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Obama must halt raids on Central American refugee families

Deportation of those fleeing violence and poverty violates human rights

January 11, 2016 2:00AM ET

by [Lauren Carasik](#) @LCarasik

The U.S. Department of Homeland Security (DHS) has launched aggressive raids on family homes targeting asylum seekers from El Salvador, Guatemala and Honduras who received [final orders of removal](#). At least 121 people, including children, have been detained since the New Year's weekend in the first large-scale deportations of refugees from Central America's troubled Northern Triangle. The nationwide raids are sending waves of fear in an already vulnerable and terrorized population, many of whom suffer from [post-traumatic stress disorder, anxiety and depression](#).

The targeted roundups follow a [surge in the number of migrants crossing the Southwest border in recent months](#). At least [10,000 unaccompanied children](#) from Central America migrated across the border in October and November alone. But deporting women and children fleeing mayhem and misery back to the perilous conditions they fled is misguided and inhumane. Most are refugees trying to escape horrific levels of gang and [gender-related violence](#) and are entitled to humanitarian protection, yet little is being done to protect their rights.

The Barack Obama administration's unrelenting efforts to turn refugees back have not deterred their inflow. More women and children are expected to flee in 2016 because they continue to be imperiled at home. Instead of cracking down on families, the U.S. should honor its domestic and international obligations to protect their rights, and re-orient its policies toward ameliorating the deplorable conditions in the Northern Triangle.

On Jan. 4, DHS Secretary Jeh Johnson [defended the raids](#) as an effort to secure the U.S. border, touting “the largest deployment of vehicles, aircraft, boats, and equipment along the southwest border in the 90-year history of the Border Patrol.” But asylum seekers pose no threat to national security that warrants such an unprecedented deployment of resources. The renewed push appears to be in part a strategic gambit for Democrats eager to establish credibility on immigration enforcement, and to avoid a new surge of migrants next summer as the presidential election looms.

Johnson insisted that “our borders are not open to illegal migration,” highlighting his misapprehension of the fact that refugees are legally entitled to present themselves at the border and seek protections, which Washington is bound to provide. However, the administration’s immigration procedures evince disregard for those rights.

Many of the migrants who received deportation orders were subjected to an accelerated court-hearing schedule dubbed “[rocket dockets](#),” which often pose insurmountable hurdles for those who have legitimate claims. Legal representation would greatly [enhance their chances of a favorable decision](#), but given the expedited process and the dearth of legal resources, few were represented by a competent attorney. Some were ordered [removed in absentia](#) even after DHS failed to provide them with adequate information, translation and notice about the hearings. The procedural flaws only intensify fear and mistrust, forcing migrants further into the shadows.

The U.S. should help address the root causes of Central American migration, instead of doubling down on the same failed policies that helped create the crisis in the first place.

The administration faced legal pushback from immigrant rights advocates almost immediately. “Our interviews revealed that these families have bona fide asylum claims,” Katie Shepherd, attorney for the CARA Family Detention Pro Bono Project, said [in a statement](#) last week, “but [they] were deprived of a meaningful opportunity to present them at their hearings in immigration court.”

Reinforcing Shepherd's claim, on Jan. 5, the Board of Immigration Appeals [stayed the deportation of four families](#) from El Salvador and Honduras who were slated for repatriation on the next day. The ruling casts doubt on Johnson's assertion that those being deported had exhausted all of their due process rights.

The focus on mass deportations of desperate refugees fleeing [conditions Washington helped to create](#) will not work. The U.S. should help address the root causes of Central American migration, instead of doubling down on [the same failed policies that helped create the crisis in the first place](#). For example, the U.S.-backed [Alliance for Prosperity](#) plan for Guatemala, Honduras and El Salvador — for [which Congress allocated \\$750 million](#) in December ostensibly to address poverty, violence, and corruption in the region — is poised only to exacerbate the hardship. Despite growing recognition about the dangers of Washington's counter-narcotics strategy, the plan, which was prepared by Northern Triangle governments, further entrenches the militarization of the drug war, providing additional funding to corrupt governments with abysmal human rights records.

The strategy will likely worsen economic instability by gutting public sector services, encouraging privatization, [deregulating markets](#), promoting large-scale, environmentally destructive projects that displace communities and inviting multinational corporations whose profits accrue to the benefit of foreigners and local elites, not the countries' desperate citizens.

The funds do contain human rights conditions for continued funding, but they allow the U.S. government [wide latitude](#) in determining compliance. Alarming, despite the [harms inflicted by clampdown](#) on emigrants, [25 percent of the funds are conditioned](#) on the countries increasing border security and stopping the flood of migrants.

As the international community grapples with the misery of millions of refugees in Europe and the Middle East, the U.S. must model humane policies that respect the rights and dignity of those fleeing violence and persecution. The Obama

administration can do this by halting the ensuing raids and providing administratively granted humanitarian protection such as [Temporary Protected Status](#) to Northern Triangle migrants. The lives of many Central American women and children depend on it.

Johnson [claims](#) that the policy of ongoing raids targeting undocumented Central American families “is consistent with American values, and basic principles of decency, fairness, and humanity.” Yet the large-scale roundups betray, not honor, those principles.

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The views expressed in this article are the author's own and do not necessarily reflect Al Jazeera America's editorial policy.