

As Donald Trump hails cooperation, five migrant families sent to Guatemala



Washington, December 18 (RHC)-- As President Donald Trump welcomed his Guatemalan counterpart to the White House on Tuesday and praised the two countries' cooperation to get "rid of the most dangerous people", five Honduran and Salvadoran families were sent from the US to Guatemala under a new controversial asylum agreement.

"We have had a tremendous relationship over the last two years," Trump told reporters, as Guatemalan President Jimmy Morales sat by his side. "We are getting rid of the most dangerous people, we are getting them out of the United States," Trump said. "They do not belong here, they are not from here."

The White House meeting came months after Trump threatened Guatemala and other Central American countries with tariffs or aid cuts if officials did not do more to stem immigration to the United States.

Following the threat, Guatemala and the U.S. signed a so-called "safe third country" agreement in July that allows US immigration authorities to require asylum seekers who first cross through Guatemala to apply for asylum there instead of being eligible to apply in the United States.

In November, a 23-year-old Honduran man became the first asylum seeker to be sent from the US to Guatemala under the deal. Since then, two dozen asylum seekers have been flown to the Central American country, Reuters news agency reported, citing Guatemalan officials. Two have requested asylum in Guatemala, and the others have chosen to return to their home countries.

On Wednesday, 16 additional asylum seekers were sent from the U.S. to Guatemala, including five families, according to Guatemala's immigration agency. Among the families were five children, ranging from four to 11 years in age.

They were taken to a children's shelter upon arriving in Guatemala City to be interviewed. It is unclear if they will apply for asylum in Guatemala.

Critics of the asylum accord have said Guatemala does not have the capacity to respond to the needs of the majority of the population, much less asylum seekers. The country continues to suffer from extreme violence, drug trafficking, corruption, malnutrition, and debilitated social services such as education and healthcare. "Guatemala does not have the conditions to receive these people," Wolke told Al Jazeera.

The agreement has faced further criticism for not providing the means to support the asylum seekers.

The majority of those sent to Guatemala as part of this agreement have stayed in the Catholic Church's Migrant's shelter in Guatemala City, which regularly serves migrants when they are in transit to the United States.

"We are carrying out the humanitarian assistance because the governments of the United States and Guatemala made no effort to open spaces, so that people are treated with dignity," Father Mauro Verzeletti, the director of the Catholic Church's Migrant's shelter in Guatemala City, told Al Jazeera.

Officials at the U.S. Department of Homeland Security, nor Guatemala's Ministry of Interior were not immediately available for comment

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