

As protesters cry: “Guatemala is not a concentration camp”

Guatemalan ruling class braces for repercussions of asylum deal imposed by Trump

By Andrea Lobo
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On Friday, the Trump administration forced the Guatemalan government to sign a two-year agreement to become a “safe third country,” whereby the United States can deport migrants who reach its southern border to Guatemala and force them to apply for asylum there to the US or Guatemala.

In effect, the Guatemalan state is being turned into an extension of the US Department of Homeland Security (DHS), with the US promising to “cooperate to strengthen the institutional capacities of Guatemala,” that is, to militarize the borders and build concentration camps as part of a network that already spans across Mexico and the United States.

Guatemala will evaluate, one by one, the protection applications of people that fulfill the necessary requirements presented in the agreement, indicates one of the points.

After signing the agreement with the DHS acting secretary, Kevin McAleenan, the Guatemalan interior minister, Enrique Antonio Degenhart, stood up in front of Trump, who had been looking over them, shook his hand, thanked him and stated, “At your service, sir.”

The accord is the product of a continuous escalation of anti-immigrant policies of the Trump administration, rubber-stamped by the Democratic Party, that have sharply intensified after a series of migrant caravans with thousands from all over the region began in October. Some chanted “We are international workers!” and appealed for support from both the Mexican and US populations.

These measures are ultimately aimed against the entire working class in the United States, Mexico and Central America, native-born and immigrant alike. While seeking to cultivate a fascistic movement based in the US immigration agencies and armed forces, the Trump administration has exploited its anti-immigrant offensive to more forcibly intensify its agenda of militarization, austerity and super-exploitation in US imperialism’s “backyard,” which in turn has fueled the mass migration.

The agreement was first reached in a meeting on June 22 between the first lady of Guatemala, Patricia Marroquín, and McAleenan at an isolated DHS outpost along the Río Grande

border between the US and Mexico.

McAleenan described the specifics to the far-right website *Breitbart*: “What we have is commitments from Guatemala to take single adults and family units without travel documents back in an expedited fashion, to get them out of our custody and repatriate them more quickly from the border, to address adults crossing into their border with children to ensure they are actually traveling with their kids and that they are properly documented. We got them to commit to having unaccompanied children, 17 and under, to ensure they have proper paperwork... All of these things were implemented in the weeks after the visit.”

While it was being implemented *de facto*, including the deployment of 89 DHS agents to oversee the Guatemalan border forces agreed to on May 27, the actual signing of the designation of Guatemala as a “safe third country” had been impeded by a ruling of the Constitutional Court. Morales was forced to cancel a meeting with Trump scheduled for July 15.

Trump responded by threatening Guatemala with tariffs on exports, a travel ban and sanctions against remittances, which constitute 11.8 percent of Guatemala’s GDP and come almost strictly from the US. “They were all set to sign a safe third agreement,” he told a meeting of conservative teenagers last Tuesday, “and then today or yesterday, they announced they can’t do it because they got a Supreme Court ruling. Their Supreme Court, right?”

Beyond riding roughshod over the institutions and laws of Guatemala, Washington is operating entirely outside of international law regarding asylum rights and the 1969 Vienna Convention on Diplomatic Relations, whose article 25 turns “a treaty void if its conclusion has been procured by the threat or use of force.”

The final decision to sign the “safe third country” designation follows an utter silence by Guatemalan officials regarding the Trump administration’s torture and abuse of Guatemalan migrants, which has resulted in the death of five Guatemalan children under DHS custody, and the violation of the asylum rights of Guatemalans, who constitute the largest number—34 percent—of US Border Patrol arrests on the US-Mexico border.

Guatemalans seeking to reach the US are still forced to seek asylum and wait in Mexico, where the government of Andres Manuel López Obrador, under threats of tariffs by the Trump administration, deployed 21,000 troops to snatch immigrants and detain them under devastating conditions, virtually operating as a “safe third” country without a formal designation.

Last week, *Texas Monthly* obtained the autopsy report of Carlos Gregorio Hernández Vasquez, who died from the flu on May 20. A video described by the forensic pathologist at Hidalgo County states that the 16-year-old boy “is seen lying on the floor, vomiting on the floor and walks over to the commode, where he sits and later lies back and expires.” The report notes that “the time on the video is incorrect,” but hours passed without treatment and he was never taken to the hospital despite knowing of the seriousness of his illness.

Now, amid conditions of generalized poverty, civil-war levels of homicides and a spiraling dengue epidemic across Guatemala, many more migrant children from El Salvador, Honduras and other countries will die in camps overseen by Guatemalan and American guards. This is the same script followed by the European Union, which funded a coast guard in Libya to detain entirely defenseless refugees from the Middle East and Africa in concentration camps, with some sold into slavery and facing rampant murders, rapes and torture.

A demonstration was organized by Guatemalan university student organizations, opposition parties, human rights and “anti-corruption” groups, and attracted over 300 demonstrators, who marched in front of the offices of President Jimmy Morales. Protesters carried handwritten signs that said, “No to the safe third country, no to exploitation, no more silence, Guatemala wake up!” and “Guatemala is not a concentration camp.”

The agreement has set into motion the pseudo-left middle-class milieu to contain and channel opposition behind the illusion that subservience to imperialism and the social crisis are due to “corruption.” If only a “less corrupt” faction of the ruling establishment would take power, they argue, Guatemala would “recover its sovereignty.”

The outlook of these organizations is rooted in profound demoralization among nationalist petty-bourgeois and bourgeois layers, including those who participated in the armed struggles during the 1980s grouped around the Guatemalan National Revolutionary Unity (URNG), who have integrated themselves into the political establishment, trade unions and NGOs.

Aldo Dávila, deputy of the Winaq Political Movement, which was founded in 1992 by Rigoberta Menchú, the indigenous anti-government leader during the civil war, told reporters at the demonstration Saturday that “we are against the conditions imposed under this spurious agreement,” while indicating that “it makes no sense that the chancellor [Sandra Jovel] was not the one signing the accord, but I think that it was smarter that she didn’t.”

These statements reveal that the organized “opposition” to Morales fears more the continued undermining of the image of the government and a social explosion than the imperialist dictates themselves.

Their posturing, moreover, is exposed by the road they propose in order to democratize the country and gain sovereignty: calling

for the return of the UN-backed International Commission Against Impunity (CICIG). This organization pursued a series of corruption cases against top politicians and businesspeople until Morales kicked it out of the country in January for investigating him and his family. Far from providing democratic accountability or national sovereignty, the CICIG was created and financed by the US State Department as a means to exert pressure on the Guatemalan political establishment through select corruption cases.

Last year, the Washington-based think-tank Stratfor hoped that a future social explosion in the country would remain “once again under the auspices of CICIG’s Guatemalan defenders,” like it did in 2015, opening the door for the far-right Vice President Alejandro Baltazar Maldonado and Jimmy Morales to come to power while continuing to militarize the country and impose new regressive taxes, social cuts, privatizations and a further worsening of the living standards.

The official poverty rate in the country increased from 51.2 percent in 2006 to 61.1 percent today, while nearly half of all children suffer chronic malnourishment.

The Trump administration tolerated the expulsion of CICIG at a time in which Morales was opposing pressure by business circles to follow El Salvador in establishing diplomatic ties with Beijing, currently identified by Washington as its main geopolitical rival. Now it has become clear, nonetheless, that US imperialism sees the need of a much quicker and more naked way of wielding its neocolonial domination over the region’s client elites.

Far from demonstrating strength, this reflects the weakness of the crisis-ridden national bourgeoisies and US imperialism alike. In order to defend their democratic and social rights, workers in Guatemala must inflexibly oppose all demoralized and pro-imperialist organizations of the nationalist petty-bourgeoisie, and fight for a united political movement with their class brothers and sisters across the region, the US and Mexico, leading behind them all other oppressed sectors, to overthrow the entire rotting capitalist system and imperialism.

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