

Guatemala suspends all U.S. deportation flights over COVID-19



Guatemala City, March 19 (RHC)-- Guatemala's government has announced that it will temporarily stop receiving Hondurans and Salvadorans deported from the United States under the asylum cooperation agreement due to the coronavirus pandemic.

"As of today, all flights under [the Asylum Cooperation Agreement] are suspended," Foreign Affairs Minister Pedro Brolo said, referring to the third safe country-type deal reached between Guatemala and the United States. U.S. officials did not immediately comment on the decision.

This comes as, despite the global health crisis, on Monday a deportation flight chartered by the U.S. Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE) arrived in Guatemala city carrying 56 Guatemalans and 17 Salvadorans.

The Central American nation will also stop receiving its nationals deported from the U.S. until both countries "establish protocols to guarantee the health of migrants and asylum seekers before they are deported," officials said.

President Alejandro Giammattei suspended all flights, a ban on all foreigners from entering the country and the closure of the country's borders for 15 days in an effort to stem the spread of the novel coronavirus. In the same manner, the Catholic Church's Migrant Shelters in Guatemala City announced that it was temporarily suspending services to migrants and asylum seekers deported from the United States. "We cannot put at risk the lives of the people," Father Mauro Verzeletti, the director of the Guatemala City Migrant Shelter, told Al Jazeera.

The United Nations refugee agency UNHCR said it was "deeply concerned" as the rule would "put vulnerable families at risk" and undermine international efforts to find a coordinated solution.

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