**Central America braces for return of US military-led foreign policy**

**Trump’s homeland security chief to lead meeting on region’s economic and security issues, as experts say aid cuts and deportations could fuel instability**

*A woman looks at a bus burnt by gang members in Honduras. Analysts fear a return of a ‘1980s drug-war model’ of US foreign policy. Photograph: Orlando Sierra/AFP/Getty Images*

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Central America is bracing itself for a return to military-led US foreign policy amid rising fears that sweeping aid cuts and mass deportations could destabilise the region.

**Central America's rampant violence fuels an invisible refugee crisis**

Gen John Kelly, the US secretary of homeland security, will this week lead a high-level meeting on economic and security issues in Central America, where [violence, corruption and poverty have forced tens of thousands to seek refuge in Mexico and the United States](https://www.theguardian.com/world/2016/oct/13/central-america-violence-refugee-crisis-gangs-murder).

The talks will be held in Miami at the base of Southern Command, which oversees US military operations in Latin America and which Kelly led before entering the [Trump administration](https://www.theguardian.com/us-news/trump-administration).

The two-day meeting comes less than a month after Trump proposed slashing foreign aid to Mexico and Central America while increasing funds for the Pentagon.

Analysts say such a move would in effect kill Barack Obama’s ambitious – though imperfect – policies to tackle some root causes of forced migration by investing in justice and security reforms, and prevention and development programmes.

“In the worst-case scenario, they will slam brakes on Obama’s more holistic, less military focus, and go back to the 1980s ‘drug war’ model and good old fashioned increases in military aid,” said Adam Isacson, a security expert at the Washington Office for Latin America.

During the cold war, the US directed billions of dollars of military aid to the region in support of dictatorships which confronting leftwing rebel groups in a series of [interlocking conflicts which killed tens of thousands and forcibly displaced millions](https://www.theguardian.com/world/2016/apr/08/spanish-trial-of-soldiers-behind-uca-atrocity-raises-hopes-of-ending-impunity-in-el-salvador).

“Kelly’s department has taken over the direction of security policy for every country north of Panama,” he added.

Almost 15,000 people were murdered in El Salvador, Honduras and Guatemala – known as the northern triangle – in 2016, making it the most dangerous region outside of Syria. Impunity is rife across the region.

**'It's life and death': border crossings continue despite the Trump effect**

The UN refugee agency estimates that about 200,000 Central Americans crossing into Mexico each year are fleeing violence and would qualify for international protection.

Activists are alarmed by the leadership, location and scope of the Miami meeting, which appears to focus on boosting business and security, instead of helping build institutions and promoting the rule of law.

More than 100 organisations from across the region have [signed a letter condemning the plans](http://lawg.org/storage/documents/NGO_Letter_Tillerson_Central_America_Conference_June_2017.pdf) to “discuss US policy towards the region solely from a security and economic lens, without addressing the protection needs and human rights of families, individuals, and children from the region”.

Daniella Burgi-Palomino, senior associate at the Latin America Working Group, said: “We’re very concerned at the detrimental impact of Gen Kelly inserting homeland security into what should be foreign policy decisions, especially as he’s shown no understanding of the root causes driving migration and refugees.”

Last month Kelly said that the vast majority of asylum seekers were [coached by smugglers](http://www.politico.com/story/2017/05/04/bob-casey-mother-son-deported-john-kelly-react-237986) to lie about threats and fears in order to stay in the US. Then, at a Senate hearing, [he called a programme to help unaccompanied child migrants a “total scam”](https://www.appropriations.senate.gov/hearings/review-of-the-fy2018-budget-request-for-the-us-department-of-homeland-security).

Government officials have seized upon the sharp drop in detentions at the US border since Trump’s inauguration as [proof that Central Americans are coming in search of jobs, not safety](https://www.theguardian.com/us-news/2017/apr/18/trump-mexico-asylum-applications-soar).

Juan José Hurtado Paz y Paz, from Asociacion Pop Noj, which works with Guatemalan minors deported by the US, believes any reduction will prove temporary.

*A Guatemalan girl, 14, waits along with more than 500 other migrants after a minor train derailment in Mexico. Photograph: Rebecca Blackwell/AP*

“Trump’s policies have created a psychosis of fear, but fear subsides, and regardless of how many walls are built, people will find a way to reach the US unless the multiple root causes of migration are tackled,” he said.

There are signs this may be starting to happen: 14,535 people were apprehended on the US southern border in May, [a 31% increase from April](https://www.cbp.gov/newsroom/stats/sw-border-migration).

This week’s meeting is co-hosted by Mexico, which had been threatening to rethink a pact made during the Obama administration to detain and deport Central Americans.

**Desperation drives American dream in Guatemalan town of lost opportunity**

Trump repeatedly attacked Mexico throughout his presidential campaign, threatening to rip up the North American free trade agreement and build a 2,000-mile border wall to keep “bad hombres” out.

But in recent weeks, Trump’s attention has turned to Central America, with pledges to deport members of the MS-13 gang to El Salvador.

In addition, plans are afoot to abandon the temporary protected status (TPS) – a special work visa sanctioned for a handful of countries prone to natural disasters – which could lead to the deportation of 250,000 Salvadorans and Hondurans.

Noah Bullock, director of the violence prevention organisation Cristosal in El Salvador, said: “Deportations that exceed the 2016 level could lead to great social instability and [such a policy] has little chance of reducing migration. Rather, it would likely feed the cycle of migration and insecurity that is already destabilizing the region.”

This week’s meeting is the latest evidence that the Pentagon is playing a central role in efforts to stop the migratory flow. In April, defence chiefs from across the region reportedly [agreed to increase intelligence and information cooperation with US armed forces](http://www.jornada.unam.mx/2017/04/25/politica/007n1pol) in order to conduct aerial, land and reconnaissance patrols on Mexico’s southern border.

In Honduras, [the most dangerous country in the world for environmental and land activists](https://www.theguardian.com/world/2017/jan/31/honduras-environmental-activists-global-witness-violence-berta-caceres), there are particular concerns about the US encouraging investment in large-scale extractive and agribusinesses.

Joaquin Mejia, from a Jesuit human rights group, said: “Experience tells us that police and military will be used as a mechanism to control and repress social conflicts generated by development projects imposed without proper consultation with communities.”