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Central America's Security Crisis is the United States problem, Too

BY JOSÉ R. CÁRDENAS

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With the Obama administration scrambling to address the "humanitarian crisis" of thousands of unaccompanied children crossing the U.S. southern border, let's hope it has learned a sobering lesson about how presumably well-meaning (and politically expedient) words and actions on a such a hot button issue as immigration can have serious real-world consequences. Whatever the administration was trying to say or do over the past few years on immigration reform got lost in translation to thousands of Central American families whose only hope in life is to make it to the United States to find safety, security, and a decent day's wage.

Reports are that the number of unaccompanied minors, primarily from Guatemala, Honduras, and El Salvador, detained at the border has more than tripled since 2011, with most of them believing -- manipulated by unscrupulous human traffickers --that some sort of legal status awaited them.

As one regional expert told the *Washington Post*, what the message came down to was "this is your big chance. If you want to get into the U.S., now is the time."

The administration is now contending with a logistical nightmare to house and feed the migrants while launching an intensive public diplomacy campaign to discourage further Central American families from making the perilous journey north, for themselves or their children.

But, frankly, these are merely stopgap measures. Moreover, they do not address the "push" factor. The administration's new effort may help to staunch the "pull" effect of enticing people to leave their homes, but just as important is addressing the conditions that are "pushing" people to seek better lives elsewhere.

In short, that is the escalating criminality and corruption in the region -- most of it fueled by drug trafficking to the United States -- that are undermining democratic institutions, rule of law, economic opportunity, and public safety.

The statistics are grim. Central America is now considered the most violent non-war zone in the world, with a homicide rate more than four times the global average. Robberies, extortion, kidnappings, and human trafficking are all up. This touches the average citizen through rising gang activity and violence. Many being interviewed at the border say they decided to leave because of gang extortion and forced recruitment of children.

It is a tragedy that such conditions are prevailing in our own neighborhood. But Central America's security problems are also our problem. For starters, the current flood of refugees is overwhelming the Border Patrol's capacities, meaning that security functions are taking second place to humanitarian concerns. That drug traffickers and other criminals would seek to exploit such gaps is elementary.

Secondly, the same networks -- aided and abetted by gangs -- that traffic people through Central America right to the U.S. border are the same networks that traffic drugs, weapons and other contraband, and any other entity that wishes to do the United States harm. Clearly, it is in the United States' interest to cripple those chains further down south rather than wait until some threat reaches the U.S. border and then hope to catch it there.

Unfortunately, the Obama administration hasn't shown much conviction at the appropriate levels to address this "push" factor in immigration flows. Certainly there are programs in place such as the Central America Regional Security Initiative, but there is very little high-level association with the issue -- in other words, *ownership*.

Of course, there are no silver bullets to restoring peace and stability in the region. The most important contribution that can be made to cutting crime and violence and strengthening rule of law in Central America is through reform of judicial, penal, and law enforcement institutions. But U.S. leadership, access, and interests in our very own neighborhood, where our past engagement has made a real and lasting difference, are essential. Drug traffickers, criminal networks, and others who wish us harm, are not affected by budget constraints or crises elsewhere and are taking advantage of the vacuum left by waning U.S. leadership.

Right now, Central America is confronting a crisis every bit as dangerous to their stability as the Soviet-Cuban threats in the early 1980s. The difference then was an administration that was willing to step to the plate and get the job done.