

Will AMLO Respond to the Central American Exodus With Compassion—Or Militarization?

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In These Times, January 29, 2019

Mexico's new progressive president says he has a just immigration plan. But critics say it's flawed.

U.S. funding for the region continues to support state security forces with track records of human rights abuses and violent repression of social movements.

As thousands of Central Americans continued to join an exodus headed toward Mexico and the United States, government officials from the region met in San Salvador on January 15 to discuss the details of a foreign assistance plan Mexico ambitiously [claims](#) will address the root causes of migration by funding job-creation and poverty-reduction in Central America and southern Mexico.

Following the example of the Marshall Plan for European reconstruction in the wake of World War II, the government of Mexican President Andrés Manuel López Obrador is calling for the investment of some \$30 billion over five years to stimulate economic development in the region. While details remain unclear, the Northern Triangle countries of El Salvador, Guatemala and Honduras signed a joint declaration with Mexico last month to kick off talks to define the initiative, formally called the [Comprehensive Development Plan](#). Mexico has asked the United States to pitch in, though so far the commitment has been paltry.

Under the original Marshall Plan, officially called the European Recovery Program, the United States pumped nearly \$13 billion into western Europe between 1948 and 1951. The goal was to reconstruct European nations devastated by World War II, liberalize trade and contain communism in the early years of the Cold War. Noam Chomsky has argued that the plan was crafted to [serve U.S. corporate interests](#) and laid the groundwork for the rise of [transnational corporations](#), though it did contribute to Europe's recovery. Alongside the economic agenda, [covert CIA operations](#), financed with 5 percent of Marshall Plan funds, used a "a network of false fronts" to undermine socialist and communist labor unions and other social organizations.

As part of his call for a Marshall Plan for Central America, López Obrador, known as AMLO, has proposed prioritizing development over security in the region, signaling that sustainable development in Central America is [tied](#) to that of Mexico. Mexico says the plan aims to combat the drivers of migration in a "[comprehensive way](#)" as part of a broader effort to [ease "restrictive" immigration policy](#) to improve conditions for Central Americans in transit. Meanwhile, security remains the top pillar in the U.S.

State Department's [strategy](#) for Central America, under which new funding to the region will fall.

Endorsing the agreement between Mexico and the Northern Triangle countries, the United Nations Economic Commission for Latin America and the Caribbean says the plan has the potential to “change the paradigm of migration, development and cooperation” in the region.

But critics argue that while the situations in the Northern Triangle are indeed dire and require urgent attention, the plan will likely follow in the footsteps of other regional U.S.-backed initiatives that have failed to effectively tackle the underlying causes of migration and—instead—prioritized militarization and private profits. Misguided priorities, compounded by weak and corrupt government institutions in the region, have led to a funding model that not only falls short of tackling root causes, but may exacerbate the inequality, displacement and failed anti-violence policies that drive people to flee their homes in their first place.

“Difficult conditions”

Deep institutional crises in the governments of the region—rooted at least in part in unrealized promises of peace and democracy after the end of U.S.-backed civil wars in the region—leaves many wary of regional leaders' will and ability to effectively administer funds in ways that will benefit populations in need. While the idea of a Marshall Plan for Central America sounds promising, it is unlikely to produce meaningful results without rethinking the ways foreign aid has been allocated and administered, critics say.

“I think it is very difficult in these conditions that any plan could change the situations in our countries,” Ursula Roldan, director of the Institute for Research and Social Projection on Global and Territorial Dynamics at the Rafael Landivar University in Guatemala City, tells *In These Times*. “First we would have to stabilize the region through deepening the fight against corruption and through more legitimate elections.”

The crises are deep. Guatemala is in the grips of a “[slow motion coup](#)” set off by the government's bid to unilaterally boot a UN-backed anti-corruption commission out of the country. Honduras is still reeling from a 2009 military coup and widely-condemned 2017 presidential election, both tacitly endorsed by the United States and accompanied by widespread political violence. And El Salvador, set to vote for a new president on February 3, remains locked into a 15-year-old “iron fist” clampdown on gangs that has [failed](#) to rein in violent crime.

Geoff Thale, vice president of Programs at the Washington Office on Latin America (WOLA), argues it's time to “fundamentally rethink” foreign aid plans for the region to yield meaningful results.

“In principle, a Marshall Plan for Central America is the right thing,” Thale tells *In These Times*. “But there’s a long way from saying that it’s a good idea, to figuring out how to actually make it work in a way that generates both development and equity in the region, that is adequately funded, and that is not riddled by corruption and mismanagement in ways that make it ineffective.”

“Government of criminals”

Bartolo Fuentes, a Honduran journalist and former member of Congress, tells *In These Times* that the southern Mexico development portion of the Marshall Plan could be promising. Fuentes helped get the word out last October about the first big caravan from Honduras, made up of people fleeing violence, political persecution, poverty and unemployment. Contrary to Trump’s rhetoric, he says the idea of the caravan was never to enter the United States en masse or by force, and some [3,000 Central Americans](#) opted to request asylum in southern Mexico.

Fuentes believes that if salaries are decent, employment in Mexico could be an attractive option for some Hondurans seeking economic opportunities. He points to the Mexican government’s Maya Train rail project as one potential source of employment for migrant workers. Indigenous groups in Mexico have rejected the project over the government’s failure to consult their communities, while environmentalists warn of impacts on forests and wildlife habitat in southern states.

But Fuentes argues that investment in Honduras administered by the government of President Juan Orlando Hernández —sworn in for a controversial second term one year ago after a highly questioned presidential election—would be a lost cause. “We have a corrupt government,” he says, rhyming off a raft of underfunded public programs like health and education as well as a slew of high-profile government corruption scandals, including the [arrest](#) of the president’s brother in Miami on drug trafficking charges.

“In few words, we need a change of government,” says Fuentes. “This is a government of criminals. As long as those people [remain in power], there will be no plan for prosperity that really works, neither by Mexico nor the United States.”

Doubling down on failed policies

Fuentes’ criticism of the United States references an ongoing regional development initiative ostensibly aimed at stemming migration from the region, the Alliance for Prosperity. Developed under the Obama administration, the Alliance for Prosperity includes [plans](#) to build a gas pipeline from Mexico to Central America, expand energy infrastructure and logistics corridors, coordinate border security across the region and attract foreign investment.

Though initially billed as a \$1 billion per year plan over five years, the United States has allocated \$2.1 billion to the region since 2016. The Northern Triangle

governments have allocated \$7.7 billion to the Alliance for Prosperity in the same period.

Journalist and author Dawn Paley [reported](#) two years ago that the plan, [proposed](#) as a solution to the increase in unaccompanied Central American children arriving in the United States, was likely to deepen the refugee crisis because it proposed the same kinds of corporate projects and militarized security that community leaders in the region were fighting to stop. “Far from improving the situation, four years on, we see increased social and environmental conflict, increased militarization, increased polarization, increased poverty and an ongoing mass exodus,” she tells *In These Times* of the Alliance for Prosperity.

In her book, *Drug War Capitalism*, Paley argues that the war on drugs in Latin America has provided a pretext for U.S.-backed militarization, which in turn pushes the frontiers of global capitalism by opening up land and resources for foreign investment and extraction. The 18-year-old, \$10 billion counter-narcotics and counterinsurgency program Plan Colombia, for example, sold free-market economic reforms and military aid as a package deal. Back in 1998, Colombia’s then-President Andrés Pastrana Arango had called for a kind of [Marshall Plan for Colombia](#). A year later he forged Plan Colombia with then-President Bill Clinton. Plan Colombia utterly [failed](#) to curb cocaine production, while the human costs of the war soared. [Foreign direct investment](#) hit a high in 2013 at roughly seven times the 2000 level, and investment in mining and oil in particular ballooned exponentially. The Alliance for Prosperity follows a familiar playbook.

“We don’t have many specific details about the proposed plan at this point,” Paley says of the new Marshall Plan, “but based on the fact that funding is supposed to come from international financial institutions and private investors as well as the U.S. and Mexican governments, it’s unlikely we’ll see a departure from the Alliance for Prosperity.” The Inter-American Development Bank [facilitated](#) the creation of the Alliance for Prosperity and will continue to be one of the partners with which U.S. support for the Marshall Plan proposes to “work closely,” along with the World Bank, International Monetary Fund and private sector partners such as the Overseas Private Investment Corporation.

Rights groups and researchers have warned militarized security, paired with development schemes designed to keep riches in the hands of transnational corporations and local elites, often exacerbate conditions that drive people to flee home in the first place.

“One of the things that has continuously failed is investment in security, which means militarization, that doesn’t attend to the longer, historical realities of a region that is completely stratified,” Alex Villalpando, professor of Pan-African Studies and Latin American Studies at California State University Los Angeles, tells *In These Times*.

Many also have raised concern that U.S. funding for the region continues to support state security forces with track records of human rights abuses and violent

repression of social movements. More than 50 members of U.S. Congress, for example, have [called](#) for the United States to more rigorously condition foreign aid and loans to Honduras' police and military in light of rampant impunity for violence against human rights defenders, epitomized by the murder of internationally-renowned indigenous leader Berta Cáceres. In Guatemala, military jeeps the United States donated in the name of the war on drugs were deployed last year to intimidate the anti-corruption commission, *The Intercept* [reported](#).

For Villalpando, any talk of a Marshall Plan for Central America is shaped by a “racialized logic” in the kind of relationship the United States has with Central America compared to Europe. While the United States saw European countries as “imperial allies” when the Marshall Plan was rolled out after World War II, Washington has long had a paternalistic relationship with Central America, he explains.

“That’s where the idea of a Marshall Plan falls,” Villalpando says. “Central America has been crucial to the U.S.’s development as an empire and as a global capitalist power.”

A sordid history

In response to AMLO’s push for the Central America plan, the United States pledged to pitch in [\\$5.8 billion](#) for Central America, though [most of that sum recommit existing funds](#), with over half coming from private investment guarantees. Washington says the aid proposes to “[promote institutional reforms and development](#)” through public and private investment in the name of “promoting a safer and more prosperous Central America.” Private investment guarantees for southern Mexico total \$4.8 billion. The Trump administration will ask for just \$180 million in new bilateral assistance for the region for 2019.

WOLA’s Thale says the U.S. contribution remains “fictional” at this point. “There’s almost no real new money in the proposal the administration made,” he tells *In These Times*. “If this is a \$30 billion plan, we ought to be contributing a larger share.”

Aquiles Magaña, executive secretary of El Salvador's National Council for the Protection and Development of Migrants and Their Families, believes that the United States has a “historical responsibility” to address structural causes of migration after decades of intervention in the region. Unlike other critics, he tells *In These Times* that the Alliance for Prosperity and other U.S. socio-economic investments are a step in the right direction. But he also argues that present-day funding doesn’t measure up to the hundreds of millions of dollars in U.S. economic and military aid that propped up El Salvador’s dictatorship during the country’s 12-year civil war, when Washington also sent military advisors to support the Salvadoran military, suggesting the United States should invest more in regional development.

U.S. history in neighboring Guatemala and Honduras is similarly sordid. In 1954, a CIA-backed coup in Guatemala set the stage for 36 years of brutal civil war and

genocide against Maya indigenous peoples. The conflict claimed 200,000 victims mostly at the hands of state forces and aligned death squads. Meanwhile, Honduras served as the Cold War staging ground for U.S. counterinsurgency strategy in the region, and in the 1980s a secret CIA-trained military unit terrorized, tortured and killed at least 184 dissidents to discourage a revolutionary uprising on Honduran soil. In the years after the region's peace accords, U.S. free trade policies shaped the region's economies, including undermining local agricultural production by flooding local markets with cheap U.S. imports. In 2009, the Obama administration refused to cut aid to Honduras after the military coup and later endorsed widely boycotted elections that took place under the coup regime. And most recently, the Trump administration appears to be turning a blind eye to constitutional crisis in Guatemala.

"Central America never managed to deepen its democracies," explains Rafael Landivar University's Roldan. She says powerful economic interests undermined the transition to democracy and the creation of meaningful public policies after the end of US-backed civil wars.

"Today we have co-opted governments, a business sector with too much power, no checks and balances on the exercise of power, and illicit forces that have controlled judicial and legislative apparatuses," she says. "What we need is to retake the path of democratic reconstruction in these countries."

The U.S. administration's plans to request \$180 million in new foreign aid for the Northern Triangle pales in comparison to Trump's \$5.7 billion request to build 234 miles of a "new physical barrier" at the border. Since the announcement of the Central America aid, Trump has focused immigration debate squarely on the wall as the only way to combat what he calls a "crisis" at the southern border.

Critics argue that the only humanitarian crisis is one of the United States' own making, as artificially slow processing of asylum-seekers left thousands of Central Americans in limbo at the US-Mexico border late last year. [Tens of thousands more](#) asylum-seekers living in the United States will be impacted as the government shutdown interrupts immigration court hearings. Meanwhile, deterrence policies—from Obama-era efforts to tighten Mexico's southern border through Programa Frontera Sur to Trump's "zero tolerance" policies—continue to show no signs of slowing the Central American exodus.

A new paradigm?

Against the backdrop of the manufactured border crisis and years of misguided U.S. responses to Central American migration, WOLA's Thale believes it is positive that Mexico is leading the strategy.

But Berenice Valdez Rivera, public policy coordinator with the Institute for Women in Migration, a Mexican social organization, stresses that AMLO should learn from his predecessor's mistakes and move away from failed solutions of militarized borders and increased immigration policing. Independent of the Marshall Plan for the

region, she believes Mexico's priorities in responding to the Central American exodus in the short term should include simplifying processes for Central Americans to regularize their status in Mexico, reducing immigration patrols, and raising awareness about and facilitating humanitarian visa options.

With thousands of Central Americans on their doorstep, Mexican immigration authorities "will attend to foreigners who arrive in Mexican territory with full respect for their human rights, offering them a humane reception, regularization processes so they can transit the country, as well as information and orientation," Marissa Gonzalez Ramirez, a spokesperson for Mexico's National Institute for Migration, told *In These Times*.

Since the latest large group of Central Americans arrived at its border, Mexican officials have received over 12,000 requests for humanitarian visas, including from 1,897 children and adolescents. About three quarters of applicants are from Honduras. But only a [fraction](#) of applicants have received their visas. Mexico's agreement with the Northern Triangle countries proposes to address all facets of migration from root causes to transit, asylum, and deportation processes. Although these moves appear to be making good on commitments to improve rights of migrants and refugees in transit, Mexico announced it has closed requests for humanitarian visas. Some rights groups also have raised [concern](#) about processing times being slower than the five days expected, noting the uncertainty has prompted some Central Americans to carry on without waiting for the visa.

But simultaneously, AMLO has attracted ire for pushing a plan to create a 60,000-strong National Guard. Critics say the force will continue a militarized public security strategy that, far from containing violent crime, has perpetuated violence and human rights abuses since former Mexican President Felipe Calderón launched the "war on drugs" 12 years ago. Lower House lawmakers overwhelmingly approved the plan, which now passes to the Senate. AMLO has called for the final version of the National Guard to include a stronger role for the military. The move does not inspire confidence that AMLO is willing to take a clear step away from militarization.

As Central Americans interested in staying in Mexico have options to request asylum or one-year humanitarian visas, it remains unclear what will happen to refugees seeking asylum in the United States under Trump's "Remain in Mexico" plan. The policy requires asylum-seekers to wait for their immigration court dates in Mexico, which could take years. Mexico has [criticized the policy as "unilateral,"](#) but nevertheless has stated the country will accept asylum seekers returned to Mexican territory. Immigration lawyers and human rights groups slam "Remain in Mexico" as a logistical nightmare that will put vulnerable asylum-seekers at greater risk.

For Valdez Rivera, ensuring humane treatment of migrants and refugees in transit through Mexico as well as effective implementation of a Marshall Plan for the region will require the government to work closely with human rights and social organizations with decades of frontline experience with these communities.

“Development doesn’t work without strengthening institutions,” she says. “The Mexican government needs to be close to civil society organizations in Central America and Mexico.”

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