

Administration of Barack Obama, 2014

Remarks Following a Meeting With President Otto Fernando Pérez Molina of Guatemala, President Juan Orlando Hernández Alvarado of Honduras, and President Salvador Sánchez Cerén of El Salvador and an Exchange With Reporters

July 25, 2014

President Obama. Well, I want to thank very much, President Molina, President Hernández, and President Sánchez Cerén for being here today. Our nations share extraordinary ties of culture, of family, of commerce that enrich all of us and make our country stronger. And we have a wide range of issues that we share and have discussed in the past in various bilateral and multilateral forms.

But today our focus was on what's been a significant challenge in the news and, more importantly, a significant challenge for families that have been at risk as a consequence of the rise of unaccompanied children traveling from Central American countries to the U.S. border, leaving their homes in Central America and making a journey that poses great danger to themselves.

All of us recognize that we have a shared responsibility to address this problem. President Molina hosted Vice President Biden in an earlier meeting to look at specific steps that could be taken to alleviate this challenge. And today what I did was share with my counterparts here the efforts that the United States has in our continuing response, including unprecedented numbers of Border Patrol agents and resources at the border, more facilities to properly care for these children that have already arrived, and more resources for our immigration courts to process the claims of these children in a way that's orderly and timely that protects their due process, but also expedites the length of time that it takes to assure that they've gotten a fair hearing.

Now, I emphasized to all three Presidents that the American people and my administration have great compassion for these children and want to make sure that they are cared for the way all children should be cared for. And we've seen an outpouring of generosity from not only families at the borders themselves that are providing assistance—and nonprofit organizations and churches that are providing assistance—but actually, from across the country, people have expressed their concern and compassion for these children.

But I also emphasized to my friends here that we have to deter a continuing influx of children putting themselves at great risk and families who are putting their children at great risk. And so I emphasized that within a legal framework and a humanitarian framework and proper due process, children who do not have proper claims and families with children who do not have proper claims, at some point, will be subject to repatriation to their home countries.

I say that not because we lack compassion, but because in addition to being a nation of immigrants, we're also a nation of laws. And if you have a disorderly and dangerous process of migration, that not only puts the children themselves at risk, but it also calls to question the legal immigrant—immigration process of those who are properly applying and trying to enter into our country.

Each President here emphasized the degree to which they have already begun to make efforts to discourage this dangerous trafficking in children. And I want to thank all of them

publicly—I already did so privately—for specific efforts that they're taking in each country to discourage parents from sending their children on this journey, for going after and arresting smugglers in a more aggressive fashion, and for working with us on the issue of repatriating the children and families in a safe and orderly way.

Initial reports show that our joint efforts appear to be paying off, and the number of unaccompanied children crossing the border this month appears to have dropped by half since June. Of course, it's still too high. And so today we agreed to continue to work together.

Finally, even as we meet this immediate situation, we all recognize that we have to do more to address the root causes of the problem, and that includes poverty and violence in Central America. I discussed this when I met with Central American leaders last year in Costa Rica. And we are committed to working together in partnership with each of these countries to find ways in which we can come up with more aggressive action plans to improve security and development and governance in these countries.

I expressed to them that we have a shared responsibility, for example, when it comes to dealing with drug trafficking, that we are dealing with the demand for drugs in the United States and doing more to stop the cross-border flows of arms, for example, from the north to the south. And I also continued to emphasize the fact that not just if, but when, we pass comprehensive immigration reform in this country, then we will have the capacity not only to strengthen resources at our borders, but we're also going to have a capacity to create more orderly ways for legal migration, in some cases temporary worker programs, that allow people to advance economically, allow our economy to grow, allow families to be reunified, but also, in many cases, a lot of people to return to their families in their home countries.

With respect to the U.S. meeting some of its responsibilities, I briefed my fellow Presidents on the supplemental request that is working its way through Congress. And I just want to mention that it is my hope that Speaker Boehner and House Republicans will not leave town for the month of August for their vacations without doing something to help solve this problem.

We have a supplemental that provides resources for additional border security, for additional immigration judges, for additional resources to assist our Central American countries in providing facilities and opportunity and security needs to deal with the smugglers. And we need to get that done. And so there have been a lot of press conferences about this; we need action and less talk.

So let me once again thank President Molina, President Hernández, President Sánchez Cerén. Each of these leaders have shown great responsiveness and great sincerity in wanting to deal with this situation in as—a sensible and compassionate way. I appreciate their efforts. They all face significant challenges, and the one thing that we, I think, all recognize is, is that if we are working together in a coordinated fashion, if the United States is listening to the ideas of these Presidents in how they are creating greater opportunity and security in their country and also how we can deal with the challenges of the smugglers, I'm confident that we're going to be able to solve this problem.

So they've proven to be excellent partners, and this is a situation where the whole can be greater than the sum of its parts if we're working together effectively.

So thank you so much, gentlemen, for not only your thoughtful presentations, but also your concrete cooperation. It means a lot to me and to the American people.

Refugee Status for Central American Migrants

Q. Mr. President, what about the refugee proposal?

Q. Is the refugee program possible?

President Obama. Actually, I wasn't going to take questions, but let me just respond to this particular question because I felt like some of the stories were a little overcranked. And as I explained to my fellow Presidents, under U.S. law, we admit a certain number of refugees from all around the world based on some fairly narrow criteria. And typically, refugee status is not granted just based on economic need or because a family lives in a bad neighborhood or poverty. It's typically defined fairly narrowly; you have a state, for example, that was targeting political activists and they need to get out of the country for fear of prosecution or even death.

There may be some narrow circumstances in which there is a humanitarian or a refugee status that a family might be eligible for. If that were the case, it would be better for them to be able to apply in country rather than take a very dangerous journey all the way up to Texas to make those same claims. But I think it's important to recognize that that would not necessarily accommodate a large number of additional migrants.

What's more important is going to be for us to be able to find the kinds of solutions, both short term and long term, that prevents smugglers from making money on families that feel desperate; that ensure that we're creating greater security for families in Central America, and that we are helping to grow opportunity long term in Central America and creating the kind of legal immigration system that makes this underground migration system less necessary. And that's what I'm going to be committed to doing. All right?

Immigration Policy

Q. Will you accept less money from the supplemental, Mr. President?

President Obama. I said one question, Jeff [Jeff Mason, Reuters].

[*At this point, the interpreter translated President Obama's earlier response.*]

President Obama. But we are going to continue to work in consultation with Central American countries to find additional creative and sensible ways in which legal claims for migration can be processed in those countries in a fair and just way.

All right. You guys got some bonus coverage there. [*Laughter*]

NOTE: The President spoke at 3:42 p.m. in the Cabinet Room at the White House.

Categories: Interviews With the News Media : Exchanges with reporters :: White House; Meetings With Foreign Leaders and International Officials : El Salvador, President Sánchez Cerén; Meetings With Foreign Leaders and International Officials : Guatemala, President Pérez Molina; Meetings With Foreign Leaders and International Officials : Honduras, President Hernández.

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