

The Americas

Trump plans to cut U.S. aid to 3 Central American countries in fight over U.S.-bound migrants

By [Mary Beth Sheridan](#) and

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MEXICO CITY — President Trump plans to slash hundreds of millions of dollars in aid to three Central American countries in retaliation for what he called their lack of help in reducing the flow of migrants to the U.S. border.

The move was one of Trump's harshest yet as he escalates a confrontation with Mexico and Central America over a surge in irregular migration, largely involving children and families seeking asylum.

Trump has already warned that he could [close the U.S.-Mexico border](#) — or at least large stretches of it — in the coming week unless Mexico takes further steps to halt the northward flow of migrants.

The State Department said in a statement Saturday that it would be “ending . . . foreign assistance programs for the Northern Triangle” — a region encompassing El Salvador, Guatemala and Honduras. The move would affect nearly \$500 million in 2018 funds and millions more left over from the prior fiscal year. The money was destined for Central America but has not yet been spent.

Trump's action was the culmination of a months-long battle in the U.S. government over the aid program, which grew substantially [under the Obama administration](#) and was intended to address the root causes of migration — violence, a lack of jobs and poverty.

Some Trump administration officials thought the program had failed to achieve enough results and in recent months have been looking into alternatives. But the president's decision to cut off the remaining funds appeared to take many people by surprise. It came just a day after Homeland Security Secretary Kirstjen Nielsen signed what the department called a “historic” [memorandum of cooperation](#) on border security in Central America.

One former U.S. official said there was “chaos” in the State Department and U.S. embassies as officials tried to figure out whether they had to cancel existing contracts or simply not renew them. He spoke on the condition of anonymity because of diplomatic sensitivities.

The number of apprehensions along the U.S.-Mexico border has been soaring, with more than [76,000 migrants taken into U.S. custody](#) in February, most of them from Central America. On Friday night, during a trip to Florida, Trump faulted governments in the region for the increase.

“I've ended payments to Guatemala, to Honduras and El Salvador. No more money is going there anymore,” [Trump told reporters](#). “We were giving them \$500 million. We were paying them tremendous amounts of money, and we're not paying them anymore because they haven't done a thing for us.”

Democratic officials, aid groups and former officials said Trump's action could boomerang by shrinking or eliminating some of the very programs keeping would-be migrants in Central America.

“Ironically, our goals of having people stay and thrive in El Salvador are very similar to the current administration's,” said Ken Baker, chief executive of [Glasswing International](#), which runs education, health and entrepreneurship programs in El Salvador and receives funding from the U.S. Agency for International Development. “Through our programs, we've been able to provide opportunities and the belief that they [would-be migrants] can thrive here.”

“The key is to get to them before” they leave for the United States, he said. “When you're talking about the problem at the border in the U.S., it's already too late.”

Jim Nealon, a former U.S. ambassador to Honduras, said that Trump doesn't seem to understand the way the Central American aid program works. The U.S. government doesn't give the money to foreign governments, but rather “to programs designed and implemented by the U.S., with the cooperation of governments and civil society,” he said. Much of the aid is administered by nonprofit groups.

He also said Central American governments are not seeking to send their citizens to the United States. “To the contrary, they already cooperate with us in trying to deter migration. But they can't prevent their citizens from leaving the country.”

Honduras, El Salvador and Guatemala are among the poorest countries in the hemisphere, and among the most violent in the world.

Over the past year, Trump has seized on the formation of giant [caravans of U.S.-bound migrants](#) as evidence that Mexico and Central America are doing little to discourage irregular migration. On Saturday, [he warned in a tweet](#) that he would close the southern border unless Mexico used “its very strong immigration laws to stop the many thousands of people trying to get into the USA.”

Authorities in the region have said they are taking what measures they can under their laws. Mexico, for example, has offered thousands of temporary humanitarian visas to migrants, permitting them to stay and work in the country.

Raúl López, vice minister of justice in El Salvador, said in an interview Friday that the flow of migrants from his country was actually slowing.

“We see that as proof that our investment — and the investment of the international community — in social issues is working,” he said. “U.S. assistance has had a positive impact in reducing migration from El Salvador, but we need more help to continue this fight.”

It was unclear whether Congress would try to block Trump’s decision to shift the Central American aid elsewhere. A delegation of congressional Democrats visiting El Salvador on Saturday called the administration’s move “counterproductive” and said they would “do everything in our power to push back on the president’s misguided approach to Central America.” The group included Rep. Eliot L. Engel (N.Y.), chairman of the House Foreign Affairs Committee, and Rep. Jerrold Nadler (N.Y.), chairman of the House Judiciary Committee.

Congress appropriates the money spent by the U.S. government, but the president has some wiggle room to reprogram funds, according to congressional staffers.

Adam Isaacson, a senior official at the Washington Office on Latin America, a research and advocacy group, said U.S. presidents have shied away from reprogramming money because it irritates lawmakers, who can retaliate by declining to fund key administration projects. “It’s just a strong, strong custom” in Congress, he said. “If you go against our will on this, we will get you in the next appropriations bill.”

Unauthorized crossings of the U.S. border have hit their highest level in a decade, although they are still well below the peak of 1.6 million in 2000. But the migrant flow has changed in character. Most migrants used to be Mexican men who could be easily deported, but now they are asylum-seeking families that are entitled to certain protections under federal law.

Border Patrol agents have been overwhelmed in recent weeks by the arrival of large numbers of Central American families, many of which are being quickly released into local communities because of a lack of detention space.

The announcement of the aid cutoff comes as a [caravan of about 2,000 Central Americans](#) and Cubans is crossing Mexico. Trump has threatened to close the border in the coming week because of the rising migrant flow.

The president has also declared a national emergency to divert funds for construction of a giant border wall, but he is facing court challenges. Immigration analysts say a wall would do little to stop the flow of asylum seekers, who typically surrender to U.S. officials to petition for relief as soon as they reach U.S. soil.

Anna-Catherine Brigida in Mexico City and John Hudson and Nick Miroff in Washington contributed to this report.

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