FEATURED Q&A

How Will Cutting off U.S. Aid Affect Central America?

U.S. Secretary of State Mike Pompeo defended the administration’s aid cut to Guatemala, El Salvador and Honduras in an appearance Wednesday on Capitol Hill. The “enormous crisis” at the southern border shows aid hasn’t been effective, he said. // Photo: U.S. State Department.

Q: The administration of U.S. President Donald Trump on March 30 cut direct foreign aid to Guatemala, El Salvador and Honduras. The move followed Trump’s threats to end some $450 million in aid to the so-called “Northern Triangle” countries, saying they have failed to prevent illegal migration to the United States. How will the decision affect the three Central American nations? Will the move alter migrant flows to the United States? Will Guatemala, El Salvador and Honduras make any major policy changes or turn elsewhere for aid as a result?

A: Salvador Paiz, president of FUNSEPA and vice president of FUNDESA in Guatemala City: “More than 76,000 migrants crossed the U.S. border without authorization in February, an 11-year high. Harsher detention policies have not deterred thousands of families from fleeing violence and poverty. The cuts in aid are unlikely to generate any substantive policy changes in the short term and might even spur additional migration. While it has become a common practice to group Guatemala, El Salvador and Honduras into the construct of the ‘Northern Triangle,’ the three countries are, in fact, independent and have their individual characteristics. In the case of Guatemala, some people do flee to escape from gang violence. However, numerous studies demonstrate that the overwhelming majority of people migrate looking for economic opportunities to better the quality of life for themselves and their families. The announcement to cut aid to the region seems like a ‘cold turkey’ approach to reassess how the aid is invested and to renegotiate the terms of engagement with each of the three Central American nations.”

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Red Cross to Nearly Triple Humanitarian Aid to Venezuela

The International Committee of the Red Cross announced Thursday that it is nearly tripling its humanitarian aid to Venezuela, from approximately $9 billion to $24.6 billion. The announcement followed a visit this week to Venezuela by the ICRC’s president, Peter Maurer, who met with President Nicolás Maduro, members of his government and lawmakers, the organization said in a statement. “During my visit, I talked to many Venezuelans and I saw how they’re facing daily challenges due to the deterioration of fragile basic services, including access to health care,” Maurer said in the statement. “Hospitals are having difficulties ensuring they have water, electricity, medicine and enough health staff on site. Our cooperation with and support to the public institutions will be crucial to reverse this trend.”

With the additional funding, the ICRC said it will be expanding its work in the areas of migration, health, water and sanitation, and detention. The ICRC recently signed an agreement with Venezuela’s health ministry to provide Venezuelans with emergency health care. The organization’s aid will go to 28 hospitals and eight primary health centers. During his visit to Venezuela, the first by an ICRC president in 24 years, Maurer visited Táchira, on the country’s border with Colombia, and Bolívar, on the Brazilian border. During the trip, he met with community members, migrants and people who have been affected by armed violence, as well as patients and medical personnel at three institutions.

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Lower House of Mexico’s Congress Passes Labor Reform

Mexico’s lower house on Thursday approved a landmark labor reform that allows unions to bargain more effectively on behalf of workers, clearing one of the last obstacles to ratifying agreements with Mexico’s labor secretariat. The law, which President Andrés Manuel López Obrador backs, would allow unions to negotiate directly with employers, and it was passed by a vote of 250-22 in the lower house. The Senate is expected to pass the bill next week, and the law will go into effect in November. The bill, which was negotiated with business groups and labor unions, was a key component of Mexico’s success in attracting foreign investment in recent years. The law was passed despite opposition from some business groups, who argued it would give unions too much power and hurt employers. The bill is expected to be signed into law by President López Obrador next week.

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—Christine Lagarde
the trade deal signed last year with the United States and Canada to replace the North American Free Trade Agreement, or NAFTA, The Wall Street Journal reported. Lawmakers overwhelmingly approved the legislation, with 417 votes in support and just one against it. The ruling Morena Party as well as main opposition parties voted in favor. The bill will now go to the Senate, where it is expected to pass by the end of April, according to Majority Leader Ricardo Monreal, the newspaper reported. The law would give workers the right to elect union leaders in direct elections with secret ballots and aims to eliminate the practice of “protection unions,” in which labor leaders can ratify contracts without consent from workers. The law also complies with labor requirements established in the United States-Mexico-Canada Agreement, or USMCA, El Universal reported. On April 2, U.S. House Speaker Nancy Pelosi had warned that the U.S. Congress would not approve the deal unless Mexico passed a labor reform. [Editor’s note: See related Q&A in the Feb. 20 issue of the Advisor.]

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Ana Quintana, senior policy analyst for Latin America and the Western Hemisphere at The Heritage Foundation: “The historically high levels of migrants apprehended at the southern U.S. border has the White House questioning the utility of foreign assistance to source countries in Central America’s Northern Triangle. In February, border officials reported detaining more than 76,000 individuals, 47 percent being family units with children. That number was the highest figure in over five years until the following month, where more than 92,000 migrants were apprehended, over 50 percent of which were family units with children. The figures demonstrate two key facts. First, the humanitarian and security crisis at the border is growing. Second, the United States and regional partners are falling short of their goal of decreasing migrant outflows from Central America. While we should be cognizant of the Northern Triangle’s domestic challenges, partner nations should push to see real change. For any country, particularly the United States, geography determines foreign policy priorities. It is critical that the Trump administration use this opportunity to find better methods of improving cooperation with our regional counterparts. An important component to this strategy is ensuring funds get to where they are needed. To do so, the administration must continue to reform and streamline foreign assistance programming by addressing burdensome legislative directives and earmarks. Central America’s security and stability is a long-term project, and the United States must be in it for the long haul.”

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**POLITICAL NEWS**

Guatemala’s Aldana Says She Was Detained at Airport

Guatemalan presidential candidate and former Attorney General Thelma Aldana on Thursday said she had been detained at an airport in Honduras before leaving the country for El Salvador shortly afterward, Prensa Libre reported. Aldana, who is among the front-runners ahead of Guatemala’s June 16 presidential election, is facing an arrest warrant at home in relation to charges including embezzlement and tax fraud. She had fled to El Salvador last month to avoid arrest, running her campaign from there. On Thursday, Aldana flew to Honduras, where she said she had been “arbitrarily detained;” lashing out against what she called the “pact of the corrupt,” in which she included Honduran President Juan Orlando Hernández. “Thelma was taken to an office where she was interrogated,” campaign strategist José Carlos Marroquín told Reuters. Honduras’ national police said in a statement that Aldana had not been detained. Aldana, 63, denies the accusations against her, dismissing the order for her arrest as politically motivated. Her candidacy gives her immunity, but Guatemala’s electoral tribunal last week revoked it, citing irregularities during her tenure as attorney general. As the country’s top prosecutor, Aldana launched investigations into high-level politicians including former President Otto Pérez Molina, who is now in jail, as well as current President Jimmy Morales. Aldana leads the presidential race with 28 percent of support in the most recent poll, Reuters reported. [Editor’s note: See related Q&A in the Feb. 1 issue of the Advisor.]
Under international law, these governments cannot legally stop people from migrating out of their countries.” — Sarah Blodgett Bermeo

the underlying conditions forcing people to migrate. Foreign aid is essential for funding regional security initiatives combating organized crime as well as in-country programs building police capacity to counter gang influence. Well-targeted aid programs can be used to provide immediate food assistance and to promote the adoption of more climate-resistant and profitable crops as well as better agriculture techniques that will reduce the need to migrate. Aid can be used to invest in health, education and job training to improve conditions and economic opportunities in these countries. As a way to force the governments of El Salvador, Guatemala, and Honduras to stop migrants from leaving, the Trump administration’s move to cut foreign aid will be unsuccessful. Under international law, these governments cannot legally stop people from migrating out of their countries. Since much aid is channeled through non-governmental organizations and U.S. contractors, cuts will hurt vulnerable people, not the governments. Moves to make aid more effective and target it to the most vulnerable locations within countries would be far more likely to decrease future migration than the misguided decision to cut aid to El Salvador, Guatemala and Honduras.”

Ken Baker, CEO of Glasswing International: “From our perspective, a cut in aid will have a very negative impact on the countries of the Northern Triangle, and the most significant impact will be on the areas that are of greatest concern to the current U.S. administration. The money is not given directly to the governments, and it is mainly targeted to address the root causes of migration, bring accountability and reintegrate returned migrants, in the hopes that they will not return again to the United States. These countries will be less able to deal with the challenges of migration without these funds, the technical support and the ability of the United States to convene and mobilize different actors, such as the private sector, to address the challenges of violence and poverty that afflict their communities. Cutting off aid in such an abrupt manner, especially to critical programs, can also have devastating and counterproductive effects. It takes time to build up the confidence of a community, a partner or a school, to get them to join efforts and meet goals. Abruptly terminating these programs will ensure more challenges with migration, and with no thought-out or agreed-upon exit strategy, it will hurt organizations such as ours. The move will most diminish U.S. influence. There are certainly other countries, such as China, that would love to increase their influence in the region and take advantage of their newly re-established relations here.”

The Advisor welcomes comments on its Q&A section. Readers can write editor Gene Kuleta at gkuleta@thedialogue.org.