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Moving Beyond Immigration Reform: A Call for Social Inclusion and to Change U.S. Foreign Policy

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HUMAN RIGHTS ALLIANCE FOR CHILD REFUGEES AND FAMILIES

During the Summer of 2014 we witnessed the dramatic and heartbreaking images of unaccompanied children and entire families from Central America turning themselves in to the U.S. Border Patrol. Most did so citing persecution by criminal organizations, which are a product of the U.S. Drug War in Mexico and Central America, as well as inhumane immigration policies, and decades of U.S. intervention in those countries. These migrants are pleading for asylum from the U.S. government and rightly so.

Violence has rapidly spread in Mexico since 2008: over 100,000 people have been murdered and 25,000 disappeared.² In Honduras between 2008 and 2012, the homicide rate went from 58 to 85 murders per 100,000 residents, making it the country with the highest murder rate in the world. And since the 2009 coup, femicides, the targeted killing of women, have increased by 62%.³ In Guatemala, femicides went from 213 reported in 2000 to 707 in 2012.⁴ The highest rate of femicide in the world is in El Salvador, where 12 women out of 100,000 are murdered.⁵ The increase in femicides in Central America explains why migrant women are making the journey to the U.S. alone or with their children. Despite mounting evidence that its policies fuel migration, the U.S. denies over 90% of asylum claims from Mexicans and Central Americans.⁶ Violence in Mexico and Central America is directly linked to the U.S.-led war on drugs and the logic of neoliberalism.⁷

The U.S. is directly implicated in this violence. Since 2008, it has spent \$800 million on the Central America Regional Security Initiative (CARSI) and \$2.4 billion on the security cooperation agreement, Plan Mérida.⁸ As a result of this aid, violence has only escalated and criminal organizations have become more powerful, better organized, and linked to corrupt government forces. Recently at a Central American regional forum, U.S. Vice President Joe (Joseph) Biden announced more support for military and public security forces and called for the consolidation of trade pacts such as the trade agreement DR-CAFTA to address development.⁹ While experts contend that corrupt security forces have eroded the

human rights of its citizens, the U.S. continues to support military and security forces. The recent disappearance of 43 students in Ayotzinapa, Mexico and the bodies of many others discovered in mass graves are further evidence of indiscriminate repression against civilians at the hands of criminal organizations that collaborate with U.S. funded state forces.

Despite the vast evidence of state violence in Mexico and Central America, the U.S. government has continued to systematically deport noncitizens to countries plagued by such organized violence. Under President Obama's tenure, over two million people have been deported, including many parents of U.S. citizen children, throwing more than 5,000 children into the foster care system.¹⁰ The U.S. government incarcerates 34,000 people in privately managed immigration detention on any given day. Green card holders are mandatorily detained for past criminal convictions, deported, and barred from reentering the U.S. for at least ten years and often for life. In 2014, the practice of family detention returned to the U.S. immigration detention system, after being eliminated in 2007, and has grown by over 1,200% in the last six months.¹¹

After hundreds of marches, sit-ins, and demands from grassroots groups, President Obama announced executive action on immigration in November 2014. The President's executive action will not provide any form of permanent status for migrants, just temporary relief from being deported and only after taxes and fees are paid, and background checks come back clean. Executive action also calls for 20,000 more border patrol agents. There are still over six million undocumented residents who will be completely left out from any form of relief, and most of the migrants coming to the border seeking asylum will likely face mandatory detention. But most importantly, the immigration detention and deportation system will remain intact; there are no signs of U.S. legislators passing laws that would halt or slow it down. Furthermore, the root causes of migration are not addressed at all, and are hidden away and rarely discussed even within the immigrant rights community.

In addition to the drug war, neoliberal economic reforms have been implemented throughout Latin America, and yet discussion over the negative impacts of neoliberal economic reforms in Mexico and Central America are another set of root causes seldom discussed in immigrant rights circles, by the U.S. media, or at the legislative level. The effect of neoliberal policies is a paramount reason that Latin Americans migrate to the U.S.

Immigration reform, as it has been advanced by both U.S. political parties, will not address the root causes of migration. It is time therefore for Latinos and their allies to rethink and move beyond discussion of immigration reform for the more than 24 million noncitizens in the U.S., and demand full social inclusion and respect for their human rights, while also directly addressing the root causes of migration: U.S. foreign policy, military aid to corrupt government forces, and neoliberal policies. Recently, the Mexican community and their allies through the hashtag, #USTired2 campaign in the U.S. demanded the government halt military aid to Mexico in light of the thousands of disappeared and murdered. These kinds of movements must continue to gain momentum as well as address the intersections with U.S. migration control if we want to see a transformation in the lives of all U.S. migrants.

ENDNOTES

- 1 This author does not use an accent on her last name. Families for Freedom (FFF) is a New York-based multi-ethnic human rights organization by and for families facing and fighting deportation.
- 2 See, for example, Investigaciones ZETA, "Peña peor que Calderón: 19 mil 016 ejecuciones en 11 meses." *Semanario Zeta Tijuana* (9 Dec 2013); "México reporta 150 mil ejecuciones producto del narcotráfico." *TeleSUR* (14 Apr 2013), <<http://narconoticias.blogspot.com/2013/12/pena-peor-que-calderon-19-mil-016.html>> [18 Dec 2014]. Also, Molly Molloy, "Peña Nieto's First Year: Iraq on Our Southern Border." *Small Wars Journal* 4/4 (2014), <<http://smallwars-journal.com/printpdf/15100>> [18 Dec 2014]. Also, "Más de 121 mil muertos, el saldo de la narcoguerra de Calderón: INEGI." *Proceso* (30 Jul 2014), <<http://www.proceso.com.mx/?p=348816>> [18 Dec 2014]. And Rafael Romo, "Mexican Drug Lord: Inside His Abandoned Mansion." CNN.com (6 Feb 2014), <<http://www.cnn.com/2014/02/06/world/americas/mexican-drug-lord-mansion/index.html>> [18 Dec 2014].
- 3 <<http://www.elheraldo.hn/pais/574500-213/honduras-tasa-de-homicidios-fue-de-855-por-cada-100-mil-habitantes>> [18 Dec 2014].
- 4 "Violence against Women Human Rights Defenders in Mesoamerica: 2012 Regional Assessment Report, October 2013." Mesoamerican Women Human Rights Defenders Initiative (pg. 10), <<http://www.awid.org/Library/2012-Regional-Assessment-Report-Summary-Findings>> [18 Dec 2014].
- 5 "Femicide: A Global Problem." *Small Arms Survey* (Feb 2012), <http://www.smallarmssurvey.org/fileadmin/docs/H-Research_Notes/SAS-Research-Note-14.pdf> [18 Dec 2014].
- 6 American Immigration Council Special Report. "Mexican and Central American Asylum and Credible Fear Claims." <http://www.immigrationpolicy.org/sites/default/files/docs/asylum_and_credible_fear_claims_final.pdf> [18 Dec 2014].
- 7 Dawn, Paley. *Drug War Capitalism* (Oakland: AK Press, 2014), 4.
- 8 Signed into law by the U.S. Congress on June 30, 2008, authorizing 1.6 billion dollars over a three-year period. Additional funds were authorized after that.
- 9 The White House, Office of the Press Secretary, Fact Sheet: Promoting Prosperity, Security and Good Governance in Central America, <<http://www.whitehouse.gov/the-press-office/2014/11/14/fact-sheet-promoting-prosperity-security-and-good-governance-central-ame>> [18 Dec 2014].
- 10 "Shattered Families: The Perilous Intersection of Immigration Enforcement and the Child Welfare System" (Nov 2011), <<https://www.raceforward.org/research/reports/shattered-families>> [18 Dec 2014].
- 11 Detention Watch Network Report, "Expose and Close: Artesia Family Residential Center," <http://www.detentionwatchnetwork.org/sites/detentionwatchnetwork.org/files/expose_close_-_artesia_family_residential_center_nm_2014.pdf> [18 Dec 2014].