



July 4, 2014

President Barack Obama
1600 Pennsylvania Avenue
Washington, D.C. 20500

Dear Mr. President:

The Sisters of Mercy have worked tirelessly with your Administration to build support for immigration reform, and as the leadership team for our Institute, we appreciate your willingness to take executive action later this summer. But we are extremely troubled by your Administration's response to the unprecedented numbers of women and children fleeing violence in Honduras, El Salvador and Guatemala. Over the last four years the number of unaccompanied minors apprehended by the U.S. Border Patrol has skyrocketed by 700% for Guatemalans, 930% for El Salvadorians and 1300% for Hondurans. The vulnerable populations from these Northern Triangle countries are not only seeking refuge in the United States; the United Nations High Commission on Refugees (UNHCR) reports that asylum applications are up 712% since 2008 in Belize, Nicaragua, Panama, Costa Rica and Mexico. What we are experiencing is a regional humanitarian crisis. The questions we need to be asking ourselves are: what has contributed to this crisis, how might your Administration's proposals actually further deepen the crisis, and what sustainable solutions can be put in place to address the root causes driving migration?

We have sisters in 12 countries, including Guatemala and Honduras. Through our service in these countries, we have witnessed the extreme violence and poverty that women and children face in their communities. The Northern Triangle countries have some of the highest homicide rates, with Honduras now ranking number one in the world. It must be recognized that in the Northern Triangle, a parent's decision to keep a child at home is more dangerous than risking the journey to another country.

The causes of this massive exodus are rooted in U.S. economic and foreign policies in Central America that clearly are not effective in responding to the underlying issues. In order to resolve this humanitarian crisis, Mr. President, your Administration must develop a new approach to the region while ensuring that the immediate needs of these refugees are fully met.

After 20 years of the North American Free Trade Act (NAFTA) and 10 years of the Central American Free Trade Act (CAFTA), the evidence is clear that neo-liberal economic policies devastate weaker economies as workers are displaced, thus forcing many to migrate outside their countries to find work. In Mexico, due to NAFTA nearly 1.4 million corn farms went under as their markets were flooded with U.S. subsidized corn. Consequently, an estimated 600,000 undocumented immigrants risked the journey to the United States. Since CAFTA was enacted in 2006, migration from Central America experienced a similar upsurge. During the first year of CAFTA in El Salvador, 11,457 workers were displaced from their jobs and migration to the United States from El Salvador jumped from 507 per day to 740 per day. Currently, Mr. President, your Administration is withholding developmental aid to El Salvador due to a provision within CAFTA, thus advancing the interest of giant seed corporations, like Monsanto, over the food security needs of the El Salvadorian people. The U.S. needs a new approach to trade, one that values people, culture, and the right of countries' sovereignty over corporate interest.

In terms of U.S. foreign policy, it would be disastrous, particularly in Honduras and Guatemala, to send more money to a militarized "war on drugs" or to security forces that are corrupt and have substantial allegations of human rights violations. The U.S. State Department cites significant human rights violations in Guatemala and Honduras that include both military and police units committing unlawful killing, kidnappings, assault, rape, extortion and corruption. Since 2008, your Administration has invested hundreds of millions into the

Central American Regional Security Initiative (CARSI), with 64% of the funds for enforcement and counter-narcotics, and the situation in the region has only gotten worse. We reject the notion that additional resources for “community policing and law enforcement,” as stated in your letter to Congress, will strengthen citizen security in the region.

The escalation of violence and the stranglehold of narco-traffickers are largely bi-products of a failing economy and corrupt governments. Nowhere is this more apparent than in Honduras. In June of 2009, the Honduran military, which receives substantial training and support from the U.S., overthrew the democratically elected President because of his anti-poverty initiatives. After a brief suspension of aid, Mr. President, your Administration renewed funding and support for the post-coup Honduran government. The government your Administration currently supports in Honduras is implicated in killings and threats to human rights defenders, labor leaders, journalists, indigenous and peasant leaders who are defending the rights to their land. Impunity reigns and increasingly military police are being deployed throughout the country. Since the coup in 2009, the political instability in Honduras led to the homicide rate increasing from 60 to 93 per 100,000, making the country the most dangerous place to live outside of a war zone. In some cities, such as San Pedro Sula, the homicide rate is 180 per 100,000, 11 times the homicide rate of your home city of Chicago. Mr. President, your Administration holds some responsibility for the current state of Honduras. Rather than send more money for security forces involved in CARSI, these funds should be suspended until impunity is seriously addressed. Also in order to prevent a similar catastrophe, your Administration should immediately end the training of Latin American militaries at the Western Hemisphere Institute for Security Cooperation (WHINSEC). The Cold War is over and we need to stop training and equipping foreign militaries that carry out coups and repress democratic freedoms in their countries.

It will take time for a new foreign policy approach in Central America to alleviate the root causes of this tragedy. Meanwhile, the U.S. needs to come to terms with the fact that more women and children will likely come to our borders. Mr. President, your Administration must uphold the high human rights standard that the U.S. demands of other countries. We are outraged by the announcement to renew the policy of family detention and efforts to expedite deportations of a vulnerable population back to life-threatening situations. A policy of deterrence will not dissuade people seeking refuge from untenable living situations but instead perpetuates their suffering once in the United States. As little as 5 years ago, the inexplicable treatment of families in the T. Don Hutto detention facilities was a national embarrassment. Thankfully, Mr. President, your Administration closed the facility, ending its legacy of inhumane treatment of women and children. There is no guarantee that this renewed effort to incarcerate mothers with their children will not have the same outcome, including children living in locked cells with only an open-air toilet accessible and guards' threats of separating mothers from their children as a disciplinary tactic.

Instead of family detention, we call on you to strengthen alternatives to detention programs, which are more cost effective and humane. We are thankful for the collaboration between FEMA and ORR and the faith-based agencies. The Sisters of Mercy and many of our faith partners are working under the guidance of these groups to mobilize our communities to provide housing facilities and services.

The Sisters of Mercy of the Americas' desire for another approach resonates with the teachings of Pope Francis. When addressing a plenary on the Pastoral Care of Migrants, the Pope asked “leaders and legislators and the entire international community above all to confront the reality of those who have been displaced by force, with effective projects and new approaches in order to protect their dignity, to improve the quality of their life and to face the challenges that are emerging from modern forms of persecution, oppression and slavery.” Our Sisters and co-workers will continue to respond to the needs of women and children in the Northern Triangle and the refugees that seek safe haven in the United States. We look forward to working with your Administration to find a new approach that will uphold the human dignity of this vulnerable population.

Sincerely,

Institute Leadership Team of the Sisters of Mercy of the Americas