance to Colombia

For more than half a century, Colombia has experienced fighting between government forces, rebel (guerilla) groups, paramilitary groups, and criminal organizations. These conflicts have resulted in human rights abuses such as harassment, threats, physical and sexual assaults, kidnappings, torture, and killings of countless Colombian civilians, indigenous communities, and human rights defenders.

In fiscal year 2019 the U.S. has requested \$265,400,000 in total aid to Colombia, of which \$165,400,000 is allocated for military and police aid. As billions of U.S. tax dollars have been used to fund militarization in Colombia, these policies have continuously failed to defeat the armed insurgencies and other conflicts and have lead to systematic human rights abuses.

Furthermore, since the signing of the peace accords between the Colombian government and the FARC in 2016, there has been increased violence in many areas of Colombia. The number of reported threats to individual community leaders, many of them Afro-Colombian and indigenous, increased almost 175 percent, from 270 in 2017 to 740 in 2018. Moreover, 500 threats were made against social organizations last year alone. According to the Colombian Ombudsman's Office, 126 social leaders were murdered in 2017 and 178 in 2018, marking a 27 percent increase. In January 2019 alone, 15 were killed.

We must stop militarized aid and fully commit to a sustainable peace process for all Colombians. It is time for the United States to fully support a continued diplomatic peace process, end militarization, and ensure human rights protections.

Isacson, Adam. "Snapshot of U.S. Aid to Colombia Right Now." *Adam Isacson*, 26 Aug. 2018, adamisacson.com/snapshot-of-u-s-aid-to-colombia-right-now/.

Fernández Aponte, Andrea. "Peace Accord Implementation in Colombia: Urgent Need to Adhere to the Spirit of the Accords." *Latin America Working Group*, 12 Mar. 2019, www.lawg.org/peace-accord-implementation-in-colombia-urgent-need-to-adhere-to-the-spirit-of-the-accords/.

Security Assistance to Mexico

For FY 2019 the U.S. has allocated \$136,800,000 for Mexican military assistance and only \$20,250,000 for humanitarian and development aid. The military assistance will go toward the current

trend of militarization of the Mexican public security forces. President López Obrador's National Plan for Peace and Security, presented just weeks before he took office on December 1, proposes creating a National Guard made up of Military Police (drawn from the Army and Navy) and Federal Police agents, primarily under the control and supervision of the Ministry of Defense (*Secretaría de la Defensa Nacional*, SEDENA).

This poses a deep threat to human rights and liberties as the training of military forces differs greatly from that of civilian police forces. As opposed to the ways in which police forces are expected to utilize the trust and cooperation of the people in conflict situations, soldiers are trained to use force to overwhelm an enemy in combat situations, making them unfit to be in close contact with civilians. Furthermore, the creation of a militarized National Guard does not address weak accountability mechanisms for human rights violations and crimes committed by members of the military. Military troops and police continue to be implicated in torture, extrajudicial killings, and enforced disappearances throughout Mexico.

"Mexico." *Security Assistance Monitor*, Center for International Policy, securityassistance.org/data/program/military/Mexico/.
Meyer, Maureen. "Proposed Mexico National Guard Puts Human Rights at Risk." *WOLA*, Washington Office on Latin America, 10 Jan. 2019, www.wola.org/analysis/mexico-national-guard-military-abuses/.

We Ask U.S. Policymakers to:

1. **Become a co-sponsor of H.R. 1945 The Berta Cáceres Human Rights in Honduras Act** which suspends and restricts (1) monetary and military assistance to Honduran police and security forces and (2) loans from multilateral development banks, until:
 - a. legal justice in Honduras is obtained for Berta Cáceres and other human rights defenders;
 - b. investigating and prosecuting members of military and police forces who are credibly found to have violated human rights and that such violations have ceased;
 - c. follow the Honduran Constitution and ensure that all domestic police functions are responsible to civilian authority and separated from the command and control of the Armed Forces of Honduras;
 - d. establishing that the government protects the rights of trade unionists; journalists; human rights defenders; indigenous; Afro-Indigenous, small-farmer, and LGBT activists; critics of the government; and other civil society activists to operate without interference; and
 - e. effective steps are taken to fully establish the rule of law and to guarantee a judicial system that is capable of investigating, prosecuting, and bringing to justice members of the police and military who have committed human rights abuses.

This act states that "the Honduran police are widely established to be deeply corrupt and to commit human rights abuses, including torture, rape, illegal detention, and murder, with impunity."

The bill was reintroduced on March 28, 2019 by Rep. Johnson, Henry C. "Hank," Jr. [D-GA-4] and was subsequently introduced to the House Foreign Affairs Committee and the Financial Services Committee. The bill currently has 65 cosponsors in the House of Representatives. **IRTF is asking all US representatives from Ohio to co-sponsor;** as of July 25, the only Ohio co-sponsors are Rep Marcy Kaptur [OH-9] and Rep Tim Ryan [OH-13].

2. **Cut funding for WHINSEC.**

3. Support legislation to **suspend training at WHINSEC** until an investigation of human rights abuses committed by police and soldier graduates is conducted.
4. Support legislation **requiring the disclosure of enrollees at WHINSEC** to establish accountability for their human rights records.
5. **Demand transparency and cut U.S. funding for the Central American Regional Security Initiative (CARSI).**

Colombia

6. **End all U.S. military aid to Colombia.** As Colombia continues towards peace, it's time to reorient aid away from militarization and instead support civil society proposals for an equal, inclusive society.
7. **Support land restitution and the safe return home for all displaced Colombians.** As part of a full implementation of Colombia's Victims and Land Restitution Law, U.S. assistance to Colombia should provide support for those who have fled from violence for a safe and sustainable return to their homes and their land.
8. In drug eradication programs, **end all forms of aerial fumigation and provide viable economic alternatives to farmers who currently grow coca.** The United States needs to take a more holistic approach to address drug abuse as a public health issue at home while reexamining the war on drugs and its strategy of using environmentally harmful and militarized solutions.

Mexico

9. **Cut military assistance to Mexico.**
10. **Cut militarized immigration enforcement in Mexico.**
11. **Increase the amount of aid subject to Mexico meeting human rights conditions,** including
 - a. the prosecution of human rights violators in civilian courts
 - b. the enforcement of prohibitions against torture
 - c. searching for victims of enforced disappearances and prosecuting those responsible

5- Trump Declares a Cut of Aid Appropriations to Central America

On Friday March 29, 2019, President Donald Trump announced that he will be cutting millions of dollars in aid to El Salvador, Guatemala, and Honduras (Northern Triangle). This announcement was abrupt. Just a few months prior (December 2018) his administration pledged to contribute "\$5.8 billion to development in Central America and increasing public and private investment in Mexico via OPIC [Overseas Private Investment Corporation] by \$4.8 billion."

Some of the aid in question has been put toward development and humanitarian assistance. Much of the aid, however, goes to "security assistance," i.e., police, military, and special police-military task forces ostensibly to interdict illicit drugs and break up organized crime. The countries of the Northern Triangle (El Salvador, Guatemala, Honduras) are experiencing a mass exodus of emigrants due to a number of factors including, but not limited to, gang violence. These countries are experiencing extreme violence by police and military, paramilitaries, gender-based violence, and economic violence.

The decision to cut aid was prompted by the president's opinion that the Northern Triangle countries are not doing their fair share to stem the sizable caravans of migrants traveling northward towards Mexico and the United States. This point in and of itself has been disputed passionately. When the U.S. committed \$420 million to the Northern Triangle countries in Fiscal Year 2017, the governments of these countries committed more than ten times that amount – \$5.4 billion of their own resources – to support investments in their own people and to strengthen public safety.

Furthermore, there are some serious holes in the argument that cutting off aid to Central American countries will fix the problem of illegal immigration to the United States; in fact, many argue that this action will have the opposite effect on migrant numbers. “Immigration analysts said the proposed cuts are likely to backfire and risk fostering the root causes of migration such as grinding poverty and widespread violence, as well as lawlessness that feeds government corruption and extortion by criminal organizations.”

“Aid cuts would be devastating to the region and would only foster the same instability that is making people flee in the first place. Cuts would waste U.S. taxpayer dollars that have already been invested and programs already set in motion that address violence, corruption and impunity, institutional weakness, and lack of economic opportunity across Central America.”

-Vicki Gass, Oxfam America Senior Policy Advisor for Central America and Mexico

“Congressional aides said the administration told them it would reallocate \$370 million in aid to Central America that lawmakers had approved for fiscal 2018, and suspend an additional \$180 million Congress had approved for fiscal 2017.”

Esposito, Anthony. “U.S. Pledges Billions in Aid to Develop Central America, Curb...” *Reuters*, Thomson Reuters, 19 Dec. 2018, www.reuters.com/article/us-usa-immigration-mexico/us-pledges-billions-in-aid-to-develop-central-america-curb-migration-idUSKBN1OH23X. “

Wroughton, Lesley, and Zengerle, Patricia. “As promised, Trump slashes aid to Central America over migrants” *Reuters*, Thomson Reuters, 17 Jun. 2019, <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-usa-immigration-trump/as-promised-trump-slashes-aid-to-central-america-over-migrants-idUSKCN1TI2C7>

“Oxfam Reaction to Proposed Aid Cuts to Central America.” *Oxfam*, Oxfam America Inc., 30 Mar. 2019, www.oxfamamerica.org/press/oxfam-reaction-proposed-aid-cuts-central-america/.

“Central America and U.S. Assistance.” *USGLC*, U.S. Global Leadership Coalition, Apr. 2019, www.usglc.org/faq-violence-migration-and-u-s-assistance-to-central-america/.

Lubold, Gordon, and Anthony Harrup. “Trump Officials Try to Defend Plan to Cut Aid to Three Central American Nations.” *WSJ*, Wall Street Journal, 31 Mar. 2019, org.salsalabs.com/dia/track.jsp?v=2&c=L3BSOA3n1%2FWuS2K8%2FKGV2WDwhIPi8bMH.

Malkin, Elisabeth. “Trump Turns U.S. Policy in Central America on Its Head.” *The New York Times*, The New York Times, 31 Mar. 2019, www.nytimes.com/2019/03/30/world/americas/trump-turns-us-policy-in-central-america-on-its-head.html.

We Ask U.S. Policymakers to:

1. **Reject a budget that would cut essential development and humanitarian aid** to Central America, specifically to Northern Triangle countries, El Salvador, Guatemala, and Honduras.
2. **Call instead for a budget that cuts military and security aid to Central America**, specifically to Northern Triangle countries, El Salvador, Guatemala, and Honduras.

6- Rapid Response Network

Please see below brief descriptions of the human rights cases we've responded to so far this year through our Rapid Response Network (RRN). These letters are written by our Rapid Response team of volunteers, signed by 190 people who reside across most congressional districts in Ohio, and are sent to government officials in the countries listed below. Copies are also sent to the appropriate rapporteurs at the Inter-American Commission on Human Rights.

These letters to heads of state (or other top officials) in Colombia, El Salvador, Guatemala, Honduras, Mexico, and Nicaragua urge their swift action in response to human rights abuses occurring in their countries.

To read the letters, see <https://www.irtfcleveland.org/content/rm> .

Jan 11, 2019

COLOMBIA

attempted assassination of Awa indigenous governor Alejandro Pascal Pai and his wife on December 29 in a remote area of Nariño Department, near the border of Ecuador.

Jan 12, 2019

COLOMBIA

the **assassinations of six social leaders** across five departments of Colombia during the first week of January; some of them were involved in implementing pieces of the Peace Agreement (e.g., land redistribution, crop substitution).

Jan 24, 2019

COLOMBIA

attempted assassination of Alfamir Castillo Bermúdez, a human rights defender in Valle del Cauca. Ms. Castillo Bermúdez has been active in pursuing justice in cases of extrajudicial killings committed by members of the Colombian armed forces and commanders who ordered such killings.

Jan 25, 2019

MEXICO

murder of human rights defender Sinar Corzo Esquinca in Arriaga, Chiapas. He was a member of the El Coloso de Piedra (Stone Colossus) Citizen Committee for the Defense of Human Rights, recognized for his defense of the right to water, health, security and basic services for citizens of diverse communities.

Jan 26, 2019

COLOMBIA

On January 12, we wrote to officials in Colombia about the **assassinations of six social leaders** during the first week of 2019. Since then we have learned of six more, described in this letter, dated January 26 2019. Like one of the victims we described in our letter of January 12 (Wilmer Antonio Miranda in Cauca Department), two of the social leaders listed in this letter have also been active in implementing the crop substitution program that is part of the Peace Agreement (Maritza Ramírez Chaverra, Nariño Department; Luis Alfredo Contreras Ortega, Norte de Santander Department).

Feb 1, 2019

COLOMBIA

killing of the third FENSUAGRO member in Cauca in just two months: **Dilio Corpus Guetio**, age 44, died after being shot repeatedly while riding his bike to work on the morning of January 29.

Feb 22, 2019

EL SALVADOR

killing of Camila Díaz Córdova, a transgender woman who sought political asylum in the US but was deported to her native country, El Salvador, in 2018.

Feb 23, 2019

MEXICO

disappearance, torture, and assassination of Noé Jiménez Pablo and José Santiago Gómez Álvarez, members of the Independent Regional Campesino Movement (MOCRI) in Amatán, Chiapas State

Feb 24, 2019

MEXICO

the **unjust criminalization of Froylán González, a member of CODEDI** (Committee for the Defense of Indigenous Peoples) in Oaxaca. The illegal detention, ill treatment, and fabricated charges against the CODEDI member is part of a systematic pattern by the state to undermine the rights of indigenous peoples. Over the past year, CODEDI has been the subject of several attacks: five murders, three other arbitrary arrests, three raid incidents, theft, and ongoing threats.

Feb 25, 2019

COLOMBIA

attack on Dibeth Quintana, a leader of the Oil Workers' Union (USO) in Aguachica, Cesar Department.

Feb 26, 2019

COLOMBIA

assassination of José Fernel Manrique Valencia, age 34, an executive board member of the Union of Construction Material Industry Workers (**SUTIMAC**) in Bucaramanga in Santander Department.

Mar 21, 2019

COLOMBIA

assassinations of three social leaders in Puerto Asís over a two-day period. **Milena García and Darwin Reyes**, a married couple, were community leaders in the rural reserve Zona de Reserva Campesina Perla Amazónica (ZRCPA), where they helped coordinate voluntary crop substitution programs. **Zonia Rosero**, a medical doctor and pre-candidate for mayor of Puerto Asís, helped coordinate a regional campaign against gender-based violence.

Mar 22, 2019

COLOMBIA

assassination of LGBTI rights defender Liliana Holguín, age 40, who became the eighth LGBTI leader killed in her city (Caucasia, Antioquia Dept.) since last year.

Mar 23, 2019

EL SALVADOR

slander social media campaign against two LGBTI rights leaders in San Salvador: **Andrea Ayala** (Executive Director of ESMULES) and **Barbara Romero** (ESMULES member)

Mar 24, 2019

HONDURAS

assassination of journalist Leonardo Gabriel Hernández in Nacaome, Valle Department.

Mar 25, 2019

COLOMBIA

Paramilitaries took three local peasant farmers from their homes in San José de Uré, Córdoba Dept; on March 22 two of those abducted, **Jhon Jeimer González Vasquez** and **Julio César Taborda Caro**, were found dead. Both men had been tortured.

Mar 26, 2019

COLOMBIA

assassination of another rural organizer working to promote the implementation of the Comprehensive National Program for the Substitution of Illicit Crops (PNIS): **Argemiro López Pertuz** in the village of La Guayacana in Tumaco municipality, Nariño Department.

Apr 11, 2019

COLOMBIA

assassinations of social leaders: musician **Edwin Andrés Grisales Galvis** (musician in Valle del Cauca Department) and indigenous leader **Ebel Yonda Ramos** (Caquetá Department)

Apr 12, 2019

HONDURAS

the **attack by Honduran National Police on civilians**, including **Hedme Castro**, her family, and other colleagues associated with ACI PARTICIPA, which promotes citizen participation in decision-making and the exercise of civil and political rights.

Apr 23, 2019

COLOMBIA

assassination of Policarpo Guzmán Mage, a rural and agricultural labor organizer and human rights defender in Cauca Department

Apr 24, 2019

COLOMBIA

Assassination of Nixon Willington Valencia, a rural and agricultural labor organizer and human rights defender in Putumayo Department.

Apr 25, 2019

MEXICO

assassination of Luis Armando Fuentes Aquino, an indigenous and environmental defender on the Isthmus of Tehuantepec in Oaxaca State.

Apr 26, 2019

COLOMBIA

Killing of Samuel David Gonzales Pashaina (the seven-month-old **infant** of a former FARC combatant) and **Dimar Torres (former FARC combatant)** in La Guajira Department

May 11, 2019

COLOMBIA

death threats against the Fuerza de Mujeres Wayuu (Force of Wayuu Women) in La Guajira Department.

May 22, 2019

HONDURAS

constant threats and attacks against Rosalina Domínguez, Finance Coordinator for the Indigenous Council of Río Blanco in Intibucá Department, her four sons (ages 16 to 30), and two other members of the Civic Council of Popular and Indigenous Organizations of Honduras (**COPINH**)

May 23, 2019

GUATEMALA

death threats and attempted attack on Quelvin Jimenez, lawyer of the indigenous Xinca people in San Rafael las Flores in Santa Rosa Department.

May 24, 2019

COLOMBIA

murders of five community leaders, including three indigenous community members, which have occurred in the last month: Cauca Dept (**Daniel Eduardo Rojas Zambrano** , President of the Community Council in the indigenous reserve of López Adentro); Nariño Department (indigenous leader **Miguel Ángel Alpala**); Chocó Department (indigenous Emberea resident **Remedia Aizama**); Antioquia Department (peasant farmer **Andrés Mauricio Roa** and farmer **Diofanor Montoya**)

May 25, 2019

COLOMBIA

murder of Dr. Christian Camilo Julio Arteaga, age 24, in El Bagre in the Bajo Cauca region of Antioquia Department, an historically neglected area where the paramilitary groups Gaitanista Self-Defense Forces of Colombia (AGC) and Los Caparrapos have been waging war for drug turf.

May 26, 2019

COLOMBIA

130 former members of the demobilized Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia (FARC) have been killed since the signing of the peace agreement between the FARC and the Colombian Government in 2016; recently **Giovanny Murillas** (Guaviare Department) and **Jorge Enrique Corredor** (Valle del Cauca Department)

Jun 21, 2019

COLOMBIA

murders of two more community leaders: Benedicto Valentia in San Vicente del Caguán in Caquetá Department and **Paula Andrea Rosero Ordóñez** in Samaniego in Nariño Department.

Jun 22, 2019

COLOMBIA

assassinations of three social leaders of the Awa indigenous community in Nariño Department: **Leidy Jacqueline Burgos Pai, Rocío García Pai, and Robert Dionisio García Bisbicús.**

Jun 23, 2019

NICARAGUA

government suppression of the rights to free speech and assembly. . For several months, the Organization of American States (OAS) has called for the release of activists, demonstrators, student leaders, journalists and others who have been criminalized over the past year.

Jun 24, 2019

COLOMBIA

assassinations by paramilitary groups—as well as government security forces—of **four social leaders: Jader Pertuz**, age 24, **Jader Polo**, age 24, **Jeferson Trochez Escue**, age 16, and **Luis Fernández Velásquez.**

Jun 25, 2019

COLOMBIA

assassination of María del Pilar Hurtado, age 34, in Tierralta, Córdoba Department. She was a leading member of a community of 17,000 people who had occupied a plot on the outskirts of Tierralta after being displaced by the construction of a nearby hydroelectric dam in 2001.

Jun 26, 2019

HONDURAS

continued use of force by government against pro-democracy demonstrators. Repression carried out by government security forces is indiscriminate and is leaving dozens of people injured and too many dead, including: **Luis Enrique Maldonado Vásquez, Erick Francisco Peralta, and Eblin Noel Corea Maradiaga.**

Jul 1, 2019

COLOMBIA

four former members of FARC (Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia) were murdered in one week in Cauca and Nariño Departments: **Rafael Polindara, Anderson Pérez Osorio, Daniel Esterilla, and Servio Delio Cuasaluzan Guanga.** Also murdered (in Córdoba) was **Manuel Gregorio González Segura**, a beneficiary of the National Comprehensive Plan to Replace Crops for illicit use (PNIS), the government's program to replace coca plantations with legal crops.

Jul 2, 2019

COLOMBIA

death threat against prominent human rights leader Yirley Velasco, in Bolívar Department. She is active defending and empowering women, teaching women about their rights and assisting victims of sexual violence in reporting their attacks.

Jul 3, 2019

GUATEMALA

continuing attacks against the Nuevo Día Ch'orti Indigenous Association (CCCND) in Chiquimula Department. They face repeated human rights violations and threats to their land, environmental, and cultural rights because of hydroelectric and mining projects in their territories

Jul 14, 2019

HONDURAS

death threats directed at political prisoners Edwin Espinal, Raul Alvarez, and Romel Portillo, human rights defenders imprisoned in the maximum security, military run “La Tolva” military prison, where they and other political prisoners have been detained since 2018

Jul 15, 2019

MEXICO

murder of land rights defender Mario Moreno Jiménez, a member of the National Front for Socialism (FNLS), in Venustiano Carranza, Chiapas State

Jul 16, 2019

HONDURAS

destruction of crops on indigenous Lenca lands in the Río Blanco community in Intibucá Department, where the community has been in organized resistance against construction of the Agua Zarca (Gualcarque River) hydroelectric dam.

ADDENDUM

IRTF statement on immigration policy. July 2019

The InterReligious Task Force on Central America was founded 38 years ago to honor the sacrifice and carry forward the legacy of solidarity of Cleveland’s church women who were raped and murdered in El Salvador. Living out that solidarity is as important now as ever.

At this moment, amidst the incredible suffering being caused by inhumane immigration policies, **we call on people here in the US to look at immigration from the perspective of poor and marginalized peoples.** To see them as Sister Dorothy Kazel and Jean Donovan did—with love, mercy, and compassion. To understand the root causes of their migration.

In Mexico and Central America, people struggle to survive day in, day out under the **enormous forces of entrenched structural violence**: the violence waged by US-sponsored militaries and militarized police forces, the violence of organized crime, gender-based violence, and the violence of incredibly unjust economic systems.

These forms of structural violence place massive pressures on them, pushing them to make the very difficult decision to migrate north in order to feed themselves and their families. In order to survive!

As people of faith and conscience, we call for a humane and welcoming immigration policy: one that recognizes migrants as human beings—not as criminals but as refugees and asylum seekers escaping their homelands that are torn by violence, poverty, and exploitation.

Months before her untimely death in 1980, Sister Dorothy Kazel, a Cleveland Catholic mission team member serving in El Salvador, wrote to President Jimmy Carter and questioned the rationale of US policy supporting guns and war in El Salvador. She saw the death, disruption, and destruction it was causing. **It was US foreign policy that fueled the civil wars in Central America during the 1980s, and it is US policies that continue to feed political turmoil and extreme economic inequality in the region today.**

Sister Dorothy was inspired by a leading figure in El Salvador who also wrote to President Carter. Archbishop Oscar Romero has been known for decades as the “prophet of the Americas” and “martyr of the poor.” Today, he is recognized as a holy man of God. The Catholic Church declared him a saint on October 14, 2018.

During the violent years of the late 1970s in El Salvador, he was a true priest of the people. At the Archdiocese of San Salvador, he opened up a human rights office so that people from all over the country had a place to come and report, and have recorded, the violence happening in their towns and villages. His Sunday homilies –the most listened to program on radio in El Salvador – became a weekly human rights report. He shed light on the atrocities happening to his fellow Salvadorans: assaults, disappearances, tortures, and assassinations.

Just a month before his assassination on March 24, 1980, Archbishop Romero had written to President Jimmy Carter, urging him to stop sending bullets to his home country. Sister Dorothy Kazel, like Romero, also saw the death, disruption, and destruction caused by US military assistance to the Salvadoran government. US foreign policy was fueling the civil war that would result in the deaths of 70,000 people and hundreds of thousands of refugees fleeing to seek safety in the US. Sadly US foreign and economic and policies continue to feed the factors underlying emigration from El Salvador and neighboring countries today.

Many coming here are seeking asylum from Honduras. In 2009, an authoritarian regime came to power by military coup in 2009, setting off a new wave of repression. In defense of democracy and human rights, a massive nonviolent resistance movement quickly sprang up. This broad coalition of peasant farmers, teachers, journalists, union leaders, LGBTQ activists, indigenous rights leaders, environmental defenders, and others are often criminalized and even targeted for assassination by the powerful US-supported oligarchy, which sees them as enemies of the state.

The violence faced by people in Central America comes in many forms.

Gang violence. The most powerful and murderous gangs in Central America originated on the streets of the US. Infamous is MS-13, or Mara Salvatrucha, that was established in Los Angeles in the 1970s and '80s, largely to protect Salvadoran immigrants against other gangs. Then those gang members were deported to Central America under Regan and subsequent administrations, where they now deal in human trafficking and drug trafficking—all the while waging violence in the streets.

Police and military violence. Military power—in collusion with paramilitary forces—is used by Central American governments not for defense but to exercise repression against their own people. Military and police are trained and equipped ostensibly for counter-narcotics operations (e.g., drug corridors on the Atlantic coast of Honduras) and public safety. But they are involved in much more nefarious activities. They squash pro-democracy movements and repress those defending their land and water. The most vulnerable are the poor,

frequently indigenous and Afro-descendant peoples. Their ancestral lands are coveted by large economic interests for mining, logging, cash crop production, hydroelectric dams—you name it. And the militaries and militarized police units do the bidding of the wealthy by forcing them from their lands (sometimes with illegal eviction orders from corrupt judges), using intimidation, assaults, destruction of homes and crops, and even assassinations.

Gender-based violence. A high tolerance of violence against women and girls means that violence becomes normalized; it is seen as a part of life for women. In the media, crimes against women are exhibited with crude images, and nobody seems to care about it. At home, domestic violence rates are as high as 50 percent. Femicide rates are also alarming. It's not just the murder of women, but the murder of women because they are women. And the US Attorney recently announced that he is instructing the US immigration court system to refuse asylum claims for gender-based violence.

Economic violence. Free trade agreements have been linked to massive displacement of small-scale farmers, unable to compete with subsidized agricultural imports that flood their domestic markets. Free trade also means more sweatshop labor. We enjoy the cheap goods while the workers live in poverty. Children who grow up in poverty are more likely to become victims of human trafficking. Hundreds are kidnapped each year. They are forced to work on fields or in the streets as forced laborers and prostitutes.

How do free trade agreements fuel the violence of economic inequality and exploitation?

Bad trade deals like the Central America Free Trade Agreement (CAFTA) create conditions for land grabs, forced displacements, environmental degradation and human rights violations.

Peasant, indigenous and Afro-descendant communities have made subsistence livings by farming, fishing and mining on their ancestral lands for generations in relative peace. But now, due to foreign investment provisions in trade deals, governments' security forces—funded and trained by US taxpayers—are colluding with paramilitaries and private security teams of multinational corporations to force them off their lands.

Why?

Because lands that have up till now been overlooked and ignored are now coveted by large economic interests for either the land itself or the valuable minerals that lay underneath. And our taxpayer dollars are funding these projects through international financial institutions like the World Bank and Inter-American Development Bank, causing forced displacement of populations and environmental destruction.

These transnational corporations, often with domestic partners, are engaged in:

- large scale open-pit mining projects that contaminate waterways with cyanide and mercury
- industrial agriculture that pollutes the soil with pesticides and herbicides
- logging
- hydroelectric dams
- construction of ports, highways, and electric grids

Traditional rural communities see their lands in a different way. Their lands are sacred, tied to their ancestry and culture, containing the very life blood of their peoples. That's they are organizing large resistance campaigns to protect their lands and waterways.

How does forced internal displacement impact emigration to the US?

When people are forced off their land, they often go to urban centers to seek employment and housing. The cities cannot keep up with infrastructure to provide safe housing, water, health care, and education to the Internally Displaced Persons (IDPs) at the rates they're arriving. Their economies cannot provide enough living wage jobs.

Families are forced into the informal (or underground) economy. Kids beg on the streets. Children are vulnerable to gangs. Young people who are fortunate enough to get jobs in factories are preyed upon by gangs. Getting off the bus after a 10-hour shift at a t-shirt factory, young women wait at a bus stop for their connecting bus. They are approached by gang members who coerce them into prostitution or drug-running. Violence is all around them.

Not able to survive in this hostile urban environment, people flee. Parents make heart-decisions to send their children and teens north toward the US, praying they will find safety and a better future. Some moms and dads flee alone, hoping to find work and send money back to support their children, now in the custody of grandparents, aunts and uncles. Other families flee together, only to be separated once they arrive at the US border, facing harsh detention and uncertainty about their futures.

Who is funding the violence. The police, the military, the joint police-military special forces? We, the US taxpayers do. We are paying for security assistance to brutal regimes that exploit, repress, criminalize, and kill their own people. At places like Fort Benning, Georgia, home of the Western Hemisphere Institute for Security Cooperation (better known as the infamous SOA: School of the Americas, or School of Assassins), for decades the US government has been teaching the militaries of Latin America how to repress their populations with civilian-targeted warfare, including surveillance and torture techniques.

So, **understandably, people flee**. They make the arduous trip north through Mexico and arrive at our border. And what does our government do? Treat them as criminals. Separate families, ripping children from the arms of their fathers and mothers. Lock them up. Deport them back to the oppression they were fleeing, an oppression of our doing.

We must join together to create a mass movement for a more humane and compassionate response. In Cleveland, we at IRTF—along with strong partners like Jobs with Justice—have been convening an Immigrant Rights Collaborative for the past two. The Collaborative is a team of representatives of faith communities and immigrant defense organizations that meet regularly to share information and plan coordinated strategies. We work on a number of things that have been coming at us non-stop since January 2017:

- emergency responses to detentions or raids
- detention visits
- bond funds
- support for families of detainees
- accompaniment to ICE check-ins, to Immigration Court
- legislative advocacy
- faith communities' pledges of immigrant defense
- sanctuary support
- public education
- public mobilizations: marches, rallies, direct actions

As a community of love and compassion, it is time that we **recognize our government's responsibility (and our own complicity) in the push factors that drive people to leave their homes**, to flee violence and destitution, to seek a better life, any life at all, in another country. It is our foreign policy and our corporate and consumer

behaviors that create these conditions. So it is our responsibility to right these wrongs, to support peace and democracy in Central America.

But until these conditions are realized, we must exercise hospitality. **We can and must turn this country into a place of welcome.** We must demand that our government treat all migrants as refugees, grant them their internationally-recognized right to seek asylum. See them as our sisters and brothers who seek shelter and safety. Show them love and compassion. Welcome them with hearty hospitality. Be a people of solidarity.