

June 7, 2017

Secretary of State Rex Tillerson
The U.S. Department of State
2201 C Street NW
Washington, DC 20520

Dear Secretary of State Tillerson,

We, the undersigned national and international organizations defending human rights—including those of women, children, indigenous communities, LGBTI individuals, immigrants, and refugees—as well as environmental rights, labor, humanitarian, and faith-based organizations, write in advance of the Conference on Prosperity and Security in Central America that the United States is co-hosting with the Government of Mexico, in collaboration with the Inter-American Development Bank (IDB), on June 15 and 16 in Miami, to express our concerns regarding topics to be discussed and to urge you to demonstrate leadership to ensure that human rights do not take a backseat in any agreements reached during the conference.

It is a crucial moment to discuss the economic, governance, and security challenges that drive the forced displacement and migration of thousands of families, individuals, and children from the Northern Triangle countries of Guatemala, Honduras, and El Salvador. In 2016, the three countries had a combined total of 14,870 homicides, and individually were still well above the minimum identified by the United Nations to constitute an epidemic of violence—with El Salvador at 81 murders, Honduras at 58, and Guatemala at 27 per every 100,000 inhabitants.^[1] The Northern Triangle countries also have some of the highest rates of sexual and gender-based violence and femicides in the world. Anti-corruption mechanisms, for example the International Commission against Impunity in Guatemala (CICIG), have led to important progress in addressing high-level corruption there, yet access to justice for ordinary citizens in the region is still elusive; the majority of crimes, including abuses involving high-level officials, remain in impunity. Families, individuals, and children who flee this violence have sought international protection not only in the United States but also in other countries such as Mexico, which last year had a record number of asylum requests, the majority from Central America.

An effective response to this forced displacement and migration from Guatemala, Honduras, and El Salvador requires policies that recognize and respect the rights of all individuals to seek asylum in the United States and the region, and foreign policies that address the intersection of root causes and that are based in human rights and in consultation with civil society organizations in the region. It is precisely for these reasons that we are concerned with the lack of consultation with civil society organizations from Mexico and Central America in the preparation for this conference. U.S. policies for the region that lack consultation with a broad range of civil society organizations and fail to consider their recommendations limit the extent to which they can be effective, lack accountability and transparency, and may be detrimental to local populations.

Moreover, it appears that the conference aims to discuss U.S. policy towards the region solely from a security and economic lens, without addressing the protection needs and human rights of families, individuals, and children from the region. By doing so, it fails to consider the nexus between the multiple causes of and solutions to forced displacement and migration—the right of individuals to seek protection outside of their countries of origin alongside their rights to education, employment, safety, and justice in their homes.

The proposal that the Department of Homeland Security lead the discussion on security and this discussion's location at the Southern Command base in Miami, in particular, sends a dangerous signal that the citizen security and justice challenges that the Northern Triangle countries face will be addressed from the perspective of the military and defense and not by the State Department and by USAID, which have prioritized development assistance, institution-building, and strengthening justice systems. Militarized approaches to law enforcement put Central American citizens at risk and do not build sustainable approaches.

The U.S. State Department human rights reports on Guatemala, Honduras, and El Salvador from 2016 all document the involvement of security forces in crimes such as excessive use of force, unlawful killings, and corruption.^[ii] Alongside gang violence, human rights violations by various state security forces have also been a driving factor of displacement and insecurity in the region. Therefore, U.S. support for law enforcement in the region should be contingent upon governments making meaningful progress in addressing these violations, and U.S. assistance should not be used to support military involvement in law enforcement activities. Border cooperation, too, should not be expanded at the cost of preventing families, individuals, and children fleeing violence from seeking protection outside of their home countries.

Driving private sector investment to the region in collaboration with the IDB also has the potential to fuel further displacement if it lacks guarantees by governments to respect human rights, as well as the right of indigenous communities to free, prior, and informed consent and if it occurs without transparency or accountability safeguards for projects, including protections for labor rights and mitigation of environmental impacts. Community leaders who have defended their lands against the development of infrastructure or extractive projects are at risk in this region; Guatemala and Honduras rank among the most dangerous countries in the world for environmental defenders.^[iii] An approach focusing on large-scale private sector investment also sidelines the importance of supporting small farmers and community-based initiatives for sustainable development which are crucial to families' livelihoods in rural areas.

If the United States is to help address the root causes of migration from the Northern Triangle countries of Central America, assistance must be targeted at building sustainable, inclusive economies that expand livelihoods for many, reducing poverty, supporting community-based violence prevention strategies, addressing sexual and gender-based violence, strengthening child welfare systems, and improving justice, accountability, and human rights protections. It should be transparent and implemented in partnership with a diverse group of civil society organizations.

We urge you now to demonstrate leadership in addressing these challenges in Central America during this conference by ensuring that U.S. support for Central American countries prioritizes building sustainable, inclusive economies and strengthening human rights, anti-corruption efforts, access to justice, and the rule of law.

Sincerely,

Argentina

Comisión Argentina para los Refugiados y Migrantes (CAREF)

Austria

Information Group on Latin America (IGLA)

Costa Rica

Asociación Costarricense para el Estudio e Intervención en Drogas (ACEID)

Asociación la Red de Jóvenes sin Fronteras

Centro Internacional para los Derechos Humanos de los Migrantes (CIDEHUM)

Costa Rica Integra (CRI)

Ecuador

Servicio Jesuita a Refugiados Ecuador

El Salvador

Asociación Comité de Familiares de Migrantes Fallecidos y Desaparecidos El Salvador (COFAMIDE)

COMCAVIS TRANS

Cristosal Central America

Fundehumanity

Grupo de Monitoreo Independiente de El Salvador (GMIES)

IDHUCA

Servicio Social Pasionista (SSPAS)

Sínodo Luterano Salvadoreño

Guatemala

ACCSS. Asociación Coordinadora Comunitaria

ASDECOHUE (La Agencia de Servicio y Desarrollo Económico y social de Huehuetenango)

Asociación Acción Cultural Guatemalteca (ACG)

Asociación Pop No'j

Concejo Ecuménico Cristiano de Guatemala

Coordinadora Nacional de Viudas de Guatemala (CONAVIGUA)

Equipo de Estudios Comunitarios y Acción Psicosocial (ECAP)

Federación Guatemalteca de Escuelas Radiofónicas (FGER)

Instituto Centroamericano de Estudios Sociales y Desarrollo
Instituto de Investigación y Proyección sobre Dinámicas Globales y Territoriales, Universidad Rafael Landívar
JIPIC-CONFREGUA
Médecins du Monde
Organización Desafío Juvenil
Sindicato de Trabajadores de Salud de Guatemala Filial Huehuetenango Hospital Regional "Dr. Jorge Vides Molina"
Unidad de Protección a Defensoras y Defensores de Derechos Humanos -Guatemala (UDEFEUGUA)

Honduras

Asociación LGTB Arcoíris de Honduras
Asociación para una Ciudadanía Participativa (ACI PARTICIPA)
Asociación para una Vida Mejor de Personas Infechadas/Afectadas por el VIH/SIDA en Honduras (APUVIMEH)
Centro de Derechos de Mujeres (CDM)
Centro de Desarrollo Humano (CDH)
Centro de Estudios de la Mujer Honduras (CEM-H)
Centro de Investigación y Promoción de los Derechos Humanos (CIPRODEH)
Centro de Prevención, Tratamiento y Rehabilitación de Víctimas de Tortura y sus Familiares (CPTRT)
Comisión Cristiana de Desarrollo
Comité de Familiares de Migrantes Desaparecidos del Progreso (COFAMIPRO)
Convergencia Ciudadana
Foro Nacional para las Migraciones en Honduras (FONAMIH)
OCDIH "Organismo Cristiano de Desarrollo Integral de Honduras"
Red Coiproden
Red Lésbica Catrachas

Ireland

TROCAIRE

Mexico

Albergue Las Memorias A.C.
Asylum Access México (AAMX) A.C.
Centro de Derechos Humanos Fray Matías de Córdova
Centro Diocesano para los Derechos Humanos Fray Juan de Larios AC
Comisión para la Defensa de los Derechos Humanos, A.C.
Coordinación Diocesana de Movilidad Humana, Diócesis de San Cristóbal de las Casas, Chiapas
Estancia del Migrante González y Martínez, A.C.
Grupo de Trabajo sobre Política Migratoria
Hermanas Auxiliadoras de México A.R.
Institute for Women in Migration (IMUMI)

Instituto de Estudios e Investigación Intercultural, A. C.
Instituto de Estudios y Divulgación sobre Migración A.C. (INEDIM)
Instituto de Investigación y Práctica Social y Cultural A.C.
Junta General de iglesias Cristianas Congregacionales de México A.R
La 72 Hogar Refugio para Personas Migrantes
Dirección de Programas de Incidencia, Programa de Asuntos Migratorios, Programa de Derechos Humanos, Clínica Jurídica para Refugiados "Alaíde Foppa", Universidad Iberoamericana, Ciudad de México
Red Jesuita con Migrantes México
Sin Fronteras I.A.P.
Voces Mesoamericanas, Acción con Pueblos Migrantes, A.C.

Nicaragua

Centro Intereclesial de Estudios Teológicos y Eclesiales
CEPAD (Consejo de Iglesias Evangélicas Pro-Alianza Denominacional)

Sweden

DIAKONIA

USA

AFL-CIO
Amnesty International USA
Church World Service
CLIMASS
Committee in Solidarity with the People of El Salvador (CISPES)
Durango Unido en Chicago
Evangelical Lutheran Church in America
Friends of the Earth - United States
Global Ministries of the Christian Church (Disciples of Christ) and United Church of Christ
Human Rights First
Human Rights Observation/Honduras
Ignatian Solidarity Network
Jesuit Conference of Canada and the United States
Kids in Need of Defense (KIND)
Latin America Working Group Education Fund (LAWGEF)
Lutheran Immigration and Refugee Service
Maryknoll Office for Global Concerns
Mennonite Central Committee U.S. Washington Office
PBI-USA
PC (USA) Office of Public Witness
Presbyterian Church (USA)
Presbyterian Peace Fellowship

Scalabrini International Migration Network
Sisters of Mercy of the Americas - Institute Justice Team
U.S. Committee for Refugees and Immigrants
Unitarian Universalist Service Committee (UUSC)
United Church of Christ, Justice and Witness Ministries
United Methodist Church, General Board of Church and Society
Washington Office on Latin America (WOLA)
Wind of the Spirit, Immigrant Resource Center
Women's Refugee Commission

Regional

American Friends Service Committee (AFSC) (USA, Mexico, Guatemala, El Salvador, Honduras)
Kino Border Initiative (USA, Mexico)
Mesa Transfronteriza Migraciones y Género (MTMG) (Mexico, Guatemala)
Oxfam (USA, El Salvador, Guatemala, Honduras)

[i] “*Violencia siguió desatada en el Triángulo Norte: 14 mil 870 homicidios en 2016*”, Departamento 19, Honduras, 7 de enero de 2017, <http://www.departamento19.hn/index.php/elcamino/ddhh/42993-violencia-siguio-desatada-en-el-triangulo-norte-14-mil-870-homicidios-en-2016-.html>

[ii] U.S. State Department, Human Rights Reports, <https://www.state.gov/j/drl/rls/hrrpt/>

[iii] United Nations, Office of the High Commissioner, Report on Environmental human rights defenders, 2016 English, <https://www.protecting-defenders.org/pdf.js/web/viewer.html?file=https://www.protecting-defenders.org/sites/protecting-defenders.org/files/environmentaldefenders.pdf>