News



A bus driver outside Guatemala City directs people boarding a bus March 19, 2020, after they were deported from the United States. (CNS/Reuters/Fabricio Alonso)



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Washington — June 25, 2020
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A report by the Washington-based Refugees International organization charges U.S. immigration policy with helping the spread of the coronavirus in Guatemala, as federal agencies in the U.S. and Mexico have repatriated infected Guatemalans through deportations.

In "Harmful Returns: The Compounded Vulnerabilities of Returned Guatemalans in the Time of COVID-19," a report released June 23, Refugees International urges that Guatemalans seeking refuge be allowed to apply for asylum in the U.S., instead of being turned over to Mexican authorities or repatriated, and that they be allowed to go with U.S. sponsors while they wait for their day in immigration court.

But U.S. policies such as the "Remain in Mexico" program, also called the Migrant Protection Protocols, or MPP, which asks those seeking asylum in the U.S. to wait in Mexico until a U.S. immigration court can adjudicate their case, have led to the eventual return home of many Guatemalans and other Central Americans during the COVID-19 pandemic.

Earlier this year, Guatemalan officials halted flights carrying deportees into the country, saying that at least 20% of its COVID-19 cases had resulted from deportees who contracted the virus in U.S. detention centers. Citing those figures, Refugees International said once they were returned to Guatemala, deportees tested positive for COVID-19, "despite having clean bill of health documents from the United States."

And once they return to Guatemala, they were met with stigma, lack of jobs and still facing dangerous conditions in addition to having contracted the virus, the group says.

"These measures force home many Guatemalans with valid refugee claims who are at risk of persecution upon return," the group said in a June 23 news release. "Others have legitimate fears for their security and safety when they get home because

returnees are at greater risk of becoming targets of violence and extortion.

"Once back, Guatemalans often struggle to reintegrate. They face unique challenges in earning a livelihood; and women, indigenous groups and children face particular barriers to accessing many basic public services. Also, health care is lacking, particularly for psychological or specialized services."

The group called on the Guatemalan government to provide "multilingual information campaigns in Mayan languages and Spanish to combat stigma directed at deportees released from coronavirus quarantine," as well as shelters where returnees can properly practice social distancing during a certain period as a way to stop the spread of the virus.

But the main concern, the group said, is that people seeking refuge in the U.S., including children, are exposed to unsafe conditions during detention and then turned away or put in conditions that risk their health and their lives while in custody.

"In the United States, the administration has responded to the pandemic by insisting on continued detention of asylum-seekers by Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE) rather than using alternatives that would allow for social distancing," said the group.

The group also has objected to the Trump administration's use of the Public Health Safety Act to remove asylum-seekers, sending them to dangerous border towns in Mexico without any proper screening.

The organization has recommended testing prior to deportation as well as testing once the returnees arrive, saying a lack of such measures puts the deported and the general population at risk.

"If a returnee has been exposed to COVID-19 or is COVID-19 positive upon arrival, there are few if any health care services to treat them, nor is there adequate shelter to allow for either quarantine or isolation," the organization said.

Deported Guatemalans return only to face hunger, a stagnant economy and restrictions on their movement.

"Adults and children alike face stigma and a growing risk of violent attack as fear and misinformation about the disease continue to spread," they said, citing a recent report from a United Nations aid official in the country who said that "many communities are rejecting returnees because they fear being infected" and some deportees have been attacked.

Earlier in the year, some U.S. bishops joined an effort by national organizations and other groups in Latin America calling on global leaders to provide better protections for migrants and refugees during the coronavirus pandemic, while also voicing worries about the spread of the virus to other countries via deportations.

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