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The Children of the Drug Wars

A Refugee Crisis, Not an Immigration Crisis

By SONIA NAZARIO - JULY 11, 2014

CRISTIAN OMAR REYES, an 11-year-old sixth grader in the neighborhood of Nueva Suyapa, on the outskirts of Tegucigalpa, tells me he has to get out of Honduras soon — “no matter what.”

In March, his father was robbed and murdered by gangs while working as a security guard protecting a pastry truck. His mother used the life insurance payout to hire a smuggler to take her to Florida. She promised to send for him quickly, but she has not.

Three people he knows were murdered this year. Four others were gunned down on a nearby corner in the span of two weeks at the beginning of this year. A girl his age resisted being robbed of $5. She was clubbed over the head and dragged off by two men who cut a hole in her throat, stuffed her panties in it, and left her body in a ravine across the street from Cristian’s house.

“I’m going this year,” he tells me.

I last went to Nueva Suyapa in 2003, to write about another boy, Luis Enrique Motiño Pineda, who had grown up there and left to find his mother in the United States. Children from Central America have been making that journey, often without their parents, for two decades. But lately something has changed, and the predictable flow has turned into an exodus. Three years ago, about 6,800 children were detained by United States immigration authorities and placed in federal custody; this year, as many as 90,000 children are expected to be picked up. Around a quarter come from Honduras — more than from anywhere else.

Children still leave Honduras to reunite with a parent, or for better educational and economic opportunities. But, as I learned when I returned to Nueva Suyapa last month, a vast majority of child migrants are fleeing not poverty, but violence. As a result, what the United States is seeing on its borders now is not an immigration crisis. It is a refugee crisis.

Gangs arrived in force in Honduras in the 1990s, as 18th Street and Mara Salvatrucha members were deported in large numbers from Los Angeles to Central America, joining homegrown groups like Los Puchos. But the dominance in the past few years of foreign drug cartels in Honduras, especially ones from Mexico, has increased the reach and viciousness of the violence. As the United States and Colombia spent billions of dollars to disrupt the movement of drugs up the Caribbean corridor, traffickers rerouted inland through Honduras, and 79 percent of cocaine-smuggling flights bound for the United States now pass through there.

Narco groups and gangs are vying for control over this turf, neighborhood by neighborhood, to gain more foot soldiers for drug sales and distribution, expand their customer base, and make money through extortion in a country left with an especially weak, corrupt government following a 2009 coup.

Enrique’s 33-year-old sister, Belky, who still lives in Nueva Suyapa, says children began leaving en masse for the United States three years ago. That was around the time that the narcos started putting serious pressure on kids to work for them. At Cristian’s school, older students working with the cartels push drugs on the younger ones — some as young as 6. If they agree, children are recruited to serve as lookouts, make deliveries in backpacks, rob people and extort businesses. They are given food, shoes and money in return. Later, they might work as traffickers or hit men.

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Teachers at Cristian’s school described a 12-year-old who demanded that the school release three students one day to help him distribute crack cocaine; he brandished a pistol and threatened to kill a teacher when she tried to question him.

At Nueva Suyapa’s only public high school, narcos “recruit inside the school,” says Yadira Sauceda, a counselor there. Until he was killed a few weeks ago, a 23-year-old “student” controlled the school. Each day, he was checked by security at the door, then had someone sneak his gun to him over the school wall. Five students, mostly 12- and 13-year-olds, tearfully told Ms. Sauceda that the man had ordered them to use and distribute drugs or he would kill their parents. By March, one month into the new school year, 67 of 450 students had left the school.

Teachers must pay a “war tax” to teach in certain neighborhoods, and students must pay to attend.

Carlos Baquedano Sánchez, a slender 14-year-old with hair sticking straight up, explained how hard it was to stay away from the cartels. He lives in a shack made of corrugated tin in a neighborhood in Nueva Suyapa called El Infiernito — Little Hell — and usually doesn’t have anything to eat one out of every three days. He started working in a dump when he was 7, picking out iron or copper to recycle, for $1 or $2 a day. But bigger boys often beat him to steal his haul, and he quit a year ago when an older man nearly killed him for a coveted car-engine piston. Now he sells scrap wood.

But all of this was nothing, he says, compared to the relentless pressure to join narco gangs and the constant danger they have brought to his life. When he was 9, he barely escaped from two narcos who were trying to rape him, while terrified neighbors looked on. When he was 10, he was pressured to try marijuana and crack. “You’ll feel better. Like you are in the clouds,” a teenager working with a gang told him. But he resisted.

He has known eight people who were murdered and seen three killed right in front of him. He saw a man shot three years ago and still remembers the plums the man was holding rolling down the street, coated in blood. Recently he witnessed two teenage hit men shooting a pair of brothers for refusing to hand over the keys and title to their motorcycle. Carlos hit the dirt and prayed. The killers calmly walked down the street. Carlos shrugs. “Now seeing someone dead is nothing.”

He longs to be an engineer or mechanic, but he quit school after sixth grade, too poor and too afraid to attend. “A lot of kids know what can happen in school. So they leave.”

He wants to go to the United States, even though he knows how dangerous the journey can be; a man in his neighborhood lost both legs after falling off the top of a Mexican freight train, and a family friend drowned in the Rio Grande. “I want to avoid drugs and death. The government can’t pull up its pants and help people,” he says angrily. “My country has lost its way.”

Girls face particular dangers — one reason around 40 percent of children who arrived in the United States this year were girls, compared with 27 percent in the past. Recently three girls were raped and killed in Nueva Suyapa, one only 8 years old. Two 15-year-olds were abducted and raped. The kidnappers told them that if they didn’t get in the car they would kill their entire families. Some parents no longer let their girls go to school for fear of their being kidnapped, says Luis López, an educator with Asociación Compartir, a nonprofit in Nueva Suyapa.

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Milagro Noemi Martínez, a petite 19-year-old with clear green eyes, has been told repeatedly by narcos that she would be theirs — or end up dead. Last summer, she made her first attempt to reach the United States. “Here there is only evil,” she says. “It’s better to leave than have them kill me here.” She headed north with her 21-year-old sister, a friend who had also been threatened, and $170 among them. But she was stopped and deported from Mexico. Now back in Nueva Suyapa, she stays locked inside her mother’s house. “I hope God protects me. I am afraid to step outside.” Last year, she says, six minors, as young as 15, were killed in her neighborhood. Some were hacked apart. She plans to try the journey again soon. Asking for help from the police or the government is not an option in what some consider a failed state. The drugs that pass through Honduras each year are worth more than the country’s entire gross domestic product. Narcos have bought off police officers, politicians and judges. In recent years, four out of five homicides were never investigated. No one is immune to the carnage. Several Honduran mayors have been killed. The sons of both the former head of the police department and the head of the national university were murdered, the latter, an investigation showed, by the police.

“You never call the cops. The cops themselves will retaliate and kill you,” says Henry Carías Aguilar, a pastor in Nueva Suyapa. A majority of small businesses in Nueva Suyapa have shuttered because of extortion demands, while churches have doubled in number in the past decade, as people pray for salvation from what they see as the plague predicted in the Bible. Taxis and homes have signs on them asking God for mercy.

The United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees recently interviewed 404 children who had arrived in the United States from Honduras, El Salvador, Guatemala and Mexico; 58 percent said their primary reason for leaving was violence. (A similar survey in 2006, of Central American children coming into Mexico, found that only 13 percent were fleeing violence.) They aren’t just going to the United States: Less conflicted countries in Central America had a 712 percent increase in asylum claims between 2008 and 2013.

“If a house is burning, people will jump out the window,” says Michelle Brané, director of the migrant rights and justice program at the Women’s Refugee Commission.

TO permanently stem this flow of children, we must address the complex root causes of violence in Honduras, as well as the demand for illegal drugs in the United States that is fueling that violence.

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In the meantime, however, we must recognize this as a refugee crisis, as the United Nations just recommended. These children are facing threats similar to the forceful conscription of child soldiers by warlords in Sudan or during the civil war in Bosnia. Being forced to sell drugs by narcos is no different from being forced into military service.

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Many Americans, myself included, believe in deporting unlawful immigrants, but see a different imperative with refugees.

The United States should immediately create emergency refugee centers inside our borders, tent cities — operated by the United Nations and other relief groups like the International Rescue Committee — where immigrant children could be held for 60 to 90 days instead of being released. The government would post immigration judges at these centers and adjudicate children’s cases there.

To ensure this isn’t a sham process, asylum officers and judges must be trained in child-sensitive interviewing techniques to help elicit information from fearful, traumatized youngsters. All children must also be represented by a volunteer or government-funded lawyer. Kids in Need of Defense, a nonprofit that recruits pro bono lawyers to represent immigrant children and whose board I serve on, estimates that 40 percent to 60 percent of these children potentially qualify to stay under current immigration laws — and do, if they have a lawyer by their side. The vast majority do not. The only way to ensure we are not hurtling children back to circumstances that could cost them their lives is by providing them with real due process.

Judges, who currently deny seven in 10 applications for asylum by people who are in deportation proceedings, must better understand the conditions these children are facing. They should be more open to considering relief for those fleeing gang recruitment or threats by criminal organizations when they come from countries like Honduras that are clearly unwilling or unable to protect them.

If many children don’t meet strict asylum criteria but face significant dangers if they return, the United States should consider allowing them to stay using humanitarian parole procedures we have employed in the past, for Cambodians and Haitians. It may be possible to transfer children and resettle them in other safe countries willing to share the burden. We should also make it easier for children to apply as refugees when they are still in Central America, as we have done for people in Iraq, Cuba, countries in the former Soviet Union, Vietnam and Haiti. Those who showed a well-founded fear of persecution wouldn’t have to make the perilous journey north alone.

Of course, many migrant children come for economic reasons, and not because they fear for their lives. In those cases, they should quickly be deported if they have at least one parent in their country of origin. By deporting them directly from the refugee centers, the United States would discourage future non-refugees by showing that immigrants cannot be caught and released, and then avoid deportation by ignoring court orders to attend immigration hearings.

Instead of advocating such a humane, practical approach, the Obama administration wants to intercept and return children en route. On Tuesday the president asked for $3.7 billion in emergency funding. Some money would be spent on new detention facilities and more immigration judges, but the main goal seems to be to strengthen border control and speed up deportations. He also asked Congress to grant powers that could eliminate legal protections for children from Central America in order to expedite removals, a change that Republicans in Congress have also advocated.

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This would allow life-or-death decisions to be made within hours by Homeland Security officials, even though studies have shown that border patrol agents fail to adequately screen Mexican children to see if they are being sexually exploited by traffickers or fear persecution, as the agents are supposed to do. Why would they start asking Central American children key questions needed to prove refugee status?

The United States expects other countries to take in hundreds of thousands of refugees on humanitarian grounds. Countries neighboring Syria have absorbed nearly 3 million people. Jordan has accepted in two days what the United States has received in an entire month during the height of this immigration flow — more than 9,000 children in May. The United States should also increase to pre-9/11 levels the number of refugees we accept to 90,000 from the current 70,000 per year and, unlike in recent years, actually admit that many.

By sending these children away, “you are handing them a death sentence,” says José Arnulfo Ochoa Ochoa, an expert in Honduras with World Vision International, a Christian humanitarian aid group. This abrogates international conventions we have signed and undermines our credibility as a humane country. It would be a disgrace if this wealthy nation turned its back on the 52,000 children who have arrived since October, many of them legitimate refugees.

This is not how a great nation treats children.

Sonia Nazario is the author of “Enrique’s Journey: The Story of a Boy’s Dangerous Odyssey to Reunite With His Mother.”

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