

Child Refugees in the Borderlands

By Anne Winkler-Morey

On September 30, following the incarceration and deportation of 60,000 migrating children fleeing physical and economic violence in Central America, who arrived on the Texas border this summer, the Obama administration announced it will designate 4,000 of the already minuscule 70,000 U.S. refugee slots for children from Latin America.

[Editor's Note: Update: On November 14, when U.S. Vice President Joseph Biden announced more details at a Central American conference at the Inter-American Development Bank, he indicated that this would not help the children who had already fled to the United States. Applicants for refugee status would have to apply from within their country of origin and need to be a relative of someone who was already a legal U.S. resident.[1] On November 20, President Obama, who has been called "Deporter in Chief" for the record number of deportations under his administration, but who has always blamed congress for not passing immigration reform, announced his own executive plan that could benefit 4.5 million undocumented people in the U.S. However, when it came to Central American children, it again emphasized that they are not welcome in the U.S. as the recently announced plan explicitly includes this: "Continuing the surge of resources that effectively reduced the number of unaccompanied children crossing the border illegally this summer, the President's actions will also centralize border security command-and-control to continue to crack down on illegal immigration." [2] The plan also requested that Congress add 20,000 more Border Patrol agents.[3] Thus, Central American children in crisis remain endangered in their own countries, and temporarily held in detention centers in the U.S. until, most likely, deported—all sources of concern for their advocates, which now include the United Nations. Anne Winkler Morey addresses root causes, stemming from U.S. policy in Central America.]



One of the trains called La Bestia for the huge risks it involves on the long journey north, undertaken to escape gangs, drug cartels, and other dangers threatening the lives of the young in Central America.

Photo: John Moore/Getty Images

The crisis of Central American child refugees unfolded at a time when we needed to protest injustice on many fronts: Gaza, Iraq, Syria, Ferguson. Arming apartheid states, waging war, killing youth for being black, and abusing the human rights of immigrants is nothing new for the United States, but with the militarization of police in Ferguson and the inhumane detention of kids on the border, our country seems to have abandoned even the need to appear as a beacon of democracy and justice.

Not the first time, of course. My 91-year-old aunt Maja tells of an infamous moment she witnessed as a teenager, when the U.S succumbed to a virulent right wing, despite damaging appearances. As a recent refugee in Cuba, she watched the ship S.S. St. Louis sail into the Havana harbor in May 1939, coming so close she could touch it, then turning around and heading back to Europe. Both Cuba and the U.S. had denied entrance to the passengers, 915 refugees from Nazi Germany, sending them back to, in my aunt's words, "be extinguished."

Likewise, the Obama administration in the summer of 2014 decided appeasing hate is more important than the lives of children or even the appearance of humanity. The whole world watched while a powerful nation incarcerated, detained in cramped quarters, and deported traumatized children, sentencing them to more torture and/or death. From the pictures of detention centers on the Texas border it looked as though the children had arrived at the doorstep of one of the poorest, most overpopulated and refugee-inundated countries in the world. I was not the only one for whom these pictures evoked images of slave ships and concentration camps.

Child refugees of U.S. foreign policy

The U.S. is directly implicated in creating the conditions that forced these children to flee their homes.

The Obama administration's policy in Central America follows a U.S. tradition of gunboats and occupations from a century ago, decades of propping up dictators, training paramilitary forces, and funding terrorists in the mid-20th century, as well as the "free trade" agreements and drug wars of the post-Cold War era. In all these periods, the goal remained the same: to protect U.S. corporations exploiting the region.

Policy motivations under Obama have been no different, but some conditions have changed.

In the last six years, mining companies, in a global race for new subsoil sources, have targeted Central America. While mining has never been a way to grow and diversify local economies unless unions are powerful, in this newest phase with new technologies corporations have found a way to touch down, extract, pollute, and exit with advancing speed, leaving even less in the way of a tax base for infrastructure, or jobs to build community incomes. It is for this reason that impoverished communities, especially in El Salvador, have rejected mining companies. It is in this context that Manuel Zelaya, president of Honduras from 2006 until he was removed in a coup in 2009, was considering legislation banning mining altogether in his country. This is one of the reasons that the Obama administration backed the coup and worked hard—as Hillary Clinton has recently boasted in her new book, *Hard Choices*—to make sure he would not return.

Zelaya was replaced by a corrupt right-wing regime, accelerating a wave of extreme violence in the country. It is no surprise then that the majority of the unaccompanied children are from Honduras, the nation with the world's highest murder rate. The reasons for violence in Honduras are multiple, but the U.S. is implicated in all of them. Free trade economics continued to ravage local economies leading people to resort to crime or emigration. The U.S.-supported coup regime was infamous for state-sponsored violence and massive corruption.

Many of the gang leaders now terrorizing a new generation of youth, were themselves young refugees who, as a result of the Central American Free Trade Agreement (CAFTA), fled El Salvador, Honduras and Guatemala decade ago. They ended up in Los Angeles where, unable to work legally, they became involved with gangs. When the U.S. deported these individuals, they were also deporting gangs to Central America. Together these factors created the crisis for Central American children, who, if they defied the "invitation" to join gangs, faced the possibility of being murdered—or embarking on the dangerous trip to the U.S. border to escape.

It is easy to become overwhelmed by the number of injustices piling up in all corners in 2014. We can't take action everywhere on everything. To keep our energy where it needs to be, I recommend NOT reading the racist comments following every news story on the migrant children or watching the rallies of Americans who

greeted buses of children, vying to be this generation's ugly white mob. We need to focus our energies where we can to create social change. As we engage in protests of all sorts on many fronts, we can make connections: the criminalization of African American children in U.S. cities and Central American children on the U.S. border; Israeli companies that built the wall in Gaza who were also hired to build the wall/s on the U.S. Mexican border; corporations that mine subsoil resources directing U.S. policy in the Middle East and Central America, while putting climate change on the fast track.

No borders.

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Endnotes

1. Yukhanaov, Anna and Zengerle, Patricia, "U.S. seeks to ease influx of Central American child migrants," Nov. 14, 2014, Reuters.com; "U.S. to grant refugee status to Central American child migrants," ticotimes.net, Nov. 14, 2104; Huang, Josie, "U.S. introduces new policy on Central American child refugees," "Multi-American, KPCC, Southern California Public Radio, Nov. 14, 2014
2. See "Cracking Down on Illegal Immigration at the Border" section of "Fact Sheet: Immigration Accountability Executive Action," White House Press Office, Nov. 20, 2014
3. "Fact Sheet: Immigration Accountability Executive Action," White House Press Office, Nov. 20, 2014, whitehouse.gov/the-press-office/2014/11/20/fact-sheet-immigration-accountability-executive-action