



BRINGING RELIEF AND HOPE TO CHILDREN AT THE BORDER



By year's end, it is expected that more than 70,000 unaccompanied children will have crossed the United States-Mexico border to flee violence, persecution and death threats in their countries of origin, mainly Honduras, Guatemala and El Salvador. The Committee for Hispanic Children and Families, Inc. (CHCF) calls for the Obama administration to (1) designate these children as refugees, (2) desist from plans to expedite their deportations back to Central America and (3) institute foreign policies promoting the development of peaceful institutions and improved social services in Honduras, Guatemala and El Salvador.

The influx of asylum-seeking children from Central America's Northern Triangle has accelerated over the course of several years.¹ While the media reported on this steady increase during that time, the recent surge of refugee children has precipitated the recent spate of continuous coverage and public debate around the issue. This forced migration is not a spontaneous occurrence. It is the result of policies fostering poverty, corruption, impunity, violence and weak civil institutions in Honduras, El Salvador and Guatemala. Many parents have sent their children away from these countries in hopes that the United States might provide a sanctuary where their children will have a better chance to survive.

This is more than a political or immigration crisis; it is a humanitarian crisis. The U.S. Department of Homeland Security has detained more than 57,000 children at the border since October 2013. Relentless, pervasive violence has forced these children to flee their home countries and brave the considerable dangers of travel, including rape, robbery, assault and even death. According to the groundbreaking report, *Children on the Run*, published this year by the UN High Commissioner for Refugees, children are fleeing extreme violence and girls are particularly vulnerable.² Reported gender-based violence in Central America includes femicide, rape, sexual assault and other violent crimes perpetrated by gangs.³ Government data released



under the Freedom of Information Act (FOIA) reveals that the number of unaccompanied girls under the age of 18 apprehended trying to cross the border—most of who migrate from Honduras—has been increasing at a rate higher than the number of boys, up 77% this fiscal year compared to last.⁴

Upon arrival or apprehension in the U.S., these defenseless children are

being placed in jail-like facilities and tagged for expedited removal without access to legal counsel or due process.⁵ Many have been living in inhumane conditions, without ready access to sufficient food, running water or sanitation facilities.

Central American governments must institute policies that (1) support the right of families to be together, (2) protect personal integrity and human rights, and (3) create a culture of peace. All governments in the region, but particularly, Honduras, El Salvador, Guatemala and Mexico, must incorporate international protection standards, ensure the best interests of the child and undertake serious and meaningful national and regional measures to eliminate the root causes of the displacement and mass migration of these children. State investments in social services, bolstered by targeted U.S. aid, may alleviate some of the economic and social problems driving violence and desperation in these countries.

Militarization is not the answer. As stated by U.S. Congressman Raúl Grijalva, “We should reassess the aid we send to nations with corrupt police and military forces to ensure we are part of the solution, not the problem.”⁶ Historically, the United States has supported repressive militaries and corrupt police forces in Central America, fomenting distrust of institutions.

CHCF demands that the United States abide by and respect humanitarian principles contained in international instruments it has ratified, including the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, the Convention and Protocol Relating to the Status of Refugees and the Optional Protocol to the Convention on the Rights of the Child on the Sale of Children, Child Prostitution and Child Pornography. According to the United States Code, Title 8, Aliens and Nationality, a refugee is



any person who is outside any country of such person's nationality or, in the case of a person having no nationality, is outside any country in which such person last habitually resided, and who is unable or unwilling to return to, and is unable or unwilling to avail himself or herself of the protection of, that country because of persecution or a well-founded fear of persecution on account of race, religion, nationality, membership in a particular social group, or political opinion.⁷



These children certainly qualify as refugees under these parameters. They must be provided counsel to ensure that all of their rights are protected. They must also be housed in humane conditions. Expanding detention centers is not a solution. In order to ensure children's safety, the Administration must respond appropriately to reports of mistreatment and abuse in these centers and move these children to safe housing situations. CHCF objects to any legislative or administrative proposal that would erode existing U.S. legal and humanitarian protections for children, which include the Trafficking Victims Protection Reauthorization Act and statutory laws that support determinations made in the best interests of the child.

We commend New York State for opening its doors to these children. Since last October, federal officials have sent more than 3,200 child migrants to New York State to reunite them with relatives or place them with guardians. It is expected that about 7,000 more will arrive in the months ahead.⁸ We must continue to make our state a safe and welcoming community for children in need.

To prevent further crises, CHCF calls for comprehensive and humanitarian immigration reform. The government should not respond by expanding its drone surveillance program or funding inhumane transportation and detention practices.⁹ Funds should be used to reduce detentions, find alternatives to detention, unite families and provide legal counsel to detainees.

Unfortunately, intolerant voices are calling for the government to deport children back to homelands too treacherous to live in. Inflammatory political rhetoric has delayed government aid appropriations that would address the imminent needs of thousands of children already in immigration custody. These children and their families must be treated with compassion, dignity and respect. Government officials and lawmakers should not bend to the intolerant, dispassionate howls of fringe groups, but take a moral stand and open the door of hope for thousands of children who have too long lived without any.

1. United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR). (2014) *Children on the Run*. 4. 1 Aug. 2014 http://www.unhcrwashington.org/sites/default/files/1_UAC_Children%20on%20the%20Run_Full%20Report.pdf
2. UNHCR. (2014), 29.
3. Ibid.
4. Manuel Krogstad, Jens, Gonzalez-Barrera, Ana and Hugo Lopez, Mark. "At the border, a sharp rise in unaccompanied girls fleeing Honduras." Pew Research Center 25 Jul. 2014 Web. 1 Aug. 2014. <http://www.pewresearch.org/fact-tank/2014/07/25/at-the-border-a-sharp-rise-in-unaccompanied-girls-fleeing-honduras/>
5. Semple, Kirk. "Advocates in New York Scramble as Child Deportation Cases Are Accelerated." The New York Times 4 Aug. 2014 Web. 5 Aug. 2014. A version of the article appeared in print on August 5, 2014, on page A17 of the New York edition with the headline: "Advocates Seek Strategy to Help Children Facing Accelerated Deportation." <http://www.nytimes.com/2014/08/05/nyregion/advocates-scramble-as-new-york-accelerates-child-deportation-cases.html>
6. Mainis, Alexander. "The Central American Child Refugee Crisis: Made in U.S.A." Dissent. 30 Jul. 2014 Web. 1 Aug. 2014 http://www.dissentmagazine.org/online_articles/the-central-american-child-refugee-crisis-made-in-u-s-a

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Since 1982, The Committee for Hispanic Children and Families, Inc. has combined education and advocacy to expand opportunities for children and families and strengthen the voice of the Latino community. Believing that the most effective way to support Latino families is by building upon their existing strengths and fostering self-sufficiency, CHCF provides a number of services through Youth Development programs, an Early Care & Education Institute, and the Family Policy Center. CHCF's model is innovative in its effective inclusion of cultural and linguistic competencies to effect change. CHCF's grassroots focus makes it one of the few Latino organizations in NYC that combines direct service with policy work that amplifies Latino voices at the local, state and national levels. (www.chcfinc.org)



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