An Urgent Humanitarian Situation: 
Unaccompanied Children Fleeing from Violence in Central America

Background

Unaccompanied and separated children from El Salvador, Honduras, Guatemala, and Mexico are arriving to the United States in record numbers seeking protection. From 2004 to 2011 the average number of children arriving to the United States and referred to Health and Human Services’ Office of Refugee Resettlement averaged 6800. In 2012, the number nearly doubled to over 13,000 children, and in 2013 it nearly doubled again to over 24,000. This year the total is expected to be well over 60,000 children.

Lack of economic opportunity and the desire for family unity, factors present during the 2004 to 2011 period of relatively low migration, are still present today. However, the overriding new factor leading kids to migrate has been violence and the breakdown of the rule of law in the region. A recent delegation from the U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops recently did an assessment in the
region and reported that “…violence and coercion, including extortion, kidnapping, threats, and coercive and forcible recruitment of children into criminal activity are perpetrated by transnational criminal organizations and gangs have become part of everyday life in all these countries, exerting control over communities.” In a study earlier this year of 404 of these children, UNHCR concluded that “58 percent….were forcibly displaced because they suffered or faced harms that indicated a potential or actual need for international protection.”

The violence against them occurs both in their home countries and also in transit to the United States. While fleeing violence, they are also often victims of human trafficking in all its forms. Although many of these children are eligible for protection under U.S. immigration law, the lack of mechanisms which could get them here safely requires them to risk their lives and embark on perilous journeys to seek U.S. protection.

For those children travelling on and arriving in the United States, all of them need the basics of life and many have additional needs due to trauma in their home countries or in transit. The U.S. Departments of Homeland Security, Health and Human Services’ Office of Refugee Resettlement (ORR), and Justice’s Executive Office for Immigration Review (EOIR) have been struggling to respond to the spike in arrivals. At certain points, ORR even has had to shift funding from services to other vulnerable populations to serve these children. Those pressures persist on ORR’s limited budget.

Also, as the children proceed through their immigration hearings, some qualify to remain here and are thereby in need of longer term care in the United States that is provided through the Unaccompanied Refugee Minors Program. Some others are returned home to Central America and Mexico. Unfortunately, there are not consistent mechanisms for repatriating these children in a way that assures their well-being or provides them with options other than dangerous remigration to the United States.

What are the Bishops Doing?

A USCCB/MRS delegation visited Mexico, Guatemala, Honduras, and El Salvador in November 2013 and did a report. USCCB/MRS has deep pastoral concerns, grounded in extensive child welfare and service experience with this highly vulnerable child population. It is the nation’s largest refugee resettlement agency, having resettled 1 million of the 3 million refugees resettled in the United States in recent years. It also has a 35-year history of partnering with government stakeholders to provide services to unaccompanied refugee minors, and a 20-year history of services

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to unaccompanied alien children.

In addressing these challenges, we urge Congress and the Administration to adhere to the following principles:

For the children, the faithful adherence to the best interest of the child standard is necessary in all decision-making. This means that all procedures, protocols, and mechanisms developed are child-friendly, trauma-informed, and administered by child welfare professionals; that children are screened and assessed for their immediate humanitarian protection needs and their long-term international protection needs; that during the pursuit of long-term solutions for the children they are placed in the least-restrictive settings (i.e. community-based); that all children are connected with social and legal services to address their immediate needs; that long-term and durable solutions are pursued that are in the children's best interests; and that where repatriation is the best alternative available, safe repatriation and reintegration is conducted in collaboration and coordination with the children's home governments, NGOs, and other implementing partners. Family reunification, including policies which ensure ongoing family safety, should be a central component of implementing the best interest of the child principle.

For the United States government, a mutually supportive, interagency response is necessary to ensure we are leveraging the expertise and resources of the agencies that bear responsibility for addressing all aspects of the challenge. This includes HHS’s Office of Refugee Resettlement (ORR) and also the Administration for Children and Families’ domestic child welfare division; the Department of State’s (DOS) Agency for International Development, Bureau of Population, Refugees, and Migration, and Western Hemispheric Affairs; the Executive Office for Immigration Review of DOJ; and Citizenship and Immigration Services, Immigration Customs Enforcement, and Customs and Border Protection of the Department of Homeland Security (DHS). The inter-agency work on the issue should incorporate clear leadership responsibilities and effective collaboration mechanisms to assure the optimum results both in the United States and throughout the region.

For the all governments of the region, resources must be invested into examining and effectively addressing root causes of migration in Central America and Mexico as well as addressing the lack of citizen security which is propelling individuals to flee. This approach must prioritize protection for those who are displaced from their homes, especially children, the most vulnerable.

What Can You Do to Help?

- Unaccompanied children are in need of your assistance, both through material support when they arrive and continual advocacy efforts on their behalf. To learn more about this situation and how you can help advocating on behalf of these children, please visit: www.usccb.org/mrs

- If you are interested in assisting MRS continue its important work with migrants and refugees, please consider making a donation to the National Catholic Migration Fund at www.usccb.org/mrs-ncf

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