



Hearing on  
“Human Rights and Humanitarian Challenges in Central America”  
Tom Lantos Human Rights Commission

Vicki Gass, Senior Policy Advisor for Central America  
Oxfam America  
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Oxfam respectfully submits this written statement for the Tom Lantos Human Rights Commission’s hearing “Human Rights and Humanitarian Challenges in Central America.” Oxfam is a global humanitarian and development organization that works to end the injustice of poverty by helping people build better futures, holding the powerful accountable and saving lives in disasters. Our mission is to tackle the root causes of poverty and end the manmade injustice of inequality. We defend human rights and help people engage directly in the key decisions that affect their lives. Oxfam works in over 90 countries, including the Central American countries of El Salvador, Guatemala, Honduras and Nicaragua where we have worked for decades.

Soon, Acting Secretary for the Department of Homeland Security (DHS) Elaine Duke will decide whether or not to extend Temporary Protection Status (TPS) for people from Honduras, Nicaragua and El Salvador. Oxfam has asked the Secretary to extend TPS for these countries for another 18 months and to exercise her authority under Section 244 of the Immigration and Nationality Act (8 U.S.C 1254(a)) to extend Temporary Protection Status (TPS) for the citizens from El Salvador, Honduras, and Nicaragua.

Oxfam argued that it is in the national security and economic interest of the United States to extend TPS and is consistent with US foreign policy goals in the region. Oxfam is also urging the U.S. Congress to pass meaningful legislation that will end the immigration limbo of TPS holders and provide them with a road to citizenship.

Oxfam is requesting an 18 month extension because ending TPS will undermine US Foreign Policy towards Central America, and because the countries do not have the social and economic infrastructure to absorb a huge influx of people. Nor can the governments guarantee the safety and well-being of returnees due to the high rates of violence and impunity.

Since 2015, when unaccompanied minors and families were surging across the border, the US government has spent 1.3 billion dollars with taxpayer money to address the root causes for the out migration, including violence prevention, institutional strengthening and anti-impunity measures, trade facilitation, and market development. While some progress has been made in anti-corruption efforts and trade facilitation, there is still much that needs to be done to see returns on US investments in the region. Many of the untenable conditions that drove migration in the first place still exist and continue to be push factors for out-migration.

To begin with, there is a humanitarian crisis in the region. The level of violence people in El Salvador, Honduras and Guatemala are experiencing has been called a war in all but name only. Amnesty International Secretary General Salil Shetty described it as “virtual war zones where lives seem to be expendable and millions live in constant terror at what gang members or public security forces can do to them or their loved ones.” He added “these millions are now the protagonists in one of the world’s least visible refugee crisis.” Similarly, Wendy Cue of the UN OCHA program and Vicente Raimundo

Núñez-Flores of the European humanitarian aid program ECHO, stated “Although they are officially post-conflict countries, the humanitarian consequence of shocking levels of violence differ, little if at all, from armed conflicts.” Finally, researchers Cantor and Plewa wrote that the “recent rates of violent deaths in these two countries [Honduras and El Salvador] in certain years appear to be second only to Syria.” To ground these statements consider that homicide rates in the Northern Triangle countries are eight times more than the global average. Similarly, in a ten day period from September 20 to 30 of this year, 437 people were killed in El Salvador – 43 a day! Or, that Honduras continues to be the most dangerous place in the world for environmental and human rights activists.

Secondly there is the often less visible female face of violence and migration. According to the Honduran National University’s Violence Observatory, nearly 4,000 women were assassinated from 2009 to 2016; and, in the first 7 months of this year, 180 women were assassinated. On average, a Honduran woman is killed every 16 hours. On October 31, 2017, the Guatemalan National Institute of Forensic Science reported that 62 women are violently killed every month. Suyapa Martínez of the Center for Women's Rights (CDM) also recently denounced that of the 365 known cases of femicide in 2016; only two had a verdict by a judge. The high level of impunity fosters even more violence against women.

Third, the levels of violence are so high that forced internal displacement in the Northern Triangle and Mexico is increasing. For example, the Honduran government identified 174,000 displaced people in only 20 of the 300 municipalities of Honduras, equal to 4% of the population. In El Salvador, 2.1 per cent of interviewees in a national survey had changed residence in the country due to threats or other violence in just one year (2012), a figure that rose to 4.6 per cent for 2014.

Evidence indicates that each displacement exacerbates a downward spiral in living conditions for IDPs in the NTCA. Compared to non-displaced households, IDP households have less access to housing and stable and formal jobs; have lower access to education; suffer greater overcrowding and health problems; and struggle to cover basic needs. Poor children and women are especially vulnerable to sexual and other violence when displaced. Often precursors to out-migration, the lack of safe and viable livelihood options for people are additional push factors for IDPs to leave their countries.

On top of the violence and lack of infrastructure, there is also the ongoing environmental crisis in the “Dry Corridor” of Central America. The United Nation’s Food and Agriculture Organization recently reported that Guatemala, Honduras and El Salvador, are experiencing one of the worst droughts of the last ten years with over 3.5 million in need of humanitarian assistance. The protracted drought has increased the vulnerability of small scale producers and rural communities given its effects on the loss of livelihoods and decapitalization of rural household economies. The significant reduction in agricultural production has reduced food stocks, decreased dietary diversity and increased cases of malnutrition in children under five. With no end in sight and inadequate government response, the effects of the drought have also forced migration to over-populated urban areas or abroad.

Further, the incursion of organized crime into many state and local structures is exacerbating the structural weaknesses within government institutions. In Guatemala, former president Otto Perez Molina and other government officials, including the vice-president, are on trial for corruption and influence peddling that extends throughout the country. And since August 2017, Guatemala has been in constant crisis due to the current president, Jimmy Morales, trying to roll back the anti-corruption measures so strongly supported by the U.S. government.

Last of all, the NCTA countries continue to be plagued by pervasive poverty and inequality. According to the World Bank, the NTCA countries are among the poorest nations in Latin America with 30%, 26%, and 17% of the people in Honduras, Guatemala and El Salvador, respectively, living on less than \$2 a day.

The dominate economic model is oriented towards exports rather than building internal markets, based on keeping wages low and hours irregular, and maintaining fiscal policies that unfairly benefit the economic and politically powerful. Central American governments are unable to guarantee the protection of their citizens or provide lasting responses to the social and economic challenges.

The U.S. government with bipartisan backing in the U.S. Congress identified all of these problems as factors for out-migration and has appropriated funding to address the root causes. Returning nearly 258,000 migrants to El Salvador, Honduras and Nicaragua will undermine the work that is just beginning to see some progress and will have a devastating impact on these fragile economies that depend on the remittances sent back— in El Salvador and Honduras, remittances are 17% of the Gross Domestic Product. Moreover, deporting these migrants could have the adverse effect of displacing countrymen and women with less resources and education causing yet another wave of immigration to the US.

The U.S. Congress should continue its leadership role in Central America by urging the Acting Secretary of DHS to extend TPS for an additional 18 months by exercising her authority under Section 244 of the Immigration and Nationality Act (8 U.S.C 1254(a)) allowing her to extend the program. Extending TPS for this period is in the national security and economic interest of the U.S. and consistent with the foreign policy goals Congress has set for the region. Oxfam also urges the U.S. Congress to pass immigration legislation to end the immigration limbo of current TPS holders and provide them with a road to citizenship. The conditions do not yet exist in Central America for their safe return and deporting people back to the untenable conditions that drove migration in the first place is unconscionable.