

U.S. sends first Honduran asylum seeker to Guatemala



Guatemala City, November 23 (RHC)-- The first Honduran asylum-seeker arrived Thursday in Guatemala from El Paso, Texas, after an agreement signed with the United States established the Central American country as a so-called “safe third country” to attend to people fleeing oppression in their own countries.

The arrival of the Honduran migrant, Erwin Ardon, in Guatemala City historically changes the U.S. treatment of persecuted people seeking protection. “The (Honduran asylum-seeker) who arrived requires shelter and we’re working with organizations to offer this help,” IOM spokeswoman Melissa Vega said in an interview.

However, Ardon’s official paperwork with Guatemala’s migration agency showed he is authorized to stay in the country only for three days, according to a copy of the document seen by Reuters. Vega said Ardon will not be seeking asylum in Guatemala but will be transported to Honduras under the IOM program.

Guatemalan Interior Minister Enrique Degenhart said his government would process anybody who wants to apply for asylum, but added that United Nations immigration and asylum agencies would be responsible for providing shelter during their stay.

Degenhart had previously told Reuters he expected some of the returnees would go back to their countries. The United Nations International Organization for Migration (IOM) said this week the U.S. had provided it with \$10 million to help migrants “voluntarily” return from Guatemala to their homelands. Degenhart also announced more asylum-seekers’ arriving from the U.S. next week.

The U.S. government negotiated and signed a deal with Guatemala in July to allow U.S. authorities to oblige migrants to apply for asylum in Guatemala first. Rights groups condemned the plan arguing that it is not conceivable to send asylum seekers to a country where the murder rate is five times that of the U.S., according to the World Bank, and from which tens of thousands of people flee each year seeking asylum for themselves.

“The countries in Central America aren’t safe to return refugees to,” said Yael Schacher, an advocate with Refugees International, in an interview. “Those are refugee-producing countries and they aren’t able to receive refugees right now, they don’t have the capacity to process asylum seekers.”

Newly-elected Guatemalan President Alejandro Giammattei, who will take office in January, said he will reexamine the agreement. Trump, who takes a hard line on migration, has been working to restrict access to his country since he came into office. He had previously said the United States is “full” and has often described would-be asylum seekers and other migrants as “disposed” to committing crimes.

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