

Human Rights Watch

Children's Rights

<https://www.hrw.org/news/2016/04/20/we-pay-mexico-catch-refugees-kids-suffer>

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In the summer of 2014, the Obama Administration had a problem. As Congress was debating comprehensive immigration reform, tens of thousands of children, and in many cases their mothers, fleeing gang violence in Honduras, El Salvador, and Guatemala were turning up at the border.

Even though irregular crossings of the southwestern border were, in fact, at their lowest number in 40 years, partisan rhetoric said otherwise. It became a political imperative, if not a humanitarian one, for the administration to demonstrate its control over the southern border.

So it made an expensive deal with Mexico to keep these desperate women and children from ever reaching the U.S. border. It would encourage Mexico "to interdict the flow of illegal migrants from Central America bound for the United States," according to Homeland Security Secretary Jeh Johnson.

At the same time, it would establish an alternative: a safe and orderly way for Central American children to apply for refugee status from their own countries to join parents who were already lawfully in the United States.

A combination of U.S. funding and diplomatic pressures spurred the Mexican government to action. On the same day in July 2014 that President Obama sent Congress an emergency supplemental request of \$3.7 billion "to comprehensively address this urgent humanitarian situation," his Mexican counterpart, Mexican President Enrique Peña Nieto, issued a decree announcing the Programa Frontera Sur (Southern Border Program) to boost migration enforcement efforts in four southern Mexican states.

The result was often a fast bus ride back from Mexico to the deadly places people had fled with no real opportunity for protection either in Mexico or back in their home countries.

The Congressional Research Service estimated that U.S. State Department funding to support migration enforcement on Mexico's southern border would exceed \$86.6 million prior to the enactment of the appropriation for fiscal year 2015. The U.S. Congress increased the president's \$115 million request for fiscal year 2015 by another \$79 million, specifying that it was to be used "for helping Mexico secure its southern border."

A year later, the number of apprehensions at the U.S.-Mexico border had fallen to 70,400, a 57 percent drop from the previous year. During that same time, apprehensions of Central American migrants in Mexico rose by 75 percent, to nearly 93,000.

The Mexican government reported a 79percent increase in the number of Central Americans deported from Mexico in the first four months of 2015.

While Mexico used the substantial influx of U.S. dollars to beef up its migration control capacity, it did not significantly improve reception conditions or its capacity to process asylum claims for the additional numbers that predictably would be apprehended. Despite a 65percent increase in asylum applications in 2014, Mexico's refugee agency, the Mexican Refugee Aid Commission, received a budget increase of less than 5 percent for 2015.

Meanwhile, the new U.S. resettlement program for Central American children was beset with logistical and bureaucratic problems and far-too-narrow eligibility criteria.

But no problem was greater than the requirement that children under threat from a gang stay and wait in their country while the United States slowly processed their applications. Nearly a year and a half later, a paltry 32 Central American refugees had been admitted through the program, out of more than 6,000 applicants.

Given the U.S. government's role in promoting Mexico's interdiction of Central American migrants and asylum seekers, it should earmark proportionate funding and support to improve and expand Mexico's capacity to process asylum claims and provide social support for asylum seekers and refugees.

It should also, as Homeland Secretary Johnson announced it intended to do, expand U.S. refugee resettlement from the region.

The United States should broaden the eligibility criteria beyond children inside their countries with lawfully present parents in the United States and consider for admission a wider range of Central American refugees who have fled to Mexico or other countries in the region.

For many decades, the United States has been a world leader in promoting refugee rights and solutions. At a time when international solidarity and responsibility sharing have never been under greater strain, and when the European Union is seeking to persuade Turkey to interdict Syrian and Iraqi refugees to keep them from reaching Europe, U.S. leadership is needed more than ever.

But its efforts to use Mexico to stem the Central American refugee flow not only exposes Central American children to danger, but sets a bad example that potentially harms refugees in Europe and throughout the world.

Human Rights Watch / ACLU Joint Submission Regarding the United States Record Under the International Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Racial Discrimination

Asylum Seekers Abused in the US and Deported to Harm in Cameroon

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