

AMNESTY INTERNATIONAL – PUBLIC STATEMENT

20 June 2019 AMR 01/0557/2019

NO CHOICE: AMERICAS MUST OFFER REFUGE AND PROTECTION

Millions across the Americas are fleeing human rights violations in their countries, seeking protection. Refugees are people who find themselves with no choice other than to leave their lives behind hoping for safety. Many arrive in hostile environments but stepping back home could put their lives at risk. American states must protect those in need and promote a coherent regional response.

In South America, **Venezuela is experiencing a context of massive human rights violations that has forced over four million people to flee the country.** Most states in the Americas have openly denounced this human rights crisis and have generally kept an open-door policy. **Colombia has received the highest number of Venezuelans -1.3 million- and Peru hosts the highest number of Venezuelan asylum seekers in the world; 227,000 as of March 2019, out of over 727,000 Venezuelans in Peru.** Despite this dramatic reality and repeated political outcries, some states have taken steps back in their international obligations to welcome and protect Venezuelan refugees. On 15 June 2019, against its international obligations, **Peru began requesting Venezuelans hold a ‘humanitarian visa’ to access the country.** Together with other civil society organizations, Amnesty International called on Peru to revert its decision and continue welcoming Venezuelans. In the Caribbean, **Trinidad and Tobago, which hosts approximately 40,000 Venezuelans, recently concluded a two-week registration process that allowed Venezuelans to gain legal residency.** Against Amnesty International’s request and despite this process only reaching around 14,000 people, authorities refused to extend the registration period and instead decided to re-enforce national immigration legislation and established visa restrictions for Venezuelans entering the country. Risks of illegal pushbacks and deportations now leaves thousands of Venezuelans in need of international protection out in the cold.

In Central America, a year on from the brutal crackdown of mass protests in Nicaragua, **some 62,000 people have fled to neighboring countries, the majority -some 55,000- seeking refuge in neighboring Costa Rica.** By allowing Nicaraguans to enter, the Costa Rican government has set an example to the region by giving them the safety they are denied in their own country. Challenges remain, including access to healthcare, education, and work, and the international community must support Costa Rica in its efforts to receive, protect and support people fleeing the human rights crisis in Nicaragua. Likewise, **people leaving Honduras, Guatemala and El Salvador, are not only leaving due to poverty and inequality, but in most cases, are forced to leave their countries to save their lives due to persecution and violence.** Since 2018, the departure of thousands of Central Americans from their countries heading north changed when people started fleeing collectively in the so called “caravans”. In recent years, **Mexico has also become a destination country for those people.** In 2017, Amnesty International called on the Mexican government to review its migration practices to stop refoulement and child detention. Against these calls, the Mexican government strengthened security on its southern border and accepted the “Remain in Mexico deal” with the USA, which makes people that have asked for asylum in the USA wait in the Mexican side of the border for their claim to be adjudicated. The constant pressure of the USA on Mexico to stop migrants and refugees from getting to the US border has resulted in mass detentions, overcrowded detention centers and mass deportations without due process, and now with 6,000 members of the National Guard patrolling the south border of Mexico.

In North America, **Amnesty International has shown that people seeking safety and protection in the USA have been systematically denied their right to seek asylum at the Mexican border,** and thousands of refugees have been left stranded in the Middle East as a result of President Trump’s “Muslim Ban” and other restrictive policies targeting refugees. The US government has taken actions which violate US and international law, including family separations, mass illegal pushbacks of asylum seekers at the border back to Mexico and potentially into harm’s way, and arbitrary and indefinite detention of asylum seekers, without parole, constituting ill-treatment in some cases of vulnerable individuals, including LGBTI people and children. Furthermore, the US is pushing for its southern neighbors to control the transit of refugees and migrants. **Amnesty International urges Mexico and Guatemala to refrain from signing safe third country agreements with the US.**

Across the Americas, these examples highlight that in the face of millions fleeing their homes in need of international protection, American states are failing in their obligation to welcome them according to international human rights standards, turning their backs on the Americas’ legacy on advanced and progressive standards related to human mobility, such as the Cartagena Declaration. **On World Refugee Day, Amnesty International calls on all states in the Americas to take steps towards guaranteeing the rights of refugees and asylum-seekers.** They must find joint solutions to the current context and ensure that no one in need of international protection is left behind. Critically, humanitarian and development aid should actively contribute to hosting communities.