



International Organizations Condemn Recent Attacks Against Casa del Migrante; Reiterate Support for its Work in Guatemala City

The Americas

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International organizations closely monitoring human rights and human mobility in Central America condemn the recent attacks against the Scalabrini Mission “Casa del Migrante” (Migrant House) in Guatemala City. We stand with Director Father Mauro Verzeletti, Scalabrini staff, and volunteers who denounced receiving threatening calls in response to their dignified work supporting Guatemalans and migrants from other countries.

On Monday, January 20, Father Verzeletti received a call threatening the personal integrity of the staff and building, promising to “put an end” to the work of the Mission. On Tuesday, after receiving a second call, Father Verzeletti filed a complaint with State Prosecutors and publicly denounced the threats.

In the days leading up to the threats against the Casa del Migrante, their facilities were brimming with migrants and asylum seekers. The Casa provided support to more than 2,000 mostly Honduran and Salvadoran migrants and asylum seekers journeying north amidst increased levels of violence, corruption, and poverty in the region. They also provided shelter, food, and clothing for Guatemalans deported by ICE and to men, women, and children recently returned from the U.S. through the Asylum Cooperation Agreement (ACA), commonly known as Third Safe Country Agreement. This is vital assistance which neither the Guatemalan or United States government had provided.

Since rules for the implementation of the ACA were published on November 19, more than 200 Honduran and El Salvadoran asylum seekers have been sent to Guatemala to apply for asylum there instead of having their cases heard in the U.S. We are concerned that in the current context both migrants and asylum seekers, as well as those advocating for their rights in Guatemala are at risk. Guatemala does not have the capacity to guarantee fundamental human rights, like safety or a fair and full asylum process, to people sent by the U.S. and at the same time, the increasing number of asylum seekers sent to Guatemala will only overburden civil society organizations providing assistance to returnees, like Casa del Migrante. Last week, four non-profit organizations mounted the first legal challenge against the U.S. policy of sending asylum seekers to Guatemala, Honduras and El Salvador. All three nations signed ACAs with the United States in 2019. The complaint argues that

these countries are far from being safe for many who flee persecution. At the same time, thousands of migrants, part of the caravan, are now facing serious acts of violence and repression at the Guatemala-Mexico border.

Through the ACA with Guatemala, the United States is renegeing on its responsibility to protect asylum seekers and exposing them to serious human rights violations by removing Honduran and El Salvadoran migrants who request asylum in the U.S. to Guatemala, without properly considering if their life and liberty could be at risk there, nor if they will be able to have access to full and fair asylum procedures in the country. This violates U.S. law and international treaties protecting migrants. Further, the ACA has not been ratified by Guatemala's congress, which the nation's Constitutional Court has ruled is required prior to its implementation. Officials recently appointed by the newly inaugurated President of Guatemala Alejandro Giammattei this week affirmed their commitment to implementing the ACA despite the Constitutional Court ruling. Given that the bilateral agreement is not fully in force, it's implementation undermines democracy and the rule of law in Guatemala, and violates the rules published into U.S. law on November 19.

We are also concerned by recent media reports that Guatemalan security forces extorted and deported Central Americans for whom Guatemalan law guarantees freedom of movement within Guatemala. At the time, DHS agents were providing assistance to the same security forces, apparently through provisions of the Border Security Agreement.

On Monday, in a second Constitutional Court ruling about the ACA and its implementation, the Guatemalan Court ruled to provisionally suspend the implementation of the "Protection and Attention" Public Policy that was approved in December by the outgoing Jimmy Morales Administration. The policy outlined how state institutions, under the direction of the Ministry of Foreign Relations, should implement the ACA. A hearing is expected in the next two weeks before a final ruling will be handed down by the Court regarding the policy.

We reiterate our support to the Casa del Migrante and express grave concern for the security and safety of its Director, Staff, and volunteers. We support the call for a full investigation into the recent threats received and demand the Guatemalan State provide perimeter security, as requested by the Casa del Migrante, in order to ensure its dignified work and service to Guatemalan and migrants from other countries can continue. The work of human rights defenders, like the Casa del Migrante, should have the full protection and recognition of the Guatemalan State in accordance with its national and international obligations.

Alianza Americas/American Friends Service Committee/Center for Gender & Refugee Studies - CGRS/Center for Justice and International Law - CEJIL/Committee in Solidarity with the People of El Salvador - CISPES/Guatemala Human Rights Commission - GHRC-USA/International Labor Rights Forum/Kids in Need of Defense - KIND/Latin America Working Group Education Fund - LAWG/Network in Solidarity with the People of Guatemala - NISGUA/Oxfam/Sisters of Mercy of the Americas - Institute Justice Team/Washington Office on Latin America - WOLA/Women's Refugee Commission - WRC