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## Red Tape Slows U.S. Help for Children Fleeing Central America

Children at a migrant shelter last year in Tenosique, Mexico. Not a single child has entered the United States through a refugee program for Central American minors, in large part because of a slow-moving American bureaucracy. Credit Meridith Kohut for The New York Times

WASHINGTON — President Obama vowed a year ago to give Central American children fleeing violence a new, legal way into the United States by allowing them to apply for refugee status while in their own countries instead of accepting help from smugglers or resorting to a dangerous trek across Mexico.

But not a single child has entered the United States through the Central American Minors program since its establishment in December, in large part because of a slow-moving American bureaucracy that has infuriated advocates for the young children and their families.

More than 5,400 children, most of them trying to escape street gangs, extortion and sexual assault in El Salvador, have applied to join their parents, who are already in the United States legally. So far the Department of Homeland Security has interviewed only 90 of them, and lengthy procedures for getting airplane tickets and processing paperwork have delayed those whose applications were approved.

“Really, it’s pathetic that no child has come through this program,” said Lavinia Limón, the president and chief executive of the U.S. Committee for Refugees and Immigrants, a nonprofit organization. Pointing to administration officials, she added, “I wonder if it were their child living in the murder capital of the world, whether they would have more sense of urgency.”

Police officers last year in the La Pradera neighborhood, a Mara gang stronghold, in San Pedro Sula, Honduras, where a 7-year-old was tortured and murdered. Thousands of children, many of them fleeing violence, have applied to join their parents in the United States through the Central American Minors program. Credit Meridith Kohut for The New York Times

In the summer of 2014, tens of thousands of unaccompanied Central American minors surged across the United States-Mexico border after journeys that put their lives at risk or subjected them to sexual abuse from smugglers. Although the numbers crossing the southwestern border with Mexico have dropped since then, nearly 40,000 such children — most of them from Central America — still tried to cross into the United States in the year that ended on Sept. 30.

The administration's refugee program for Central American minors was intended to reduce the incentive for children to make the trek: At the time that it was proposed a year ago, a White House spokesman called it an "orderly alternative to the dangerous journey that children are currently undertaking to join relatives in the United States."

Administration officials said they are still convinced that the program will become a good alternative for some of those children, although they acknowledged the delays. Mr. Obama's advisers said approving refugees is never a fast process and is even harder in places like Central America, where the United States does not have a long-established system for processing refugee applicants.

State Department officials said the program was also slowed by the requirement of DNA tests for parents in the United States and their children in Central America before the children could be granted entry. The officials said some parents had taken a long time to have those tests performed, further extending the delays. The process also includes security checks, medical screenings, payments for airline flights, and other paperwork.

Nonetheless, Simon Henshaw, the principal deputy assistant secretary of state, said that he expected the first children in the program to be reunited with their parents in the next two weeks and that the department was preparing to interview as many as 420 more children starting this month.

Administration officials said it is important that the program not make any mistakes in who is granted entry to the United States, because political adversaries could use any failure to try to shut down the effort. They said that requires being methodical in processing applicants, even if that creates some delay.

State Department officials also said that most of the applications for the program were submitted in the last four months and that the Department of Homeland Security had already begun preparing to screen some of the children before their DNA testing and other paperwork.

“As with all of our refugee programs, we are always seeking ways to streamline without sacrificing the security or integrity of the process,” Mr. Henshaw said.

United States Border Patrol agents detaining a young migrant last year outside McAllen, Tex., near the Mexican border. Credit John Moore/Getty Images

But activists at international refugee organizations said those explanations are not good enough.

Kevin Appleby, the director of migration policy at the United States Conference of Catholic Bishops, said children in Central America remain in danger from violence in their countries as they wait for their applications to be considered.

“We need to fix the program so that it works and so that children have a real opportunity to get protection,” Mr. Appleby said. “They have to make the program workable. Right now, it’s not workable.”

Mr. Appleby said his organization still supports the goal of the program, which is intended to process the children’s cases more efficiently. The children will not increase the overall number of refugees granted admission to the United States annually because they will be counted against limits the administration has already set.

Refugee status is granted to someone who can prove fear of persecution by reason of race, religion, nationality, political opinion or membership in a particular social group. Those who receive refugee status can live and work legally in the United States and can generally pursue American citizenship after five years in the country.

The Central American Minors program also allows the Department of Homeland Security to grant a two-year temporary entry into the United States for children who do not qualify as refugees. Those immigrants must apply to renew their entry status every two years and are not eligible to pursue American citizenship.

Ms. Limón said she recognized the need for officials to screen the potential refugees to make sure they qualified. But she said the fact that the children are so young and may face violence in their countries should trump bureaucratic concerns.

“They have set up an elaborate, bureaucratic, step-by-step system,” she said. “The children are in danger, and they can’t wait. It’s just sad, and, I think, indefensible.”

Of the 90 Central American children who have been interviewed so far, officials said about 10 qualified as refugees and 75 were recommended for entry under the temporary status, known as “humanitarian parole.”