

El Salvador says it's not ready to receive asylum seekers



San Salvador, February 6 (RHC)-- El Salvador is not ready to receive asylum seekers from the United States and will not accept them until it can offer them the necessary protections and support, Minister of Foreign Affairs Alexandra Hill Tinoco said in San Salvador.

El Salvador is one of three Central American governments that signed bilateral agreements with the US government last year that would allow the US to send asylum seekers from its southwest border to instead apply for asylum in Guatemala, Honduras or El Salvador.

Guatemala started receiving asylum seekers in November, and Honduras and El Salvador are expected to follow.

"We are not going to admit anyone seeking asylum until we as a country have the conditions and technical, financial and human capacity to be able to give these people who are seeking asylum and sent to another country the best treatment," Hill Tinoco said.

The so-called asylum cooperation agreements are among the controversial measures the US government has taken to close the door to asylum seekers arriving at its border with Mexico. Hill Tinoco said her government is at the point of determining the technical team that will meet with their U.S. counterparts to develop a plan of how it could work.

The administration of U.S. President Donald Trump did not immediately comment on Hill Tinoco's statement, but during his State of the Union address on Tuesday, Trump touted the agreements with Central American countries, calling them "historic."

The agreements have come under widespread criticism by rights group who say the Central American countries, from where asylum seekers are fleeing, are not equipped or safe enough to receive migrants. In a report issued this week, Human Rights Watch (HRW) said at least 138 people deported to El Salvador from the U.S. in recent years were subsequently killed.

A majority of the deaths documented by HRW in the report occurred less than a year after the deportees returned to El Salvador; some were within days. The organisation also confirmed at least 70 cases of sexual assault or other violence following their arrival in the country.

The violence underscores the risk faced by people forced to return by US law that mandates deportation of noncitizens convicted of a range of crimes and by Trump administration policies that discourage asylum-seekers, said Alison Leal Parker, HRW's U.S. managing director.

"Our concern is that many of these people are facing a death sentence," Parker said. Between 2014 and 2018, the U.S. deported about 111,000 Salvadorans back to their homeland, which has long been in the grip of fierce gang violence.

The United Nations reported last year that killings in El Salvador, a majority of them linked to gang conflict, have declined from a peak of more than 6,000 in 2015. But the country still has one of the highest homicide rates in the world.

Meanwhile, the number of Salvadorans seeking asylum in the U.S. grew by nearly 1,000 percent between 2012 and 2017, with many applicants citing threats from gangs. Only about 18 percent are granted asylum.

The deaths tracked in the study occurred under the administrations of Trump and his predecessor, former President Barack Obama. Trump has made immigration enforcement a centrepiece of his administration. That has included a policy of forcing asylum seekers from Central America to wait in Mexico while their claims are evaluated and be sent back to their homelands if their claim is rejected.

Many of those asylum seekers could previously have been released on parole in the U.S. for a decision that could take a year or more. The Department of Homeland Security says it is trying to make the process more efficient and crack down on fraudulent claims.

Rights groups have also urged the administration to repeal the policy that requires asylum seekers to wait in Mexico along with the agreements that allow Guatemalans, Salvadorans and Hondurans to be settled in other countries in Central America while seeking refuge. They also want the attorney general to reverse restrictions that made it harder for them to claim US asylum because of threats posed by gangs or gender-based violence.

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