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THOSE MIGRANT CHILDREN BELONG WITH THEIR U.S. FAMILIES

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One of the goals of any sensible immigration policy should be to unite family members and keep them together. Our government should not be taking children away from their parents or close relatives and deporting them back to home countries wracked by drug-related violence and poverty.

But that is exactly what is happening with the children who have fled to this country from Central America.

According to Homeland Security Secretary Jeh Johnson, the government has been deporting several thousand migrants a week to Central America thanks to the addition of more aircraft and flights to return them. Cecilia Muñoz, the director of domestic policy at the White House, told "PBS NewsHour" in June that "the deportation process starts when they get here" and it is likely that "the vast majority of those kids end up going back."

Mr. Johnson said last month that "aggressive border security measures" deployed in response to the migrations have already cost \$405 million. The Obama administration has asked Congress for an additional \$1.2 billion to build detention centers and temporary immigration courts to speed this process up further, as well as to construct more barriers and increase border patrols to keep the children out.

The government's single-minded focus on enforcement and deportation is misguided and morally indefensible.

Under a 2008 anti-human-trafficking law, unaccompanied children detained at the border are initially placed in the care of the Health and Human Services Department's Office of Refugee Resettlement. The children are then transferred to the custody of a parent, close relative or qualified sponsor while they go through removal proceedings. As of July, almost 90% of these children have been released to relatives or sponsors.

Migrant children who have been reunited with their parents or close family members must be allowed to stay, and President Obama can issue temporary visas that will exempt them from deportation. President Franklin D. Roosevelt took similar action during World War II to bring nearly 1,000 Jewish refugees from Italy to the safety of Fort Ontario, N.Y.

The public would support Mr. Obama. A survey conducted in July by the nonprofit Public Religion Research Institute found that 62% of Americans – including a majority of the Republicans polled – believed that migrant children should be treated as refugees and allowed to remain in the U.S. if their home countries are unsafe.

Instead the government has been speeding through deportation hearings. TRAC, a Syracuse University policy group, recently reported that, on average, juveniles in Phoenix waited only 66 days before their cases were heard by an immigration judge. In contrast, other immigration cases in Phoenix had an average wait time of 805 days. Juvenile cases were

processed even faster in Omaha, Neb., where the average wait time was 10 days compared with 840 days for all other cases.

This breakneck pace raises serious concerns about whether Central American migrant children are receiving due process of law. Are they getting legal representation? Do they have the opportunity to develop and present their asylum claims? Every immigrant is entitled to a full and fair hearing.

More fundamentally, the Obama administration and Congress need to recognize that deporting more migrant children will not stop others from fleeing violence and poverty in Central America. Enforcement measures like higher walls and more armed guards are poor deterrents.

The root causes of the migration from Central America are crime and poverty. A wiser U.S. policy would provide more foreign aid to El Salvador, Guatemala and Honduras, where money is needed to fight drug cartels and street gangs, improve public education and revive the economy.

Violence in these countries is rampant, fueled by drug cartels and street gangs that use Central America as the bridge between the drug supply in South America and the drug demand in the U.S. The security situation in Honduras has deteriorated so much that the Peace Corps has pulled out its volunteers. For similar reasons the Peace Corps also has scaled back its operations in El Salvador and Guatemala.

Foreign aid could be used in these countries to improve their militaries and police forces, which in turn could combat the cartels and restore security. Mr. Obama should direct the Drug Enforcement Administration to focus particular attention on drug dealers from these countries who supply the U.S. market.

Economic woe in Central America has meant fewer jobs and more poverty. In July the leaders of El Salvador, Guatemala and Honduras appealed to Mr. Obama and Congress for monetary assistance that could be used to promote economic growth. We should provide that aid, both to the Central American governments and to nongovernmental organizations working in those countries on these issues. Personal safety and a chance at making a decent living would encourage children to stay in their home countries.

However, for the children who are already here and have rejoined their U.S.-based relatives, we must show compassion and keep them together with their families. Continuing to throw billions of dollars into deportations, detention centers and fences will not only break up families but is doomed to failure, wasting billions of taxpayer money.