Purpose of the Visit

Ask Congress to rethink U.S. foreign policy toward Central America **to end harmful interventions** that further **militarize Central American** societies, while **meaningfully addressing violence, impunity and rights violations that compel displacement and migration.**

What our Faith Tells Us

Pope Francis made his views clear on the children arriving from Central America, seeking refuge from violence, persecution, and extreme poverty. He described the situation as a "humanitarian emergency" that "requires, as a first measure, these children be welcomed and protected." He went on to state, "These measures, however, will not be sufficient, unless they are accompanied by policies above all, that promote development in their countries of origin. Finally, this challenge demands the attention of the entire international community so that new forms of legal and secure migration may be adopted."

"How long will you judge unjustly and show partiality to the wicked? Give justice to the weak and fatherless; maintain the right of the afflicted and the destitute. Rescue the weak and the needy; deliver them from the hand of the wicked" (Psalm 82:3-4)

Those who flee wars and persecution should be protected by the global community. This requires, at a minimum, that migrants have a right to claim refugee status without incarceration and to have their claims fully considered by a competent authority. (US-Mexican Catholic Bishops' Pastoral Letter on Migration, 2003)

What We See

Violence

- Migration from the Northern Triangle of Central America—El Salvador, Guatemala and Honduras—has risen steadily as violence has increased. (Jesuit Conference)
- Honduras, El Salvador and Guatemala are three of the most violent countries in the world. The cause of the violence is complex and fueled by rampant inequality, lack of justice and accountability in crimes against average citizens, widespread corruption, organized criminal syndicates that control territory and target residents of poor neighborhoods, brutal militarized police, and weak governance mechanisms. Irresponsible corporate actors—palm oil conglomerates, mining companies, and energy sector multinationals—continue to take advantage of the chaotic environment to illegally appropriate land from poor farmers and leverage and subvert the justice system to reap profits. (Jesuit Conference)
- Violence against women and girls has increased at an alarming rate in the region. El Salvador has the highest rate of femicide (murder of women and girls) in the world; Guatemala is third and Honduras is seventh. (NY Daily News) Gender-based sexual violence is also on the rise and the militarization of Honduran society has seen this problem reach epidemic rates. (Radio Progreso, Honduras)
- Child advocates, especially from Honduras and El Salvador, report accounts of children and teenagers subject to assaults and intimidation from gangs, and of children being forcibly recruited by gangs who are increasingly aggressive and now have "join or die" policies.
- Governments in the region have been unable to prevent violence and ensure citizen safety. Beginning in 2003, governments in Central America implemented "iron fist" (*mano dura)* policing strategies; but homicide

rates rose as those policies were implemented. Many young people in poor neighborhoods where gangs are active have no other option but to flee home. (University of Central America)

Impunity, Corruption, and Complicity

- Though the situation is different in each country, throughout the region corruption within the political parties and the government, law enforcement and security complicity in criminal activity, and deep infiltration of the public sector by organized crime—particularly in Guatemala and Honduras—erode citizen security, undermine democracy and destroy citizens' trust in their own governments.
- In Guatemala, the country with the worst malnutrition in the Western Hemisphere, a recent widespread corruption scandal in which public funds were pilfered touched the highest echelons of the political class, finally forcing the resignation of the Vice President and the President after they were indicted as the head of the criminal conspiracy. While new elections are underway and a transition government is in place this is the most wide-reaching government corruption scandal in Guatemalan history and exposes the roots of the country's vast inequality and citizen's lack of confidence that public officials have their best interests in mind. (OXFAM America)
- In El Salvador, facing an unprecedented surge in the number of homicides this year, the government unleashed army brigades into poor neighborhoods, supposedly to root out gang members. The result has been chilling, with human rights groups and neighborhoods reporting attacks on innocent youth by military and police, and targeting of alleged gang members in extra-judicial executions. (IPSnews)
- Only 20 of every 100 murders are ever investigated in Honduras according to official data of the Honduran Public Ministry. (Vice News)
- Impunity is widespread in the region. The conviction rate for murders in all three countries hovers around an appalling 5%. (Jesuit Conference)

Migration of People in Need of Protection

While the number of refugees from Central America arriving in the U.S. has gone down this past year, the crisis continues. The U.S. has collaborated with Mexican and regional authorities to intercept refugees and migrants before they reach the U.S. border. Many times these vulnerable people have been returned without due process and sometimes resulting in grave harm and even death after these illegal deportations. (Jesuit Conference; Georgetown University Law Center, Human Rights Institute, The Cost of Stemming the Tide)

- **Children traveling alone**: Over the last few years, there has been a large increase in the number of children who are fleeing their countries of origin, often traveling alone. Many of them are fleeing violence or forced recruitment. In a recent report, the UN Refugee Agency found that 58% of them have international protection concerns. During their journey north, these children are exposed to horrific dangers, including attack, kidnapping, rape, and disappearance.
- **Asylum-seekers**: The numbers of asylum-seekers from Central America has increased by more than 250% since 2012, as many of the issues driving child migration affect adults as well. Some have interpreted the increasing asylum claims as proof of abuse or fraud; however, the U.S. is not the only country seeing such an increase. From 2008-2014, Mexico, Panama, Nicaragua, Costa Rica and Belize jointly documented a 1,185% increase in the number of asylum applications from El Salvador, Honduras and Guatemala.
- **Families**: In addition to increased numbers of asylum seekers and unaccompanied children, the U.S. has also been receiving a large number of families, especially women with young children. Although the U.S. does offer some limited protection to children traveling alone, women with their young children are often deported extremely quickly, without a meaningful chance to tell their story and access the protection they need.

Solutions

The U.S. government can help reduce impunity and violence in Central America:

First, the U.S. must end harmful interventions that further militarize Central American societies such as funding and equipping corrupt and abusive military and security forces or pressuring governments in the region to carry out migration enforcement to prevent people from leaving their countries of origin—even when they are fleeing for their lives.

Instead, the U.S. should focus on building the capacity of El Salvador, Guatemala, and Honduras to respond to the humane security and development needs of their people through state institutions and civil society. This can be done by providing resources and technical assistance for shelters for women and girls who have been targeted for sexual violence, strengthening child welfare systems in-country, providing support and assistance to witness protection programs so that cases can go to trial and perpetrators can be convicted, investing in community-based violence prevention strategies, strengthening judicial sector independence and reforms, and supporting sustainable and inclusive economic development in the region.

When Central Americans do arrive at the U.S.'s southern border, they should be treated with dignity and respect, and their protection needs should be taken seriously. All people should receive access to programs that help them to understand their rights, and children should have access to legal representation and a child welfare specialist to help them navigate the complexities of our immigration system. The U.S. must refrain from the unnecessary and costly use of detention for children, families, and asylum seekers, which degrades access to legal representation and exacerbates trauma. Alternatives to detention have proven far more cost effective and humane.

Our Requests

1) **Invest in the right of Central Americans to remain at home**: The U.S. should work with Central American civil society organizations to hold governments in the region accountable. These governments must address the need of Honduran, Guatemalan and Salvadoran people to live in **safe** and **sustainable** communities, rather than doubling-down on the militarization of Central American societies.
2) **The U.S. must not encourage or finance programs that fuel violence in Central America or degrade the ability of people fleeing violence to access safety in other countries**: Congress should condition all security sector funding to Honduras, Guatemala, and El Salvador on respect for human rights. The U.S. must end programs that seek to militarize the borders of Central America and Mexico with the particular goal of cutting off access to asylum for people fleeing targeted and generalized violence. These programs endanger the lives of people seeking safety and run counter to our country's obligations under international law.
3) **Ensure that Central Americans fleeing harm have a full and fair process for accessing refugee status and other protections:** The U.S. must live up to its values of fairness and justice, ensuring that children and families seeking safety within our borders have the ability to tell their stories and have their cases evaluated within an age appropriate and timely system. We must not water down protections meant to ensure that traumatized and terrorized victims of persecution, torture, or trafficking have the ability to make their case for humanitarian relief in the U.S. In particular, the use of detention degrades access to due process, legal representation, and refugee protection.