



Central America's Northern Triangle: Challenges for U.S. Policymakers in 2021

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El Salvador, Guatemala, and Honduras, located in the Northern Triangle region of Central America (see **Figure 1**), have long struggled with high levels of poverty and inequality, widespread insecurity, and fragile democratic institutions. Already-difficult living conditions have worsened over the past year due to the Coronavirus Disease 2019 (COVID-19) pandemic and two hurricanes. The International Monetary Fund **estimates** the Salvadoran economy contracted by nearly 8.6% in 2020 and the Honduran and Guatemalan economies contracted by 8.0% and 1.5%, respectively. Nearly **1 million** Salvadorans, **3.1 million** Hondurans, and **3.7 million** Guatemalans are contending with crisis or emergency levels of food insecurity. Although the pandemic and government lockdowns initially disrupted criminal activities, reports **suggest** domestic violence increased and gangs and illicit trafficking groups quickly adapted to the changed circumstances. Amid these challenges, the Northern Triangle governments have sought to **undermine** anti-corruption efforts, **weaken** judicial independence, and **consolidate power**, in the view of many analysts.

The deteriorating situation in the Northern Triangle could have far-reaching implications for the United States. U.S. authorities **encountered** (apprehended or expelled under a public health authority) approximately 112,000 Hondurans, 96,000 Guatemalans, and 30,000 Salvadorans at the Southwest border in the first four months of 2021. Migration levels typically peak in the spring, but mixed flows of asylum-seekers and economic migrants could swell again later in the year as governments further ease COVID-19-related border restrictions. Conditions in the region also could affect illicit trafficking patterns, as some analysts **warn** that criminal organizations may exploit the situation to further tighten their grip on the “economies, people, and politics” of the Northern Triangle.

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Figure I. Map of Central America

Source: Congressional Research Service.

From FY2016 to FY2021, Congress appropriated more than \$3.6 billion of foreign assistance supporting the [U.S. Strategy for Engagement in Central America](#) to improve conditions in the region and address the underlying drivers of migration. The Obama Administration devised the strategy after a surge of unaccompanied minors from the Northern Triangle arrived at the Southwest border in 2014. The Trump Administration maintained the initiative but [suspended](#) most foreign assistance for the Northern Triangle in March 2019. It reprogrammed \$396 million to other foreign policy priorities and withheld most of the remaining assistance for more than a year while it negotiated a series of [border security and asylum agreements](#) with the Northern Triangle governments. The aid suspension resulted in U.S. agencies scaling back many programs less than two years into implementation, making it difficult to assess the effectiveness of U.S. assistance efforts in the region. Nevertheless, a 2019 Government Accountability Office [study](#) and a 2020 [progress report](#) suggest U.S. programs have achieved mixed results.

In addition to the challenges posed by funding interruptions, U.S. efforts to foster structural changes in the Northern Triangle have faced significant resistance from small but powerful groups of elites who benefit from the status quo. Their opposition to anti-corruption and good governance reforms, experts say, has left Northern Triangle institutions without the [resources](#) or capabilities necessary to respond to the region's challenges and susceptible to [cooptation](#) by private and criminal interests. It has also been seen to contribute to a [sense of hopelessness](#) among citizens of the region that conditions could ever improve.

Accordingly, many analysts argue that combatting corruption should be the U.S. government's top priority in the region. Among other policies, they [recommend](#) increasing political and financial support to reformers inside and outside of government while using diplomatic pressure and targeted sanctions to spur political will among those resistant to change. Congress has placed anti-corruption conditions on assistance to the Northern Triangle governments and created several other anti-corruption [sanctions authorities](#). The United States-Northern Triangle Enhanced Engagement Act (P.L. 116-260, Division FF, Subtitle F) requires the President to produce an annual list of corrupt actors in the region, due by June 2021, and directs the President to impose visa sanctions on those identified. Although sanctioning corrupt officials may help foster long-term improvements in governance in the region, it could complicate short-term government-to-government cooperation on other issues, such as [detering migrant flows](#).

The Biden Administration is [requesting \\$861 million](#) in FY2022 to begin implementing its proposed four-year, \$4 billion plan to foster systemic change and address the root causes of irregular migration from Central America. According to the Administration, the funding "would allow the United States to sustain effective regional partnerships and strengthen host government accountability to bolster service delivery

and security by curtailing endemic corruption, preventing violence, reducing poverty, and expanding economic development opportunities.” The U.S. Citizenship Act of 2021 (S. 348/H.R. 1177) would authorize \$1 billion annually from FY2022 through FY2025 to combat corruption, strengthen the rule of law, and consolidate democratic governance; reduce criminal violence and improve citizen security; counter sexual, gender-based, and domestic violence; and tackle extreme poverty and advance economic development in Central America. Although there is [evidence](#) that foreign assistance can alleviate some drivers of forced displacement, such as violence and food insecurity, economic migration appears to be linked to long-term demographic and development trends.

To manage migration pressures in the near term, some analysts [argue](#) policymakers should increase legal U.S. pathways for temporary laborers and asylum-seekers while working with partners throughout the Western Hemisphere to strengthen humanitarian protection systems. In February 2021, President Biden issued [Executive Order 14010](#), calling for a comprehensive regional framework to manage migration flows. Pursuant to the executive order, the Administration [suspended](#) the 2019 asylum agreements with the Northern Triangle countries, [reestablished](#) the Central American Minors program to reunite children with parents in the United States, [began processing](#) asylum-seekers previously returned to Mexico, and [reserved](#) 6,000 temporary, non-agricultural worker visas for individuals from the region. Congress may consider additional measures, including S. 348/H.R. 1177 and H.R. 6—passed by the House in March 2021—that would modify the legal pathways available to those in the region and adjust the status of some Central American immigrants in the United States.

For further analysis, see CRS In Focus IF11151, *Central American Migration: Root Causes and U.S. Policy*, and CRS In Focus IF10371, *U.S. Strategy for Engagement in Central America: An Overview*.

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