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A HUMANITARIAN CRISIS

Who hears the cry of the young mothers and children detained at the border?

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Children have been arriving to the US in increasing numbers from Guatemala, Honduras, and El Salvador, escaping from violence and personal threats by criminal gang, besides poverty.

The tens of thousands of children traveling alone, some as young as five years old, are apprehended at the Border and held in detention centers for an undetermined period, until relatives can be located. The Border Patrol generally provides for their physical needs, but their psychological and emotional conditions are often devastating and their future is uncertain.

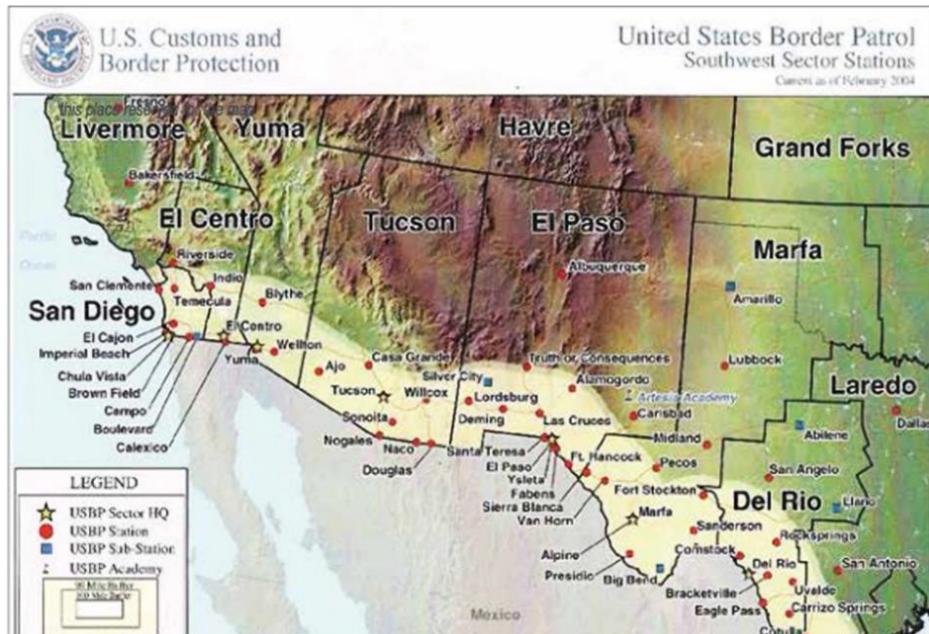
To get to the US/Mexican border, they had to travel for at least 15 days through Mexico, where many were subject to abuse and blackmail. We do not know how many never made it through Mexico, possibly becoming victims of human trafficking. However, for these kids the risks encountered in their travel pale against the violence and threats they faced in their country.

Families with children have also been arriving in increasing numbers from the same countries, to escape violence and poverty.

They were lured into migrating by unscrupulous crime rackets, who, against payment, promised them safe passage to the US, assuring that they will be welcome when they arrive.

Children and families attempt to cross the US/Mexican border, mainly through Southern Texas. The Border Patrol of that sector apprehends most of them, but overwhelmed by the volume of new arrivals, often busses or flies those apprehended to Northern Texas, Arizona, and California.

There, families are processed and then released, often at night, to the local Greyhound bus station with little money, food or other resources. The intervention of local charities is their only hope. Eventually, they will attempt to reach their relatives in locations across the US, where they must



Sectors of the US-Mexico-border (From U. S. Customs and Border Protection)

report to local Immigration authorities for further proceedings and possible deportation. In many ways, these are not migrants, but refugees. They are similar to the Syrian and Iraqis who have fled to Jordan or to Turkey. **As Vincentians deeply committed to caring for the poor and the vulnerable of our society wherever we find them, are we willing to understand their fear, their precarious situation and welcome them?**

Background

The current crisis comes on top of the ongoing migration issues, caused by lack of economic opportunities in Central American countries (the so-called “push factor”) and by the desperate need of cheap labor by many US industries (the so-called “pull factor”).

As we all know, because there are no simple, reasonable and practical **legal** ways to migrate to this country, migrants from Mexico, Central America and elsewhere, both children and adults, have been coming into our country undocumented. Our immigration system, not updated for decades, is at the source of the 10-12 million undocumented migrants currently in the US and the root cause of thousands of deaths in the desert, millions of deportations, separated families and many social ills.

Something has to change

Everyone says that something has to change, ordinary citizens say it, members of the Border Patrol say it and so are the Border Communities, the Governors of Border States, and the US Government.

What has to change?

We have little control over the violence or lack of economic opportunities that made migrants leave their country.

What we can control is what is happening in this country. We need to address what is at the heart of the problem:

- How do we meet the tremendous need for labor in agriculture, in chicken farms, in construction, in home services, etc.?
- How do we limit the huge inflow of illegal narcotics, a flourishing hidden market?
- How do we heal those who have fallen victim to narcotic addiction and prevent others from becoming so?



Border Patrol Vehicle near Tucson (from Wikimedia Commons)

These are the questions that we should be asking.

Updating immigration legislation to meet the economic requirements of our country can go a long way in addressing undocumented immigration. An orderly migration process that allows workers and their families to enter our country legally and provides asylum for victims of violence would leave only drug

carriers and other criminals that have something to hide trudging through the desert to cross the border. The Border Patrol could then concentrate its efforts to catch those criminal and limit the import of narcotics!

What can we do?

1. Continue to advocate for immigration reform, the only thing that can ensure the long-term stability and well-being of many migrant families. The Senate passed Comprehensive Immigration Reform last year. The House has yet to do so. It is essential that the House of Representatives forthrightly address these complex and divisive issue. There is good support in the House for Immigration Reform, but unfortunately, the House leadership has not allowed legislation to come to the floor. It is imperative that we continue to put pressure on our Representatives by writing to them or, better yet, by bringing groups of Vincentians to meet with their staff at their local district offices. This is the link to the recent Action Alert issued by Sheila Gilbert, our National President:

<http://capwiz.com/svdpusa/issues/alert/?alertid=63272546&queueid=10442621931>

2. We can also advocate that the US Government allocate sufficient resources for the compassionate handling of children and families, detained at the Border or with temporary stay, pending further proceeding and deportation.
3. We can provide immediate help to immigrant families living in our communities (often split families or families living in hiding) or twin with Councils in the border areas that are supporting the new immigrants upon their arrival.
4. Pray that our country treats these children and families with compassion and gives them protection. They are our brothers and sisters, who are the crucified members of the Body of Christ.

WHO ARE THESE CHILDREN?

Bishop Mark Seitz of El Paso provided the USCCB testimony at a hearing in the House Judiciary Committee on Wednesday, June 25. During his testimony, shared the stories of three children— one from El Salvador, Guatemala, and Honduras—to give the committee a sense of the reality of the violence they are fleeing:

Marta*, age 16, was born and raised in El Salvador, where she lived with her mother, father, brother and sister until just a few months ago. Currently, Marta is in a secure juvenile facility in the United States because she entered the U.S. without status.

Marta reports having a very happy childhood, being involved with her church and that she is very close to all her family members. Now she is separated from everyone she knows in the world, because she had to flee for her life.

One day back home, Marta witnessed a fellow student's death as he was shot in the back by the gangs on his way home from school. Then the threats against Marta began. Members of the La Mara Salvatrucha (MS13) gang have repeatedly

tried to recruit Marta to assist them in their criminal activities and have threatened to kill her and her family. Marta has been beaten, and threatened with a machete by gang members. At one point, the police intervened by relocating Marta's family to the countryside, but the gang still located Marta. Few community members are willing to assist her family out of fear of the gang. Marta's choices were to flee the country, join the criminal gang, or possibly be killed. After being in hiding for months, Marta's mother sent her to the U.S., to save her daughter's life. The family continues to be in hiding in El Salvador.

Marta cries repeatedly out of fear for her family's safety and is suffering from post-traumatic stress disorder. Marta is applying for asylum in the U.S. and has been approved to transfer to a foster care setting while she navigates immigration proceedings with the aid of a pro-bono attorney.

Ana*, age 15, grew up in Totonicapán, Guatemala, living with her biological parents and nine siblings. On an average day, Ana woke up at 5:00 AM to clean the house, and then sewed dresses until 9:00 PM, at which time she would fix dinner for her family and go to bed. Prior to migrating to the U.S., Ana had completed fifth grade before her father decided that her time would be better spent working. The impetus for her migration was the severe physical and emotional abuse she suffered at the hands of her father, who was unable to sustain steady employment and suffered from alcohol abuse. In June of 2013, Ana's mother secretly arranged for her to travel to the United States in hopes of reunifying with her 30 year-old sister in Houston, Texas. She travelled mostly by car, stopping to sleep in basements and warehouses on her way through Mexico.

The Lord is knocking at the door of our hearts. Have we put a sign on the door saying, 'Do not disturb?'

Pope Francis

Once near the northern border of Mexico, she spent three nights in a trailer while the guide waited on other members of the group to arrive. Ana was given little water and nothing to eat while waiting in the trailer. On the third night in the trailer, the guide attempted to rape Ana, but another traveler pulled him away. The next day, after crossing into Texas, the guide again tried to rape her but his efforts were once again thwarted. Angry at her rejection, the guide abandoned Ana in the middle of the desert and returned to Mexico. Ana continued to walk until she found a farm and was subsequently apprehended by Border Patrol.

Maria* is a 16-year-old girl from Honduras who arrived to the US and was placed in ORR custody in July 2013. She was referred for home study due to having been the victim of sexual abuse at the age of 13. While in Honduras, she had suffered additional abuse that began with harassment in her country of origin by La Mara Salvatrucha (MS13) Gang. Maria was pursued, brutalized and attempts at recruiting her culminated into the brutal beating of her mother and other family members, constant threats of kidnapping, and an eventual kidnapping by MS-13 gang members. Eventually Maria sought assistance and tried to get out of her confinement and recruitment by the gang. She finally devised a plan to escape, and under the ruse of going "shopping", the child arranged to escape to her sister's house. However, when the gang realized that the child had escaped, they surrounded the home to which she fled. Local authorities eventually secured Maria,

*debriefed her, and helped her relocate to protective custody in another part of the country. The child's mother insisted that she be moved to the care of a family member (aunt) in a nearby city in Honduras, but this only lasted a short time, since gang members found out this location and pursued and harassed Maria at this location as well. Since this incident, Maria has not had any contact or involvement with this gang, and eventually fled to the United States for fear she would be killed. Maria is currently being cared for by a foster-care family and awaits her court date. * **All names were changed to protect children's' identity***

This is the link to the entire text of Bishop Seitz testimony: <http://www.usccb.org/about/migration-policy/upload/BSeitzfinaltest.pdf>

The Office of Refugee Resettlement established a parents' hotline so parents can try to locate their children: **1-800-203-7001**