Thirty-five years after deaths of Cleveland churchwomen in El Salvador, U.S. policy still devalues human rights: Theresa Keeley (Opinion)

Thirty-five years ago in El Salvador, four U.S. missionaries were raped and murdered [https://www.csjs.org/news/remembering-the-churchwomen-of-el-salvador.php] by members of the Salvadoran National Guard. Maryknoll Sisters Maura Clarke and Ita Ford and Cleveland's Ursuline Sister Dorothy Kazel and lay missionary Jean Donovan were aiding Salvadorans who had fled their homes in the midst of civil war.


Today, another crisis, the flow of Central Americans, demands human rights play a greater role in U.S. policy.

Although 10,000 Salvadorans, including Blessed Óscar Romero [http://www.dioceseofcleveland.org/pope-recognizes-martyrdom-of-archbishop-oscar-romero/], were murdered in 1980, it was the churchwomen who ignited U.S. outrage. Echoing Archbishop Romero, opponents called for an end to U.S. military aid to the Salvadoran government. Others, most notably U.S. Secretary of State Alexander Haig and U.S. Ambassador to the U.N. Jeanne Kirkpatrick, defended U.S. policy by insinuating the women were to blame for their own deaths.


Congress later required Ronald Reagan to certify every six months that El Salvador was improving its human-rights record, including making progress in the women's case. Five men were found guilty [http://www.nytimes.com/1984/05/25/world/5-salvadorans-are-found-guilty-in-slaying-of-us-churchwomen.html] in

U.S. aid fostered an environment that prompted Salvadorans to flee, yet the United States overwhelmingly denied Salvadorans' asylum claims. The Reagan administration could not argue that El Salvador's human-rights record was improving on one hand, while on the other, recognize that Salvadorans faced persecution.

Only three percent of Salvadorans were granted asylum status at the administrative level, in comparison to an average rate of 30 percent for other nationalities. Many deported Salvadorans were murdered upon their return. In response, people smuggled Central Americans into the United States and protected them in churches and homes as part of the sanctuary movement.

The civil war ended in 1992. It left 75,000 Salvadorans dead and cost the United States $4 billion, but the war's legacy continues.

In the name of human rights, the United States has turned on former military allies. In April, the United States deported Gen. Carlos Eugenio Vides Casanova, former head of the National Guard and defense minister. Citing a 2004 law barring human-rights violators from living in the United States, the Obama administration pushed for Vides' removal on the basis that he covered up torture and murder by his troops, including those of the churchwomen.


These U.S. actions are commendable, but the United States is not doing enough now.

Only a handful of children have arrived [http://latino.foxnews.com/latino/politics/2015/11/17/first-six-teens-arrive-in-us-legally-under-central-american-minors-program/] under the U.S. Central American Minors program. According to the Guardian [http://www.theguardian.com/us-news/2015/oct/12/obama-immigration-deportations-central-america] and research by Elizabeth Kennedy, a social scientist at San Diego State University, some deportees have been murdered upon their return, just as some were in the 1980s.


Rather than the threat of communism, opponents today argue that Central Americans threaten to drain the economy.

Republican Sen. Jeff Sessions of Alabama, chair of the Senate subcommittee on immigration and the national interest, contends that the U.S. program is not a refugee one because Central Americans seek better economic opportunity and/or unification with family. He is right; an economic migrant is not a refugee. And economics and family unification are definitely motivating some.

But international law is clear: A country cannot return or expel a refugee or asylum seeker back to where his or her life may be threatened. El Salvador ranks first in the world for female homicides and fifth for murders overall. As the United Nations has found [http://www.unhcr.org/5630f24c.pdf], many Salvadoran women and unaccompanied children can prove a well-founded fear of persecution — necessary to claim refugee status — from gang or domestic violence.

Thirty-five years ago, the churchwomen's murders shocked the conscience of many Americans. On this anniversary, Salvadorans facing the same fate should as well.

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