

INSIDE DEVELOPMENT | THE FUTURE OF US AID

# State Department lays out criteria for resumption of 'Northern Triangle' aid

By **Teresa Welsh** // 13 January 2020Topics: *Funding, Democracy, Human Rights & Governance, Trade & Policy, Latin America and Caribbean, United States*

*A Honduran migrant carries her son at the airport after giving up her U.S. asylum claim and voluntarily returning to Honduras, in Ciudad Juarez, Mexico. Photo by: REUTERS / Jose Luis Gonzalez*

WASHINGTON — The State Department has determined steps that “Northern Triangle” governments must take for resumption of full U.S. foreign assistance, but stated it has no timeline for determining if or when that may happen, according to a letter sent by the department to Congress last week.

The letter, obtained by Devex, said the money was cut off last year as a “wakeup call” to the Northern Triangle countries “to demonstrate political will and do more to stop illegal immigration to the United States.”

“The governments of El Salvador, Guatemala, and Honduras must improve their border security; combat migrant smuggling and human trafficking, especially related to children; receive and reintegrate returned citizens; and implement public messaging campaigns to dissuade illegal immigration from these countries,” the letter said.

The Trump administration cut off money to the Northern Triangle (<https://www.devex.com/news/rescission-by-another-name-trump-move-sparks-questions-for-implementers-94622>) in March 2019, but has stated publicly (<https://www.devex.com/news/us-to-resume-northern-triangle-aid-programs-that-support-its-interests-official-says-95678>) it would resume foreign assistance that was seen to serve U.S. interests (<https://www.devex.com/news/central-america-aid-will-be-conditional-mike-pompeo-says-94669>). Administration officials have been vague about what

## US aid in Central America:

► US State Department ignores congressional request for Central America aid update (<https://www.devex.com/news/us-state-department-ignores-congressional-request-for-central-america-aid-update-96341>)

► Central America aid will be conditional, Mike Pompeo says (<https://www.devex.com/news/central-america-aid-will-be-conditional-mike-pompeo-says-94669%20//Implementers,%20omissions%20in%20the%20>

countries must do in order to see the full return of funds (<https://www.devex.com/news/following-review-us-will-not-provide-new-funds-to-central-america-95126>).

► Implementers, missions in the dark about Central America assistance cuts (<https://www.devex.com/news/implementers-missions-in-the-dark-about-central-america-assistance-cuts-94914>)

“The department remains optimistic the governments will take additional actions the president believes further addresses illegal immigration from their countries in time for decisions regarding [fiscal year] 2019 and FY 2020 funding,” the letter said, noting the U.S. government had seen a decrease in “immigrant encounters” at the southern border in recent months that it attributed to the stricter aid policy.

The State Department’s letter was sent in response to a request for information sent to Secretary of State Mike Pompeo in December by House Foreign Affairs Committee Chair Rep. Eliot Engel and Rep. Albio Sires, chair of the Subcommittee on Western Hemisphere, Civilian Security, and Trade.

The Democrats requested details about when full funds would return and if doing so would be related to implementation of safe third country agreements signed by the U.S. and the three governments last summer. Those deals allow the U.S. to send people back to Central America to seek asylum rather than doing so in the U.S.

They also called on Pompeo to return full funding to the region, after \$143 million to be used primarily for law enforcement activities or activity related to the safe third country agreements (<https://www.devex.com/news/despite-criticism-us-signs-third-migration-agreement-in-northern-triangle-95700>) was resumed in October (<https://www.devex.com/news/us-to-resume-northern-triangle-aid-pompeo-says-95846>). The President’s Emergency Plan for Aids Relief (<https://www.devex.com/organizations/u-s-president-s-emergency-plan-for-aids-relief-pepfar-48995>) assistance also continues.

In its response last week, the department said that money was intended to “enhance cooperation and responsibility sharing with respect to asylum seekers” and help the countries build out their asylum systems.

Refugee advocates say that weak institutions and widespread violence make the countries ill-suited to provide appropriate protections to asylum seekers.

The State Department missed the original Dec. 18 deadline (<https://www.devex.com/news/us-state-department-ignores-congressional-request-for-central-america-aid-update-96341>) the congressmen set for a reply, but submitted a letter to Sires after Devex requested comment last week on its failure to respond to the congressional letter. A spokesperson for the Bureau of Western Hemisphere Affairs confirmed the response had been sent and told Devex “the progress these countries have made toward our mutual goals is a step in the right direction.”

In its response, the department declined to provide Congress with a copy of an internal plan approved by Pompeo that lays out areas of cooperation from Northern Triangle governments to resume assistance, saying it was “internal/deliberative and therefore cannot be shared.”

The House Foreign Affairs Committee said that because the State Department’s letter failed to answer the specific questions outlined in Engel and Sires’ letter, the Democrats have reiterated their request for that information.

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## ABOUT THE AUTHOR

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Teresa Welsh has reported from more than 10 countries and is currently based in Washington, D.C. Her coverage focuses on Latin America; U.S. foreign assistance policy; fragile states; food systems and nutrition; and refugees and migration. Prior to joining Devex, Teresa worked at McClatchy’s Washington Bureau and covered foreign affairs for U.S. News and World Report. She was a reporter in Colombia, where she



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