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Fleeing Violence in Central America: Time to Implement Canada's Resettlement Policies

Good afternoon and thank you for inviting me and giving me the space to raise the crisis of Central America with you. I also want to personally thank Jean Nicolas Beuze who has been a tireless advocate on Central America refugee issues.

Today I am appearing in my capacity as a Professor of Practice at McGill's Institute for the Study of International Development. The opinions I express are my own.

I have spent most of my working life with Médecins Sans Frontières. I have lived and worked in many countries where people fear for their lives and for the security of their family on a daily basis and who are forced to flee their homes.

Today the nearly 70 million people in the world on the move have no choice - they are fleeing the extreme violence of war or gangs, structural poverty, corruption, and the impacts of climate change. Yet, despite international legal norms, people forced to flee are being rejected or blocked from entering host countries or being forcibly sent back to the violence and misery they escaped.

My last humanitarian mission in January 2019 took me to Venezuela, where I witnessed an entire people's survival being instrumentalized for political aims. A country where food and medicine have become luxuries and where people dream of safe refuge. 1 in 10 Venezuelans have left the country since 2014. Not out of choice. Out of necessity.

The situation in Venezuela is all too familiar for the people of Honduras, El Salvador and Guatemala. The pattern of violent displacement, persecution, sexual violence, and forced repatriation in Central America is akin to the conditions found in the deadliest armed conflicts in the world today.

I witnessed that myself when I was in Mexico with Médecins Sans Frontières. I met with Gloria. She had been forced to leave El Salvador. Gangs threatened to kill her young son if he refused to work for the gang and her daughter if she refused to be the gang leader's girlfriend. Fearing for their lives, Gloria and her children fled.

Gloria's story is all too common. Nearly 500,000 Central Americans flee to Mexico every year.

When she arrived in Mexico, Gloria expected to find sanctuary. And on the books, Mexico has the formal instruments to protect refugees. However this is not reflected on the ground.

Instead of being welcomed, Gloria was kidnapped. Within a day of entering Mexico, Gloria was caught by a gang. She was raped multiple times. So was her 16-year old daughter. Her son was forced to be a witness. Gloria remained confined with her children for weeks. 2 in 5 migrants mention direct attacks or threats, extortion, or gang-forced recruitment as the main reason for fleeing their country. Over half of Salvadorans MSF surveyed had a relative who died due to violence.

Local authorities knew who kidnapped Gloria, but they turned a blind eye. Violent crimes against migrants are rampant in Mexico. 99% of them go un-investigated and unpunished.

Gloria told me she did not feel safe in Mexico. She did not believe she would get permission to stay in Mexico. In 2015, 96% of Guatemalans, 92% of Hondurans and 87% of Salvadorans detained in Mexico were deported back to their home countries.

The reality is that Mexico is not able or ready to host these people, from either a legal, human rights or economic perspective. Violence, criminality and the absence of protection and health care are major challenges facing Central American refugees in Mexico.

So, like many before her, Gloria continued her perilous journey north to the United States and beyond. I don't know what happened to her but the prognosis was not good. Aside from the dangers of the journey, at the US border she would face an increasingly restrictive US immigration policy. She would face hostility inspired by the fear incited by the growing anti-immigration, securitization and xenophobic populist discourse.

The Central American humanitarian situation is at its heart, a crisis of compassion, of humanity. Like other refugee contexts globally, this crisis of humanity causes immense human suffering and indignity. Perverse policies and discourses deny people access to basic protection and safety. They deny a person's right to flee extreme violence.

All of this runs contrary to international norms and our values as a Canadian society. Canada has played a lead role in the development of both Global Compacts on Migration. The humanitarian crisis in Central America provides Canada an opportunity to demonstrate that leadership on the ground by helping people like Gloria. I have 4 recommendations for this Committee. Canada should:

1. Fully recognise the humanitarian and international protection needs of Central American asylum seekers.

2. Advocate for safe passage, protection and access to healthcare for Central Americans on the move regardless of their legal status
3. Implement Canada's policy to offer resettlement to Central American refugees and to enforce gang-related violence as a criteria for acceptance. In the whole of 2017, Canada resettled only 28 Central Americans.
4. Given the reality of the Safe Third Country Agreement, Canada should take measures to ensure people passing via the US can enter Canada officially and safely.

Canada has helped 40,000 Syrians resettle in Canada since 2015. It is long past due for Canada to offer resettlement to Central Americans.

And we can't forget, Canada is a country built by the courage and determination of immigrants. Central Americans who are forced to flee their homes are courageous and determined. Often with young families, they want to build a better life for themselves and their children. And in 8 years, they can become net contributors to the public coffers. They are not a burden, they are an investment.

But at its base, this is not an economics debate. This is a question of humanity. As we sit here, there are thousands of Gloria's and their children fleeing Central American countries for their lives. We have a responsibility to make sure they do not suffer her fate.

Thank you.