

September 12, 2017

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

The Honorable Elaine Duke  
Acting Secretary of Homeland Security  
U.S. Department of Homeland Security  
Washington, DC 20528

Dear Secretary Tillerson and Acting Secretary Duke:

We write to express our deep concern about the recent elimination of the Central American Minors (CAM) Parole Program and to share our alarm and disappointment upon learning that the Administration is now considering abolishing the CAM Refugee Program. Without these authorized paths to protection, children in danger will be forced to seek safety through infinitely more dangerous routes in which they are at risk of harm from smugglers and traffickers. We urgently request that the Administration preserve these critically important programs and all Central American refugee processing programs offering a lifeline to those fleeing extreme violence in the region.

El Salvador, Honduras, and Guatemala remain among the most dangerous countries of the world, with disturbing homicide rates, widespread gang and sexual- and gender-based violence, and high rates of impunity. Unable to rely upon the governments or child welfare systems of their countries to protect them, children in Central America frequently have no choice but to look elsewhere for safety from unspeakable danger. Building on its leadership in providing refuge to the most vulnerable and welcoming refugees as a critical part of its diplomacy, the United States should make available all possible avenues of protection to these children and their families, including the opportunity to access refugee protection from their home countries. Closing these vital pathways and our nation's doors will have grave consequences, not only for these families, but also for the stability of the region.

Ongoing conditions throughout the Northern Triangle countries underscore the importance and necessity of CAM refugee protection. According to recent statistical analysis of the 178,825 cases of unaccompanied migrant children who fled to the United States from Northern Triangle countries during the years of 2011 through 2016, violence in municipalities within the Northern Triangle countries was the single strongest causal factor in a child's migration over any other factor, including U.S. policy or economic factors.<sup>1</sup> In the first six months of 2017 alone, children

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<sup>1</sup> *Violence, Development, and Migration Waves: Evidence from Central American Child Migrant Apprehensions*, CGD Working Paper 459. Washington, DC: Center for Global Development, available at:

have been the victims of multiple homicides and massacres in Honduras,<sup>2</sup> and murders of LGBTI individuals are on the rise. Domestic violence, and sexual and gender-based crimes against women and children are pervasive throughout the region, and perpetrators are seldom brought to justice. High impunity rates—at or over 95 percent for such crimes in El Salvador, Guatemala, and Honduras—foster widespread violence.<sup>3</sup>

The CAM Refugee program is narrowly tailored and available only to children who meet the legal definition of refugee, have a parent in lawful status in the United States, and pose no security risk. Rigorous screening procedures offer additional safeguards. Applicants must submit an Affidavit of Relationship with a resettlement agency, undergo DNA testing to confirm their biological relationships, and complete an interview evaluating their claim for refugee status. If approved after completing this months-long process, a child may then be processed for resettlement in the United States through the U.S. Refugee Admissions Program.

Children and families fleeing violence in Central America share an urgent need for safety while also possessing unique experiences, needs, and concerns. Leaving behind one's home and country to remain alive is an unthinkable weight, and poses personal and difficult decisions. The CAM Refugee Program and other in-country refugee processing in Central America allow children and families to pursue refugee status in the United States while still within their country's borders. The region's widespread violence necessitates refugee protection mechanisms with similar range and reach. In-country refugee processing programs are a critical avenue of protection and contribute to ensuring stability in the Northern Triangle countries of Central America.

Refugee status through CAM has offered lifesaving relief to children like Yanira\*<sup>4</sup> and Lucia\*, two sisters from El Salvador. Gang members in their country took an interest in Yanira and Lucia, and began pressuring them to become their girlfriends. The sisters knew that dating a gang member would make them sex slaves of the gang. Neither girl was friends with gang members, and both were terrified of being forced to date a gang member. When their father intervened to protect them, gang members murdered him in retribution. The girls fled to another family member's house, but continued to receive death threats as gang members hunted for their location. Four months later, gang members threatened a cousin of the girls – demanding that the cousin disclose their location or be killed. He refused to reveal their whereabouts, and the next day he was found dead, killed by gang members making good on their threat. The girls were on the run again. As a result of the mounting threats and danger against them, their case was

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<https://www.cgdev.org/publication/violence-development-and-migration-waves-evidence-central-american-child-migrant>.

<sup>2</sup> *Informe Mensual de la Situación de los Derechos de las Niñas, Niños y Jóvenes en Honduras*, Casa Alianza (June 2017), available at: <http://www.casa-alianza.org.hn/images/documentos/CAH.2017/1.Inf.Mensuales/6.%20informe%20mensual%20junio%202017.pdf>.

<sup>3</sup> *Neither Security nor Justice, Sexual and Gender-Based Violence and Gang Violence in El Salvador, Honduras, and Guatemala*, Kids in Need of Defense (May 2017), available at: [https://supportkind.org/wp-content/uploads/2017/05/Neither-Security-nor-Justice\\_SGBV-Gang-Report-FINAL.pdf](https://supportkind.org/wp-content/uploads/2017/05/Neither-Security-nor-Justice_SGBV-Gang-Report-FINAL.pdf).

<sup>4</sup> Names have been changed to protect the identity of children.

expedited.<sup>5</sup> Yanira and Lucia were granted refugee status and have safely resettled in the United States in the care of their mother. They, and their mother, are deeply relieved and grateful that they escaped alive.

Since 2014, nearly 1,600 children have obtained refugee status through CAM.<sup>6</sup> An estimated 6,000 have affidavits of relationship currently pending. Although small, the program serves as a desperately needed source of safety for those whose options are few.

The elimination of this program threatens to leave many children in danger, drive unauthorized migration from the region, and strengthen criminal smuggling and trafficking networks that prey upon vulnerable migrants. We urge the Administration to reaffirm its commitment to the CAM Refugee Program and to other in-country processing programs for individuals fleeing extreme violence in Central America. Through these initiatives, the United States can extend a critical lifeline to those facing brutal threats to their lives and freedom. The United States' conscience demands nothing less, and its diplomacy in the region stands to gain.

Sincerely,

Advocates for Basic Legal Equality, Inc.  
The Advocates for Human Rights  
Alianza Americas  
Al Otro Lado  
American Friends Service Committee  
American Gateways  
American Immigration Council  
Amnesty International USA  
ASISTA  
Asylee Women Enterprise  
Bethany Christian Services  
Center for Gender & Refugee Studies  
Center for the Human Rights of Children, Loyola University of Chicago  
Center on Immigration and Child Welfare  
Center for Law and Social Policy  
Central American Resource Center, Washington DC (CARECEN)  
Christian Community Development Association  
Church Council of Greater Seattle

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<sup>5</sup> Even as an expedited case, it took thirteen months from the time their mother filed until the time the girls arrived in the United States.

<sup>6</sup> *U.S. Ends Program for Central American Minors Fleeing Violence*, Mica Rosenberg, Reuters, August 16, 2017, available at: <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-usa-immigration-minors/u-s-ends-program-for-central-american-minors-fleeing-violence-idUSKCN1AW2OZ>.

Church World Service  
Connecticut Association for Human Services  
Connecticut Voices for Children  
Evangelical Lutheran Church in America, Advocacy Office  
The Episcopal Church  
First Focus  
Franciscan Action Network  
Friends Committee on National Legislation  
Human Rights First  
Humanity United  
Immigrant Legal Resource Center  
Immigration Legal Services Department, Catholic Charities – Diocese of Baton Rouge  
International Refugee Assistance Project  
International Rescue Committee  
Jesuit Conference, Office on Justice and Ecology  
Kids in Need of Defense  
Kino Border Initiative  
Latin America Working Group  
Leadership Conference of Women Religious  
Lutheran Immigration and Refugee Service  
National Association of Social Workers  
National Association of Social Workers, New Mexico branch  
National Center for Youth Law  
National Immigration Law Center  
National Justice for our Neighbors  
PICO California  
Public Counsel  
Ready at Five  
Rocky Mountain Immigrant Advocacy Network  
Save the Children USA  
Scalibrini International Migration Network  
SchoolHouse Connection  
Sisters of Mercy of the Americas  
Tahirih Justice Center  
Teaching Excellence Center  
Unitarian Universalist Service Committee  
Washington Office on Latin America  
Women's Refugee Commission  
Young Center for Immigrant Children's Rights