



House Foreign Affairs Committee
Tom Lantos Human Rights Commission

Hearing on:
Human Rights and Humanitarian Challenges in Central America
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Thank you to Co-Chairmen Randy Hultgren (R-IL) and James McGovern (D-MA) and members of the Tom Lantos Human Rights Commission for the opportunity to submit this written testimony and to testify regarding the issue of forced displacement and existing migrant protection system capacity within Central America. The U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops (USCCB) welcomes this important discussion. We ask to include our recent report [Temporary Protected Status: A Vital Piece of the Central American Protection and Prosperity Puzzle](#) into the record.

I. Introduction

The Catholic Church has a long history of solidarity, pastoral care, community outreach, service, and advocacy related to people on the move, particularly immigrants and refugees. Migration and Refugee Services of the USCCB (USCCB/MRS) is the largest U.S. refugee resettlement agency, welcoming and helping to integrate refugees, regardless of nationality, race, ethnicity, or religion. Working in partnership with the U.S. government, state and local governments, and local communities, it has resettled over one million of the three million refugees who have come to our country since 1975. It also serves as a national leader in caring for unaccompanied refugee and migrant children and victims of human trafficking. USCCB/MRS works through 80 Catholic Dioceses and Archdioceses and their Catholic Charities agencies in some 100 offices and sub-offices in 37 states across the country to welcome and serve refugees, unaccompanied alien children, and victims of human trafficking.

USCCB/MRS works with a wide array of secular and Catholic partners in Central America, most notably Catholic Relief Services (CRS), the Scalabrinian Missionary Sisters in Honduras and the respective Bishops Conferences in El Salvador, Mexico, Honduras and Guatemala. CRS, the international relief and development agency of the U.S. Catholic community, works in 19 countries in Latin America and the Caribbean. CRS works with the Catholic Church and local civil society partners to address the root causes of poverty, create more peaceful and just societies, help communities protect the environment, and prepare for and respond to natural disaster. CRS' development programs in Latin America and the Caribbean focus on water smart agriculture to help farm families cope with changing weather conditions and to build resilient farming systems; youth development to address the high rates of violence and the lack of job opportunity; and education to promote child development and food security across the region. CRS' humanitarian work meets the critical, immediate needs to plan for and respond to frequent natural disasters. YouthBuilders, CRS' flagship youth program, has helped more than 7,000 young people in Central America build vocational and life skills so they can return to school, find a job, or start a small business. The Scalabrinian Missionary Sisters Association have been providing pastoral and humanitarian care to migrants in Honduras since 1991. In their missionary-apostolic work they co-ordinate at a national and archdiocesan level the Pastoral Care of Human Mobility in the Church, in society and in public and international institutions. They also work in the Centro de Atención a Migrantes Deportados and in Tegucigalpa airport. The Pastoral Care for Human Mobility also works in San Pedro Sula airport and in the Casa del Migrante un Ocotepeque, at the frontier with Guatemala. In these centers, the Scalabrinian sisters promote a dignified reception of migrants, helping them to defend their rights, and assist in their social and occupational process of reintegration.

The Catholic Church's solidarity and service related to migrants stems from the belief that every human being is created in God's image, and from the Church's experience this is often forgotten

in the cases of migrants and refugees who are frequently marginalized and mistreated. Pope Pius XII reaffirmed the Catholic Church's commitment to care for pilgrims, aliens, exiles, refugees, and migrants of every kind, affirming that all peoples have the right to conditions worthy of human life and, if these conditions are not present, the right to migrate.¹ Meanwhile, we advocate to address the root causes for such poor conditions while also protecting those forced to migrate. In our joint pastoral letter, *Strangers No Longer: Together on the Journey of Hope, A Pastoral Letter Concerning Migration*, January 23, 2003, the U.S. and Mexican Catholic bishops call for nations to work toward a "globalization of solidarity." In that document we affirm that "Refugees and asylum seekers should be afforded protection. Those who flee wars and persecution should be protected by the global community." No. 99. We likewise stated that "because of their heightened vulnerability, unaccompanied minors require special consideration and care." No. 82. And we state that refugees should "have access to appropriate due process protections consistent with international law." No. 99. Also, we stated that "[b]ecause of their heightened vulnerability, unaccompanied minors require special consideration and care." No. 82. Pope Francis provides recent guidance regarding such situations, saying, "Collective and arbitrary expulsions of migrants and refugees are not suitable solutions, particularly where people are returned to countries which cannot guarantee respect for human dignity and fundamental rights."²

II. Background

In August 2017, an USCCB/MRS delegation travelled to El Salvador and Honduras to express solidarity with our Central American brothers and sisters to assess the potential human security issues for them, and to assess the capacity of both of their nations to adequately return and integrate them if certain immigration programs in the United States, such as Temporary Protected Status (TPS) are not renewed. Most Reverend David O'Connell, Auxiliary Bishop of Los Angeles, California and member of the USCCB Committee on Migration (USCCB/COM) led the delegation in Honduras. Most Reverend Joe S. Vásquez, Bishop of Austin, Texas and Chairman of the Committee on Migration, joined the delegation in El Salvador.

The delegation first visited Honduras to speak with U.S. and Honduran government officials, Catholic leaders, Catholic service providers, civil society and the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR). Delegation members had the opportunity to speak with families and youth who had recent migration experiences and perspectives on current repatriation and integration services. The delegation subsequently travelled to El Salvador to collect information and assess the local conditions, including the capacity for the nation to reabsorb large numbers of returned nationals. In addition, delegation members heard updates on vulnerable mobile populations, the current situation of violence in communities, and related forced displacement.

Upon return, USCCB/MRS staff issued a report, [Temporary Protected Status: A Vital Piece of the Central American Protection and Prosperity Puzzle](#) which evaluated the conditions on the ground in both countries and reviewed current capacity to accept and reintegrate returned

¹ Pope Pius XII, *Exsul Familia* (On the Spiritual Care of Migrants), September, 1952.

² Message of his Holiness Pope Francis for the 104th World Day of Migrants and Refugees referring to Statement of the Permanent Observer of the Holy See to the 103rd Session of the Council of the IOM, 26 November 2013.

nationals. Additionally, the report addressed the importance of TPS to ongoing security and protection efforts.

III. Findings

The delegation found incremental but important progress in both El Salvador and Honduras³ in relation to improvements in protection systems but overall found that violence targeted against families and internal forced migration and large internal displaced populations proved to be ongoing obstacles to respective governments' capacity to provide protection and respond to large scale return of nationals and other humanitarian problems.

a. Internal Displacement in Honduras and El Salvador

The delegation learned of the substantial internally displaced persons (IDPs) populations that exist in Honduras and El Salvador, and the difficulties both countries are having providing care for them. In the case of El Salvador, there is the additional problem of even addressing and acknowledging the issue publicly, as displacement was an issue during the civil war. Given the pervasiveness of violence leading to internal displacement in both countries,⁴ and the slow progress to address both the root causes and the consequently growing humanitarian challenges, both governments will face severe obstacles to integrating returning populations from the United States and ensuring that they do not add to the growing IDP population. Such IDP growth would not only undermine the security efforts to quell violence in both countries but would likely also contribute to forced re-migration of TPS returnees and others back to the United States.

The delegation visited Catholic and other civil society NGO service organizations who serve people affected by violence and forced displacement. Despite their best efforts, all noted the limited capacity to care for IDPs in both countries. In the context of caring for those physically displaced within the country, the organizations interviewed discussed similar stories of attempting to attend to people who frequently leave their homes against their will to save their own and their families' lives. Many families then must move to another place where they frequently find themselves living in inadequate conditions and suffering deterioration in their family life. Another issue related to addressing the internally displaced is the lack of existing governmental infrastructure to care for the IDP population. As more families are fleeing from their neighborhoods and becoming displaced, they are effectively abandoning established and regularized lives. They are leaving behind their family, social networks, belongings, property and livelihoods. They face difficulties reintegrating into the labor market, accessing health

³ See Temporary Protected Status: A Vital Piece of the Central American Protection and Prosperity Puzzle, U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops, Office of Migration and Refugee Services, October 16, 2017 available at <http://www.usccb.org/about/migration-policy/fact-finding-mission-reports/upload/el-salvador-honduras-report-20171016.pdf> For discussion of Honduran government protection mechanisms see pages 2-4; for discussion of Salvadoran government protection mechanisms see pages 4-5.

⁴ Internal Displacement Monitoring Center (IDMC), 2016 Report on the Grid: Global internal displacement in 2016, cites the number of IDPs in El Salvador to be 220,000 <http://internal-displacement.org/global-report/grid2017/pdfs/2017-GRID-el-salvador-spotlight.pdf>

services and education, and have difficulty obtaining personal documents such as birth certificates, identity cards, passports, educational and health records.

UNHCR estimates that Honduras has 174,000 internally displaced people.⁵ A recent study estimates that from 2004 - 2014, approximately 41,000 households within 20 municipalities were internally displaced because of violence or insecurity.⁶ Displacement in Honduras does not occur from every community across the country, but instead takes place from certain communities and municipalities.⁷

The situation in El Salvador remains more complex and hidden. Estimates range from 220,000 IDPs⁸ up to roughly 400,000.⁹ With regard to data collection on IDPs, most data are collected by NGOs or international organizations, since there is no government system in place to collect information on IDPs. The Salvadoran government has not yet publicly acknowledged the full extent of the phenomenon of internal displacement, particularly with respect to those who have been displaced due to violence. As a result, there is currently no national strategy or legislative or policy framework in place to comprehensively monitor, address, or respond to internal displacement in El Salvador when such displacement is related to violence or other factors.¹⁰

While there is initial progress in Honduras to identify and evaluate the number of IDPs and their needs, neither Honduras nor El Salvador has stopped the forced displacement of its current residents. They have neither established programs to meet their immediate humanitarian and protection needs nor assured that their internal displacement will not lead to international flight. Adding additional returnees, such as former TPS recipients, into this dynamic would only lead to more forced displacement, internal instability of both countries, and increased irregular migration back to the United States.

b. Targeted Violence against Family Units

In both countries, the delegation consistently heard that while children were still very vulnerable and experienced extreme protection issues, more whole family units were being targeted and

⁵ UNHCR Honduras Fact Sheet, March 2017, available at <http://reporting.unhcr.org/sites/default/files/UNHCR%20Honduras%20Fact%20Sheet%20-%20March%202017.pdf>

⁶ Interinstitutional Commission for Protection of Displaced People Due to Violence, Characterization of Internal Displacement in Honduras, (2015) at 12, available at

http://sedis.gob.hn/sites/default/files/desplazamiento/Caract.Desplazam.Interno_ENG.pdf

⁷ See Temporary Protected Status: A Vital Piece of the Central American Protection and Prosperity Puzzle, U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops, Office of Migration and Refugee Services, October 16, 2017 available at <http://www.usccb.org/about/migration-policy/fact-finding-mission-reports/upload/el-salvador-honduras-report-20171016.pdf> At For more discussion of the Honduran IDP situation see pages 7-8.

⁸ *Id.*

⁹ Interview with Noah Bullock, Executive Director, Cristosal, 8.17.17, notes on file with author.

¹⁰ See Temporary Protected Status: A Vital Piece of the Central American Protection and Prosperity Puzzle, U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops, Office of Migration and Refugee Services, October 16, 2017 available at <http://www.usccb.org/about/migration-policy/fact-finding-mission-reports/upload/el-salvador-honduras-report-20171016.pdf> For more discussion of the Salvadoran IDP situation, see pages 8-9.

more rural areas were experiencing exploitation due to gang violence and drug trafficking operations.¹¹

The Church in both Honduras and El Salvador is experiencing, publicly reflecting on, and responding to the escalation of violence in urban communities, in rural communities, and to family units. In his pastoral letter, “I See Violence and Strife in the City,” Most Reverend José Luis Escobar Alas, Archbishop of San Salvador, stated: “[t]he faithful know that they are being monitored in their comings and goings in the communities. The same applies to pastoral agents who are constantly watched. . . The exodus of families is heartbreaking . . . It is truly unfortunate and painful that the Church cannot work because of this atmosphere of insecurity and anxiety that shakes our beloved country.¹²” The Archbishop describes one parish alone that in one year was “exposed to murder, persecution, exodus, and extortion,” including the murder of six active parishioners by stabbing, dismemberment, or firearms.¹³

In many cases, an act of violence directed at a person involves his or her whole family group and breaks down the social fabric of communities, as people are forced to flee with their families. There have been cases where whole communities are targeted and forced from their homes after threats from criminal groups. This targeting of entire families, and the corresponding need for protection of entire families, is corroborated by what the delegation heard from service providers in both Honduras and El Salvador. In Honduras, both Casa Alianza and Pastoral Care for Migrants, a Catholic collaborative effort led by Scalabrinians in Honduras, reported an increase in families arriving at shelters seeking care. Sister Lidia Mara Silva de Souza, National Coordinator of the Pastoral Care for Migrants, noted many more “total family migration” cases arriving for services and protection.¹⁴ She described this as a situation where one person is persecuted by gangs, but as a result, the whole family often needs to leave to protect the family. Families in shelters had begun to be targeted when youth had inadvertently disclosed the new location of the family through social media, such as Facebook, causing the need for some families to move yet again in search of protection. In these cases, internal relocation within Honduras is preferred rather than leaving the country, if safe options are available, but such options were very limited and uncertain.¹⁵

IV. Recommendations

Based on the observations and findings collected during the visit, the delegation provides the following recommendations to help ensure improved governmental protection and humanitarian capacity.

¹¹ See Delegation Notes, 8.17.17 notes on file with author.

¹² Most Reverend Jose Luis Escobar Alas, I See Violence and Strife in the City: A Pastoral Letter on the Occasion of the Feast of the Beloved Blessed Oscar Romero, March 24, 2016 at 18.

¹³ *Id.*, at page 15.

¹⁴ Meeting with Sister Lidia Mara Silva de Souza, National Coordinator, Pastoral Care for Migrants in Honduras, 8.15.17 notes on file with author.

¹⁵ See Temporary Protected Status: A Vital Piece of the Central American Protection and Prosperity Puzzle, U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops, Office of Migration and Refugee Services, October 16, 2017 available at <http://www.usccb.org/about/migration-policy/fact-finding-mission-reports/upload/el-salvador-honduras-report-20171016.pdf> For more information on targeted family violence, see pages 6-7.

1. Honduras and El Salvador need to improve their respective in-country legal work opportunities for their youthful populations.

Gang-prevention programs that have job skill component programming, such as Catholic Relief Services Youth Builders programs will help to provide Honduran and Salvadoran nationals with more economic security and help further develop the stability of the region. Job opportunities need to be reflective of young population's skill level.

2. Honduras needs to develop stronger programming to address protection and integration services for internally displaced people and for returnees who have been outside of Honduras for many years.

Augmenting existing government protection mechanisms is vital to prevent onward migration and re-migration in the case of Honduran nationals who have been internally displaced or returned. Such program development could also help enable Honduras to adequately handle the return of TPS recipients in the future. Services such as language skills and cultural orientation will help ensure that such a long departed and newly returned population will better acclimate and will not face remigration or forced displacement.

3. El Salvador should consider addressing the issue of internal displacement of people due to generalized violence.

El Salvador should work with UNHCR to engage in an internal displacement profiling study to better understand and respond to the scope and challenges of IDPs whose numbers have greatly increased in the past five years. Special attention and formal acknowledgment should be given to those who have been displaced due to community violence or conflict.

4. El Salvador and Honduras should address causes of forced displacement and migration, working in collaboration with the United States, the international community, and civil society.

Honduras is already engaging UNHCR and other international organizations in this effort, but meaningful protection plans need to be further created and implemented. El Salvador needs more robust engagement and programming both with UNHCR and also with the larger NGO and international donor community.

V. Conclusion

Thank you for the opportunity to share these findings and observations. We welcome the opportunity to speak more about the important human rights promotion and protection efforts that are occurring in Central America with respect to care and well-being to refugees and immigrants.