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U.S. can soon start sending people seeking asylum to Honduras

By: RHC  
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The administration of U.S. President Donald Trump has finalized a controversial agreement with Honduras that would allow some people seeking asylum in the United States to be sent to the Central American country instead.

The agreement is similar to one with Guatemala and is part of the administration's effort to reduce the flow of migrants across the southwest border by making it harder to gain entry to the US with an asylum claim. Critics have slammed the deals, saying they violate U.S. obligations under international law on asylum.

The text of the agreement with Honduras was released Thursday, a day before it is published in the Federal Register and takes effect.

The U.S. is already expelling most people it encounters along the US-Mexico border under an emergency public health order signed by Trump last month in response to the coronavirus outbreak. That order was renewed for 30 days and is set to expire next month.

Critics say both the new agreement and the earlier one with Guatemala - the subject of a legal challenge - represent a retreat by the US from its obligations under international law to provide a sanctuary to people seeking refuge from persecution and high rates of violence.

Neither Honduras nor Guatemala has the capacity to accept and resettle refugees, so people will likely just return eventually to whatever danger they fled in their home countries, said Yael Schacher, senior US advocate for Refugees International. "The U.S. is indirectly sending people back to face persecution," Schacher said.

Aaron Reichlin-Melnick, a lawyer and policy counsel with the American Immigration Council, said on Twitter that with the Honduras deal in place, "asylum at the southern border is effectively gone."

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"Honduras and Guatemala are not 'safe third countries' for asylum seekers fleeing harms in neighboring countries, he added. "The only thing that can stop these illegal agreements is a court case that's slow you wending [sic] its way through the system now - and the November election."

Under the agreement reached last year, the U.S. sends asylum seekers from El Salvador and Honduras to Guatemala. The majority of those sent as part of that deal have chosen to return back to their country instead of seeking asylum in Guatemala.

It is not yet clear how the new agreement would work. Neither the version released by the U.S. nor the one put out earlier by the Honduran government specifically says who could be sent to Honduras. But officials have previously said that the government of Honduras had agreed to accept asylum seekers from Guatemala, El Salvador, Mexico, Nicaragua and Brazil.

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