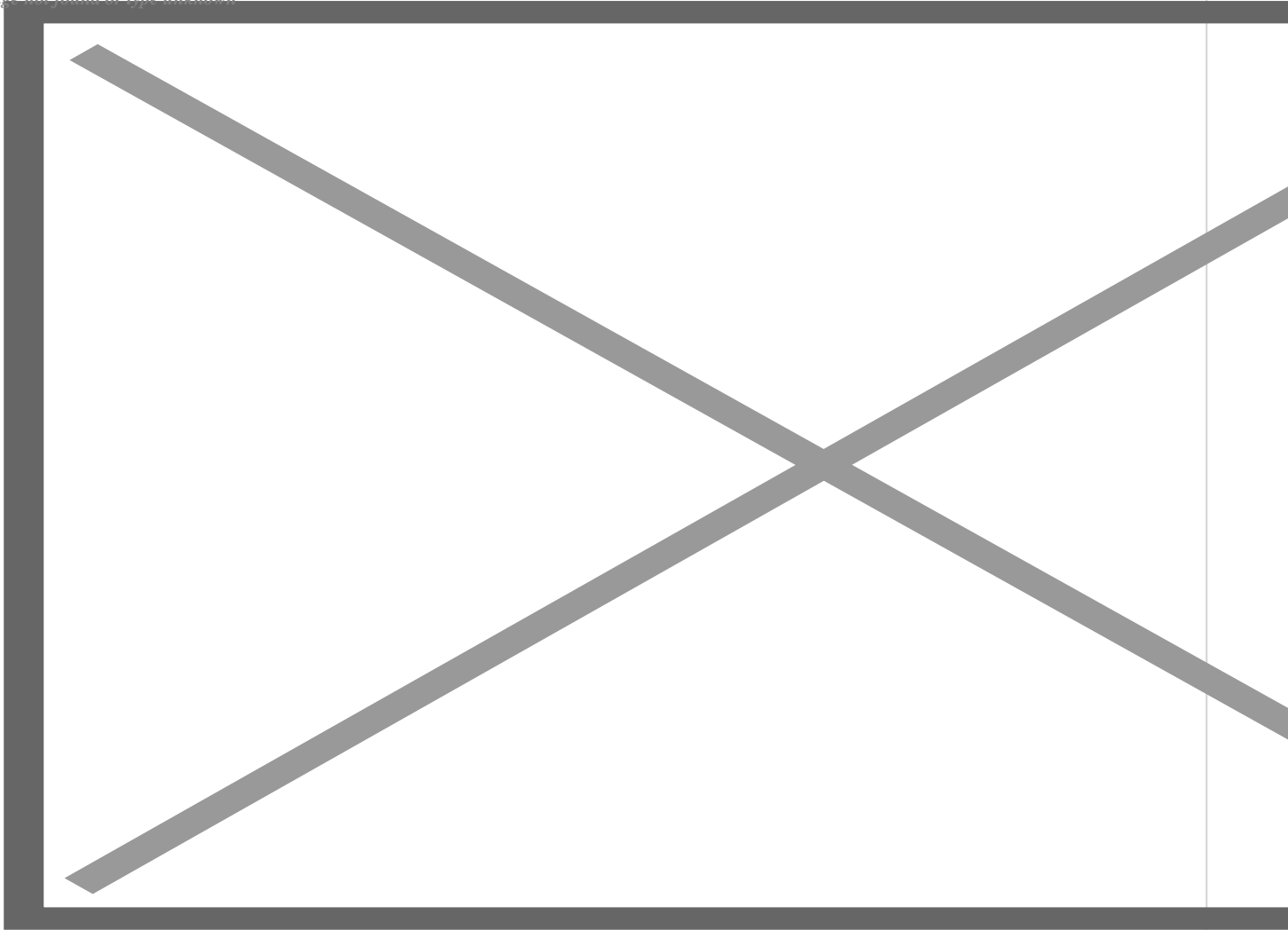


U.S. ends deals to send asylum seekers back to Central America

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Washington, February 7 (RHC)-- The United States has moved to end agreements with three Central American nations under which former President Donald Trump's administration intended to send migrants and asylum seekers who arrived at the U.S. border back to those countries.

In a statement on Saturday, U.S. Secretary of State Antony Blinken said President Joe Biden's administration is suspending the accords with the governments of Guatemala, El Salvador and Honduras, effective immediately. Transfers under the U.S.-Guatemala accord were paused in mid-March of last year due to the COVID-19 pandemic after rights groups said hundreds of people were sent back, while the agreements with El Salvador and Honduras were never implemented.

The deals, also known as safe third country agreements, will be terminated as per the notice period stipulated in each, Blinken's statement reads. "In line with the President's vision, we have notified the Governments of El Salvador, Guatemala, and Honduras that the United States is taking this action as efforts to establish a cooperative, mutually respectful approach to managing migration across the region begin," he said.

Since taking office on January 20, Biden has pursued several executive actions to overturn some of Trump's most hardline and divisive policies, particularly as they relate to immigration. He signed executive orders on February 2 related to family separation at the US-Mexico border, and ordered a review of a policy that forced asylum seekers to remain in Mexico as their US immigration claims were being processed.

Biden said his efforts aim to "undo the moral and national shame of the previous administration that literally, not figuratively, ripped children from the arms of their families." The policy shift has been welcomed by immigration advocates in the US, who have for years decried Trump's hardline policies on immigration as worsening human rights violations and risks faced by thousands of asylum seekers.

The orders came just weeks after thousands of primarily Honduran asylum seekers were blocked by Guatemalan security forces and returned home while attempting to reach Mexico and the United States.

Migrant caravans have set off from Central America during the past few years amid rising poverty, political instability and violence in their home countries. Many participants in the most recent caravan said devastating hurricanes and the COVID-19 pandemic pushed them to leave.

In his statement on Saturday, Blinken stressed that the suspension of the agreements with Honduras, El Salvador and Guatemala does "not mean that the U.S. border is open." "While we are committed to expanding legal pathways for protection and opportunity here and in the region, the United States is a country with borders and laws that must be enforced," he said.

A day earlier, the Guatemalan government welcomed the Biden administration's decision to end the deal, as well as its "commitment to our country and the region", the AP news agency reported. Human Rights Watch previously denounced the agreement between the US and Guatemala, saying asylum seekers did not have access to effective protection in Guatemala.

"As a result, they are effectively compelled to abandon their asylum claims, and some who have a well-founded fear of persecution appear to be returning to their home countries where they are at real risk of serious harm," the rights group said.

The U.S. transferred 939 Honduran and Salvadoran asylum seekers – mostly women and children – to Guatemala under the deal between late November 2019 and mid-March 2020, HRW reported.. Of those, about 2 percent applied for asylum in Guatemala.



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