

THE WHITE HOUSE
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ON-THE-RECORD PRESS CALL

BY AMY POPE, DEPUTY HOMELAND SECURITY ADVISOR AT THE NATIONAL SECURITY
COUNCIL,

ANNE RICHARD, ASSISTANT SECRETARY FOR POPULATION, REFUGEES, AND MIGRATION
AT THE DEPARTMENT OF STATE,

AND ALEJANDRO MAYORKAS, DEPUTY SECRETARY AT THE DEPARTMENT OF HOMELAND
SECURITY

ON CENTRAL AMERICAN REFUGEE PROCESSING

Via Telephone

10:05 A.M. EDT

MR. BOOGAARD: Hi. Thanks, everyone, for joining the call. And I appreciate you being able to get on on a little bit short notice this morning. This call will be on the record. It is embargoed until noon today, at 12:00 p.m. today. The call will be to provide an update on Central American refugee processing.

Today we have three speakers on the call: Amy Pope, the Deputy Homeland Security Advisor at the

National Security Council. Unfortunately, Heather Higginbottom was unable to join, so she will be replaced by Anne Richard, the Assistant Secretary for PRM, at State -- Population, Refugees, and Migration. And Deputy Secretary Ali Mayorkas, from the Department of Homeland Security.

I'll now turn it over to Amy Pope, Deputy Homeland Security Advisor.

MS. POPE: Thanks, Pete. As many of you know already, over the past year -- a couple of years, the United States has taken a series of steps to address what we see as an ongoing humanitarian challenge in Central America, particularly as we've seen an increasing number of vulnerable individuals attempting to leave the region and come to the United States.

In response to what we have been seeing, we've created a comprehensive strategy, including a very, very significant financial commitment from Congress -- \$750 million in foreign assistance to Central America -- which is primarily focused on improving the economic, social, governance, and security conditions in those countries. It also includes creative solutions to address the humanitarian situation in these countries, while also recognizing that we have a responsibility to maintain the integrity of our own immigration system and our own borders. And so we must promote safe and orderly migration and border security.

To address these goals, the administration in 2014 created the Central American Minors program. Our goal there was to protect children who had legitimate humanitarian claims, while discouraging people from placing their children in the hands of smugglers who were taking children on an extraordinarily dangerous journey across Mexico into the United States.

We also announced an effort to expand our refugee processing in the region, in coordination with UNHCR, to allow individuals to apply for humanitarian relief in-country, rather than attempt a dangerous journey to the United States.

While we have seen some modest changes in our system, and we think these are steps in the right direction, what we have seen is that our current efforts to date have been insufficient to address the number of people who may have legitimate refugee claims, and there are insufficient pathways for those people to present their claims for adjudication. So as a result, today we're announcing additional steps to further expand our efforts to help vulnerable families and individuals from El Salvador, Guatemala and Honduras in what we believe will be a safe and orderly processing of their claims.

First, you'll hear later this morning the government of Costa Rica has announced they've agreed to enter into a protection transfer arrangement -- we're calling it a PTA -- with the U.N. High Commissioner for Refugees, UNHCR, and the International Organization for Migration, to help address this regional migration challenge. This announcement is an extraordinarily important step forward for this program, and the United States is very grateful to Costa Rica for their leadership on human rights and their capacity as a partner in addressing what we believe is a regional migration challenge that requires a regional migration solution.

For cases that do not require immediate transfer to Costa Rica, the United States, working with our partners in-country, is establishing an in-country referral program so that we can identify vulnerable residents in the region, who we believe have a credible refugee claim, to present those claims to the United States. They would go through the same screening and vetting process that we now employ for all refugee applicants, which, as many of you know, is the most comprehensive screening we do for any category of immigrants coming to the United States. So they would be screened and interviewed by the Department of Homeland Security officers in their countries of origin.

We're also very pleased in announcing our expansion of the existing Central American Minors program, which, as many of you know, provides children in El Salvador, Guatemala and Honduras with a safe and orderly alternative to the dangerous journey that some children are making to the United States.

As of today, the U.S. has received more than 9,500 applications for that program. Right now, under the current program, a lawfully present parent within the United States can request refugee status for their children located in one of these countries. We are now expanding the program so that, when accompanied by a qualified child, there will be additional categories of applicants who can be considered under this program.

I will defer to my colleagues from the State Department and the Department of Homeland Security to give you more details of the program. And first, I'll turn it over to Anne Richard.

MS. RICHARD: Thank you very much. Earlier this year, we had announced plans to expand the U.S. Refugee Admissions Programs to help vulnerable families and individuals in Central American countries, and offer them a safe and legal alternative to the dangerous journey many migrants are taking to reach the United States.

So we're especially pleased today to report the government of Costa Rica has agreed to enter into the Protection Transfer Arrangement, or PTA, with the U.N. High Commissioner for Refugees and the International Organization for Migration, to help address this regional migration challenge.

Under the PTA, Costa Rica will serve as a temporary host site for applicants awaiting refugee processing and onward resettlement to the United States or another third country. It is important to note that the PTA is only open to applicants who are pre-screened in their countries of origin and does not apply to migrants who travel to Costa Rica on their own. Additionally, for cases not requiring immediate transfer to Costa Rica, the United States is establishing an in-country referral program so that vulnerable citizens can be considered for refugee protection in the United States after being screened and interviewed by the Department of Homeland Security officers in their home countries or their countries of origin.

As the United States has made clear in the past, we are committed to protecting Central Americans at risk and expanding resettlement opportunities in the region. The steps taken today and over the past year are another example of the creative solutions being taken across the federal government to make progress on this issue.

By themselves, today's actions will not solve this challenge but are steps in the right direction and are a further example of the United States' continued commitment to resolve the situation.

I turn now to Deputy Secretary Mayorkas from the Department of Homeland Security to discuss the expansion of the Central American Minors program that Amy Pope just mentioned.

DEPUTY SECRETARY MAYORKAS: Thank you very much. And good morning, everyone. Let me, if I can, first add a few general points to the introductory remarks of my colleague, Amy Pope, from the National Security Council. Amy referenced the fact that we, to date, have received approximately 9,500 applications under the Central American Minors program. Most of those applications have actually come in the last nine months. We're seeing a significant uptick in the number of applications in that program. To date, more than 600 youth have arrived in the United States under the Central American Minors program. And we now have approximately 2,880 who have been approved under the Central American Minors program. So we're seeing tremendous growth in that program, and we expect that growth to continue over the next six months.

With respect to the expansion of the Central American Minors program, the categories of expansion are specifically as follows. When accompanied by a qualified child who is under age 21 and unmarried, the following additional categories of applicants may be considered for admission under the Central American Minors program: The older siblings of the qualified child, specifically sons and daughters over the age of 21 of a U.S.-based, lawfully present parent. Second, the in-country, biological parent of the qualified child -- in other words, there may be a lawfully present parent in the United States and the other parent may be in-country with the child. Third, the caregivers of a qualified child who are also related to the U.S.-based, lawfully present parent.

And we would, of course, assess the caregiver relationship in the interview on a case-by-case basis, upon the judgment of our well-trained adjudicators. And so this expansion of the Central American Minors program will lead to an even greater growth of admissions under the program, and achieves not only the protection of the vulnerable child, which is at the core of this refugee program, but also achieves one of the goals of our system -- one of our overarching goals of family unity.

Let me just add one final point, which is not specific to the Central American Minors program, and then I'll think we'll open it up to questions -- and that is, with the great leadership of our President in this area, Mexico specifically -- its President Peña Nieto -- agreed on Friday, as an outcome of his meeting with our President, to increase the state of Mexico's capacity to process asylees. And so their asylum program will expand in parallel to the efforts that we are announcing this morning.

Q Hi, good morning. Thanks for doing this. A couple of quick questions. I was wondering if you could give us any sense of capacity, now that you opened this Costa Rica corridor. Is there any sense or any sort of detailed agreement of how many people the Costa Ricans could host at any given time, and how much time these applicants would be expected to spend there as they wait for their cases to be processed?

Separately, as we've also seen a surge of Cubans make an effort to get to the United States through South and Central America, is there anything the administration is doing in the way of creative outside-the-box thinking to make this a little more orderly? How do you justify that there's been really no change in Cuban immigration policy at a time when many of your neighbors and allies are under strain as a result of this flow?

MS. RICHARD: The PTA being set up in Costa Rica is aiming to host 200 individuals at a time for

a period of six months. Thank you, Ali.

DEPUTY SECRETARY MAYORKAS: Ernesto, we actually have been working on the orderly arrival of Cubans to our southern border. A number of Cubans who have sought refuge have been in Panama and other countries, and we worked with those countries to ensure an orderly flow from their countries to the border, knowing that they were headed north. So we have worked on an orderly migration, to the extent those individuals achieve dry land.

MS. POPE: To add to Assistant Secretary Richard's information about Costa Rica, Costa Rica's commitment here is relatively modest, but that is why we looked at these other pathways to provide people a way to apply for refugee adjudication. Costa Rica, their agreement with us here is really to address those who are so vulnerable that there are no options for them to remain in the region while their applications are processed. And so that particular capacity is not reflective of our commitment to adjudicate applicants.

DEPUTY SECRETARY MAYORKAS: And if I could add to that. So these are really three parts of a whole. What we're talking about is an overarching refugee program effort to address the needs of the vulnerable and those qualifying for refugee status. So as Amy mentioned, the Costa Rica option, that part of this deals with those who need immediate protection. And Costa Rica has offered to provide that immediate protection. We then have both the in-country processing -- a new component of this effort -- as well as the expansion of our Central American Minors program. So all three, in addition to what I articulated at the outset with Mexico's increased capacity to process asylees, it's a fourth element with the United States as the core working with its international partners, and now Mexico also enhancing its efforts. This is now really turning the page to a really new chapter of refugee processing of these individuals.

Q Can you tell me in these three Central American countries, how many more people will the U.S. have there to do the screening and where will it be done?

DEPUTY SECRETARY MAYORKAS: Anne, do you want to take that first, or would you like me to jump in?

MS. RICHARD: Go ahead, Ali.

DEPUTY SECRETARY MAYORKAS: So we have devoted considerable resources. U.S. Citizenship and Immigration Services has not only taken its well-trained adjudicators and moved them to address this increased processing, but we have also taken adjudicators from other lines of work as capacity would permit, and devoted them to this effort. Forgive me, I don't have the specific numbers but I can say that we have surge resources to address this humanitarian need. In addition, I should say that the President announced increased targets for the processing of refugees from around the world, and we are building our capacity in the Department of Homeland Security to achieve the President's increased goals. So we are, in fact, hiring additional refugee officers as well as asylum officers.

MS. RICHARD: This is Anne -- I can add to that. We currently have a presence in the capitals of the key countries, working on the Central American Minors program. And we can expand the staffing and the resources necessary, working through our partner there, the International Organization for Migration. So we don't anticipate that that will be an issue in the coming months.

Q I have two questions. Do you guys expect this announcement today, these steps announced today will be enough to face the surge? Or would it be possible that in several months ahead there will be a need of new measures, as one of you said earlier, because the original plan was not enough for the surge? And the second question is if you could please detail the updated number of refugees already in the U.S. by Central American countries. How many from El Salvador, from Guatemala, and from Honduras? Thank you.

MS. POPE: So in response to your first question, we do know that there are migrants who are coming from Central America who will not qualify as refugees and are not coming because of the criteria -- that they're fleeing persecution in their home country, for example. And so we don't know what the impact of that will be until we start this program, but what we do know -- and the reason why we've moved forward at this point -- is the evidence that we've seen since standing up the CAM program is that the criteria is too narrow to meet the category of people who we believe would qualify under our refugee laws but they just don't have a mechanism to apply for it.

So it is our hope that providing a safe and orderly way for persons who have legitimate claims and would be considered refugees by any definition, that they would have a reason to apply through this process rather than themselves take a very dangerous journey or put their children into the hands of smugglers and exposing them to all sorts of dangers that we know exist along the path to the United States.

DEPUTY SECRETARY MAYORKAS: And if I could add to Amy's point. One, I'd like to underscore the fact that this significant expansion in the multiple parts that we have outlined -- the goal is for individuals who have legitimate humanitarian claims not to take the perilous journey and to really accept our

outstretched arm of relief and proceed with those claims in a safe and orderly way, number one. And number two, and importantly, this is in parallel to our very foundational effort to enable the Central American governments themselves to take the lead on creating a better economic and social governance structure and to assist in that endeavor. Of course, Congress appropriated up to \$750 million in fiscal year 2016, and we have a more significant proposal in the President's budget for fiscal year 2017. So that foundational effort is also underway.

MS. RICHARD: This is Anne. To add on the numbers of refugees who have come north, there have been 267 who have entered the United States as refugees under the Central American Minors program; 200 of those came from El Salvador. And before this program started, there were negligible numbers. There was no official program to bring refugees from Central American.

DEPUTY SECRETARY MAYORKAS: And we're nearly at 3,000 approvals. So while Anne identified the number that have actually arrived in the United States, we expect a significant increase in the coming months by virtue of the great number of approvals. And we're just waiting for the processing of -- the safe and orderly processing of those individuals before they arrive.

Q I'm wondering, on the expansion of the Central American Minors program, what kind of numbers are you anticipating there? And if you could give us a little better sense of these caregivers -- who is likely to be qualifying under that program? And also, if the record to date is 267 for a program that I believe has been in effect for a number of years, why should we anticipate that there will really be enough of an expansion in light of the tremendous numbers that we see coming across the border?

DEPUTY SECRETARY MAYORKAS: Julia, it's Ali. So the number of the children -- the 60-some-odd number -- speaks of the individuals who have arrived in the United States but they are numbers that reflect a significant growth in the program and, specifically, a growth over the last nine months. So the program, number one, is gaining and has gained considerable traction recently.

We've received approximately 9,500 applications. To date, the Department of State has performed its initial screening of more than 6,800 of these applicants. And we in the Department of Homeland Security have completed approximately 2,900 final interviews and decisions. We have approved for resettlement approximately 2,884 and we expect that number to increase over the next six months. So I think the trajectory speaks more profoundly about the prospects for this program to really capture those in humanitarian need -- more so than the children, 60-some-odd number that already have been settled, number one.

Number two, it's very difficult to estimate what the volume will be under the expanded program. It could very well be significant by virtue of the trend that I just identified. With respect to caregivers, it really -- it's a function of the care provided to the qualified child. Very often, we will see relatives serve as caregivers, though that is not at the exclusion of others, but cases that we have seen which really propel this decision. Aunts, uncles, grandparents would be, I think, the most compelling example of those providing care for the child who also, by bringing them into the United States as qualified relatives, we achieve the ultimate goal of family unity.

Q I was wondering a little bit more on the numbers that you kind of addressed already. But in-country processing, like, how many do you plan to be able to process at a given time? And with Mexico's increased capacity, how many do they plan to be taking in between a six-month or a one-year period? Because as you mentioned, that 200 individuals for six months at a time, and Costa Rica is a very small number. Given just in one month, you have more than 6,000 families coming across the southern border.

DEPUTY SECRETARY MAYORKAS: I'm going to turn it over to Anne, but I want to make a point, because the Central American Minors program started slowly and, as I underscored to Julia, it is growing now significantly over these past several months. And what we are really doing -- we're expanding significantly the foundation of the refugee program. These programs most often take time to build traction, credibility in the countries at issue. And just as in the Central American Minors program we expect this type of growth to occur over time, what we are announcing today is an expansion of the foundation of a lasting refugee program for those in Central America who qualify as refugees and are in need of relief. So it's really rolling out a very material expansion of a foundation for a refugee program in the Western Hemisphere.

I'll turn it over to Anne for the specific answer to your question.

MS. RICHARDS: In addition, I can say that having watched the growth of the Iraqi refugee program and then been involved in the beginnings of the Syrian refugee program, this is very normal for there to be a lag between announcement of a program and when the numbers start to pick up and pick up. So we're very confident that the numbers are increasing, just as Ali said, and that thousands will be benefitting from these programs in the near future.

In terms of the in-country programs, it's difficult to speculate on our estimated specific numbers. I think the advantage that we see in the in-country program is it gives us a great deal of flexibility so that we can get cases that require quick removal from their surroundings to Costa Rica, but we can also work with countries

that present very differently to carry out screenings and interviews in their home country, if that makes more sense for their particular case.

DEPUTY SECRETARY MAYORKAS: If I may also add, it's important to underscore -- again, to repeat -- that the Costa Rica component of this multipart effort is to address those individuals who are in need of urgent protection. So in addition to the in-country processing, in addition to the Central American Minors program, in addition to Mexico's expansion of its asylum capacity, Costa Rica has offered to provide immediate sanctuary, if you will, for those in need of urgent protection. So that's a very discrete need. And what they are addressing is those in urgent need or protection, and I think the commitment is 200 at a time. And this is at the outset of the program.

Q Hi. I am wondering when does the expansion actually go into effect. Would that be today? And also, how long is it actually taking today from the time the person -- the youth applies, to the time that person is approved and resettled? And do you foresee that timeframe becoming longer as more people apply for the program, now that more people would be eligible?

DEPUTY SECRETARY MAYORKAS: So when we operationalize it between -- we've been working, of course, on preparing for the operationalization of this -- we expect implementation of these expanded programs within in a few months, number one. And I don't exactly know the processing time right now, but this is why Costa Rica's partnership is so critical. Because if, in fact, we're dealing with someone who's in need of urgent protection during the pendency of the process, Costa Rica has agreed to provide that protection in process. And so that's why that partnership is such a key element of this multipart expansion.

Q Hi, good morning. We've seen not just Cubans, but other migrants from the region that are also using this route, and adults. And I'm wondering, do we have any evidence that there is an organized trafficking network, and people are being asked money in order to make the U.S. territory?

DEPUTY SECRETARY MAYORKAS: So there are smuggling operations that, amongst the many illegal activities that they are involved in, include the smuggling of individuals to the Southwest border. One of the efforts of our Department of Homeland Security, under a new task force model created by Secretary Jeh Johnson, is a focus of our law enforcement resources, our multiagency resources on breaking the smuggling organizations by land, by sea, and by air. We address not only the individual smugglers, but also the movement of their finances. It's a multipart, multiagency attack against the smuggling organizations. And the smuggling organizations are not necessarily country of origin specific, but rather

focused on the money that they could earn. And we are attacking that with all resources.

MR. BOOGAARD: This call was on the record. Again, the speakers were Amy Pope, Deputy Homeland Security Advisor; Anne Richard, Assistant Secretary for Population, Refugees, and Migration at State; and Alejandro Mayorkas, the Deputy Secretary for the Department of Homeland Security.

The call is embargoed until 12:00 noon today. And the call was on the record. Thank you, everyone, and have a nice day.

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10:37 A.M. EDT

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