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U.S. TO OFFER REFUGEE STATUS TO SOME CENTRAL AMERICAN CHILDREN

By Miriam Jordan
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The Obama administration is launching a program to offer refugee status to some minors from Central America who have family members already living in the U.S., enabling those who qualify to enter the country legally and remain here.

The decision follows a surge in unaccompanied children illegally entering the U.S. over the summer, fueling both a political and border crisis.

In a memorandum to the State Department on Tuesday, President Barack Obama allocated 4000 slots to refugees from Latin America and the Caribbean out of 70,000 available worldwide in fiscal 2015.

The plan would allow young people to apply to enter the U.S. as refugees without making the often-dangerous journey here. Relatives already in the U.S. would request they be considered for screening in their home countries. If approved, the children could join family in the U.S.

More than 66,000 unaccompanied children – mainly from Honduras, Guatemala and El Salvador – journeyed to the U.S. in the first 11 months of the fiscal year ended Sept. 30, nearly twice the previous year's rate.

Immigrant advocates and human-rights groups have been calling on the administration to treat the minors as refugees because many of them fled violence, particularly from gangs.

Activists who call for a tough stance on illegal immigration criticized the Obama administration's move.

"The president's plan undermines his contention that his administration is determined to return the thousands of recent illegal aliens from those Central American countries," said Ira Mehlman, a spokesman for the Federation for American Immigration Reform, which favors curbing all immigration to the U.S. "It will be difficult for him to justify returning thousands of illegal aliens, even as he is granting relatives of U.S. residents refugee status."

The president first signaled he was considering in-country refugee processing for Central American children in July, at the height of the influx. In August, agents apprehended 3129 unchaperoned children at the border, a significant drop from previous months.