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## Outsourcing a Refugee Crisis: U.S. Paid Mexico Millions to Target Central Americans Fleeing Violence

As immigration has become a key issue on the campaign trail, we look at a startling new report that finds "the United States has outsourced a refugee problem to Mexico that is similar to the refugee crisis now roiling Europe." In her New York Times opinion piece, "The Refugees at Our Door," Pulitzer Prize-winning journalist Sonia Nazario describes how the Obama administration is paying the Mexican government to keep people from reaching the U.S. border—people who often have legitimate asylum claims. We speak to Nazario about the harrowing stories she heard from Central American refugees in shelters in southern Mexico.

*Image Credit: Sonia Nazario*

### Transcript

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**AMY GOODMAN:** As Democratic presidential candidates kick off the first debate of the 2016 presidential race tonight, the issue of immigration has emerged as a key issue on the campaign trail. On Thursday, Hillary Clinton addressed the Congressional Hispanic Caucus Institute's 38th Annual Awards Gala and called for a more humane immigration policy. She also denounced what she called the "ugly" anti-immigrant rhetoric coming from Republican presidential candidates.

**HILLARY CLINTON:** It's a problem when a leading Republican candidate for president says that immigrants from Mexico are rapists and drug dealers. It's a problem when candidates use offensive terms like "anchor babies" or even talk about changing the Constitution to take citizenship away from those who were born here. We need people who will stand up to this ugly rhetoric and extreme thinking, who will say—who will say with our words and our actions, "Basta! Enough! End this!"

**AMY GOODMAN:** Earlier this year, Democratic presidential hopeful Bernie Sanders called for comprehensive immigration reform. This is Sanders addressing the National Association of Latino Elected and Appointed Officials conference in Las Vegas.

**SEN. BERNIE SANDERS:** It is not acceptable to me, and, I think, a growing majority of the American people, that millions of folks in this country are working extremely hard, but they are living in the shadows. And that has got to end. ... Despite the essential role that undocumented workers play in our economy and in our daily lives, these workers are too often reviled by many for political gain and shunted into the shadows. Let me be very clear as to where I stand: It is time for this disgraceful situation to end.

**AMY GOODMAN:** Well, we turn now to a startling new [report](#) that examines America's broken immigration system, called "The Refugees at Our Door," just published in *The New*

*York Times* by Pulitzer Prize-winning journalist Sonia Nazario. The article suggests the Obama administration is paying the Mexican government to keep people from reaching the U.S. border—people who often have legitimate asylum claims, and once deterred in their journey, often left to die.

Nazario writes, quote, "In the past 15 months, at the request of President Obama, Mexico has carried out a ferocious crackdown on refugees fleeing violence in Central America. The United States has given Mexico tens of millions of dollars for the fiscal year that ended Sept. 30 to stop these migrants from reaching the United States border to claim asylum. Essentially the United States has outsourced a refugee problem to Mexico that is similar to the refugee crisis now roiling Europe."

Well, for more, we go to Los Angeles, where we're joined by Sonia Nazario. She is the author of *Enrique's Journey: The Story of a Boy's Dangerous Odyssey to Reunite with His Mother*.

Sonia Nazario, welcome back to *Democracy Now!*

**SONIA NAZARIO:** Thank you.

**AMY GOODMAN:** Explain what you found. How is the U.S. paying Mexico to stop migrants from coming north?

**SONIA NAZARIO:** Well, we're doing the exact opposite of what Germany is doing. And, you know, I should say that I think we can have a debate about what should be done about economic migrants, people who come here for a better life, but with refugees, that is someone who is being persecuted, and they are fleeing for their lives. And in Germany, we've seen these emotional images of the German people and Angela Merkel opening their doors, welcoming them at train stations. And what we are doing as a country is we have paid Mexico tens of millions of dollars to stop these refugees from arriving at our border and claiming, asking for refuge, asking for asylum. Our State Department is funding this. And our congressional leaders, the Department of State has said in a recent document that they want to spend \$90 million next fiscal year, in 2016, to do more of this. And what we're seeing is that this is paying for this incredible crackdown, where the immigration authorities have increased immensely the number of deportees. Mexico, in the first seven months, deported 23,000 more Central Americans than the United States, and it plans to up that amount by 70 percent this year, while the rate is cut by the United States. So we're asking Mexico basically to do our dirty work. President Obama, for politically expedient reasons, 15 months ago, wanted this problem, as he saw it, of these immigrant children coming to the United States alone, this surge, to go away, and so he outsourced his problem to Mexico.

**AMY GOODMAN:** Can you tell us the story of July Elizabeth Pérez, who you met in a migrant shelter in Mexico?

**SONIA NAZARIO:** Yes, last month I spent seven or eight days in Mexico. I felt that not enough attention was being focused on this. And July, first, you know, she lives in one of the most deadly towns in Honduras, which the homicide rate has recently declined some, but per the last U.N. report, worldwide, had the highest homicide rate in the world, after Syria. And she lived in this very deadly town controlled largely by the 18th Street gang, a gang that, by

the way, started here in Los Angeles, where I live. And first, her brother was abducted, and he was killed. They stole his \$91 in rent money that he was taking to pay. They cut off his feet and his hands when they killed him. And then they abducted her 14-year-old son. They had asked him to join the gang. They start doing this to children at very young ages—nine, 10, 12 years old. He was 14. He had gone on a short errand a few steps away with a friend, been kidnapped. And she frantically searched for him and found him a few hours later. He had been suffocated to death with a bag over his head and found in a garbage bag. She fled to another city three hours away. And seven months later—you know, the gangs are incredibly good at intelligence. They beat the CIA by a mile in figuring out who's coming in and out of towns and where—the movement of people who are escaping gang violence. And she got a warning: "We know where you are now."

So, seven months later she fled to Mexico, trying to reach her mother, grandmother, who were legally in the United States. She applied to the U.S. Embassy for a visa. They turned her down. And so her only choice to save her three remaining children was to try to get through Mexico to the United States. And it took her 20 days to travel 250 miles. These migrants are walking through Mexico now, because they cannot get on the trains—ride on top of freight trains, as they used to do, because of this crackdown. And she encountered all sorts of obstacles—immigration officials shooting at her on top of the train with her children aboard, having to go around these enormous number of checkpoints, raids now—20,000 raids on immigrants just in the past year as part of this Southern Border Plan, as it's called, that was pushed by President Obama.

**AMY GOODMAN:** Is it fair to say the U.S. is bankrolling these Mexican border guards who, in a number of cases, are guilty of horrendous human rights abuses?

**SONIA NAZARIO:** Yes, it's absolutely true we are bankrolling this—tens of millions of dollars last year and, as I said, \$90 million proposed by the Department of State this year, and that doesn't count what the Department of Defense has been kicking in, an unknown amount. And many, many studies have shown that Mexican officials, both the federal police, the state police, and immigration officials are complicit in this robbery, rape, killing of immigrants as they try to travel north to the United States to safety. And we see children now walking the length of Mexico trying to allude those officials, and women like July putting their children, her three-year-old, her six-year-old—her six-year-old walking for days on end, for 12 hours at a time, putting her three-year-old on her shoulders, trying to get her north through Mexico to the United States to safety.

I think what we are doing is shameful. Refugees are people fleeing harm, and we should at least give them a chance of proving that they are refugees. And if they aren't, then perhaps send them back. But we have signed protocols saying that we will protect refugees. We have urged other countries, like Germany and the countries surrounding Syria, who have taken in more than 4 million refugees. We get a few tens of thousands, and instead of trying to comprehend what they're going through and welcome them, or at least put them through our judicial system and see if they qualify or not, we have paid Mexico to send them back to their deaths. There is a study by our social researcher that just came out showing that in the last 21 months, 90 people, at least, have been murdered shortly after being returned by the United States and Mexico to their home countries, in these three very violent countries in Central

America, including a 14-year-old boy returned to Honduras, Gredis. Within 24 hours of being returned home, he had two bullets in his head. This is what our policies are causing.

And I think the American people need to say, "This must stop. I do not want this done in my name. I do not want my taxpayer money funding this." And I have a letter on my website, [EnriquesJourney.com](http://EnriquesJourney.com), if you agree, to send your congressional leader, saying that you want a fairer policy towards refugee children, in particular.

**AMY GOODMAN:** Last year, *Democracy Now!* spoke to [Jose Luis Zelaya](#). He fled his home in Honduras at the age of 13 in search of his mother. He traveled unaccompanied through Central America, finally reached Houston four months later. Zelaya described his journey.

**JOSE LUIS ZELAYA:** Honduras is a very dangerous country. Once, I was simply playing soccer, and there was a drive-by shooting, and during the soccer game I ended up being shot twice in both of my arms. And it was then when I made the decision that I needed to run away. I needed to leave the—I needed to leave Honduras and come to the United States to find my mother. I didn't know where she was. All I knew was the area code, 713, which was the Houston area code.

And I came to the United States. It took me 45 days to come. It was horrible. It is the worst experience that I have ever witnessed—to be thirsty and not have water, to be hungry and not have food. Not even a trashcan, to be able to find food, was available in the desert. Whenever you're riding the train and you see people lose their lives, you see little girls being physically abused by the coyotes, and you can't do anything because you're a child. I was 11—I was 13 years old when I came. I knew—I wasn't trying to break the law; I was trying to fulfill the law by trying to reunite with my mother, by trying to reunite with my sister.

And when I came to the United States, I was actually in a detention center, as well, in Harlingen, Texas, and the experience there were very difficult. We were only allowed to see the sunlight one hour a week, and we were only allowed to drink water three times a day.

**AMY GOODMAN:** That's Jose Luis Zelaya, who fled his home in Honduras at the age of 13. You yourself rode, on top of seven freight trains, the length of Mexico with child migrants a decade ago. How does what they go through today compare, Sonia Nazario?

**SONIA NAZARIO:** Well, I think, you know, it was certainly difficult back then. I still have post-traumatic stress, to indicate how hard it was. And as Luis mentioned, it was very difficult. Many people are robbed, raped, beaten, back then. But we've seen just in the last year an 81 percent increase in robberies. And you're seeing, by the time people got to the shelter, the migrant shelter—which really has become a refugee camp, by the way—a few—just 200, 300 miles inside the southern border of Mexico, 95 percent now are robbed by the time they get there, some of them multiple times. The majority of the women are being raped. And so, what you're seeing is an exponential increase in the harm being done to these migrants, both by the immigration authorities and by this whole army of delinquents, that have taken the message from the Mexican authorities: "It's open season on migrants. You can do

whatever you want, because we need to get—at the U.S., you know, bidding, we need to get this flow to stop, to get these people not to reach the United States border."

And so, what we're seeing is, instead of riding on top of that train, on top of the freight trains up the length of Mexico, as I did for my book, *Enrique's Journey*, people are going in places that are harder, that they are more isolated. And that's where these delinquents have all risen up that are robbing and raping and killing in extraordinary numbers. Twenty thousand Central Americans are being disappeared every single year, kidnapped. And many of these people resurface after someone in the United States has to pay ransom to release them. But if you can't pay, they will kill you. They will cut you up in front of the others as a message. Many of them are being enslaved to work in marijuana fields or digging tunnels, prostituted. They are finding people—14 migrants recently awoke, drugged up, with slits on the side of their bodies, wounds that had been sewn up. Their kidneys had been harvested. It's another level and a higher number of robberies, rapes, killings that are happening today than when Luis made the journey and when I made the journey. And yeah, you had to convince me that this was a lot tougher than before, but it is tougher than before. It is extraordinarily hard.

And that's why people are stopping 200 to 300 miles in at this shelter that I was at and saying, "I can't go back. They will kill me in my country. But I can't go forward. They will kill me in Mexico. I'm going to try to get asylum. I'm going to try to get a humanitarian visa from Mexico," which, by the way, Mexico makes extraordinarily difficult to get. They try to put every barrier possible to apply for asylum. If you're detained, they basically don't inform you of your right to asylum, which they are supposed to do, per Mexican law. Only one in 10 people are being informed. If you're informed, they try to dissuade you from applying. And if you're even able to apply, which only 2,000 folks were able to do last year, they hold you in these jails that have rats roaming by day, worms in the food. They try to do everything possible to discourage you. And only 20 percent—you stay there months, or even a year, if you appeal. Only 20 percent of people who are able to apply win their asylum claims, versus 50 percent in the United States. So Mexico is putting every potential obstacle they can in the course of people trying to reach our borders and say, "Help me. They are trying to kill me in my country. I cannot go back. And now I cannot move forward. I am stuck."

**AMY GOODMAN:** Sonia, the man we just heard from, the young man who moved here when he—who traveled here when he was 13, Jose Luis Zelaya, is with the group United We Dream. And that's the same group that protested Hillary Clinton. We just played a clip of her speaking in Las Vegas. She was actually heckled there by United We Dream. And one of the protesters, Juan Carlos Ramos, issued a statement saying, "Our message to Hillary Clinton is simple: immigrant youth do not trust you." They were protesting the fact that private prison corporations donate to Clinton's campaign, and they said she should reject that money. What about the prisons here in the United States?

**SONIA NAZARIO:** Well, we've managed to get a law passed in Congress that 34,000 deportable immigrants will be locked up any night in our prison system. As we've locked up fewer nonviolent drug offenders, we have—the prison industry has found a way to fill those jails with immigrants. And that's absolutely true. It's gone from \$800 million or so, seven, eight years ago, that they made off of immigrants, to more than \$2 billion. This is a huge industry for them. And they spend a lot of money at this. And we can get laws like that passed

through our Congress, but when we try to get a law allocating \$50 million to immigrant children so a four-year-old doesn't stand before our immigration judges being asked to present their asylum claim all by themselves—we don't allocate immigration lawyers to immigrant children who come here alone, and so you see these children shaking with utter fear before that judge—well, that law got shot down by the Senate. So, it's absolutely true that the prison industry wants to keep this going. And companies like Corrections Corp. of America and GEO have made a lot of money off of this.

I think instead of what we are doing, we need to push our government to do what Germany is doing, which is to establish a system, be a leader in terms of refugees and establish a system to allow these refugees to arrive at our border and claim asylum, and then redistribute these migrants to Canada, to Latin America, and, yes, some to the United States, so that they are safe, while we address the root causes of this violence, help these countries address the root causes in Latin America. You know, we only take in 70,000 refugees a year. Germany, that dinky country in Europe, will take in more than 10 times that number this year. I think we can afford to go up to at least 130,000—that's what we took in pre-9/11—to allow especially these children to have a safe harbor in this country. And instead of paying Mexico to turn them away, we should also pay them to make sure that they are screened for asylum. Mexico only has 20 asylum officers in the whole country, three offices. They have purposefully underfunded this.

**AMY GOODMAN:** You choose to use the word "migrant" and "refugee" rather than "immigrant." Why, Sonia?

**SONIA NAZARIO:** Well, I think with a refugee, it is a person who is being persecuted in their home country, and they are fleeing harm. And this is what I saw when I went to Honduras 14 months ago. I saw children—you know, we spend billions of dollars to stop the flow of drugs coming from Venezuela and Colombia up the Caribbean corridor to the Dominican Republic, Jamaica, Haiti. They were landing there, those drug flights. We spend all this taxpayer money, and what did the narcos do? They simply rerouted, and they're now landing four of five narco flights in Honduras. And so, they are trying to control that turf to move drugs north to us, the largest consumer of illegal drugs on Earth. We use one in four illegal drugs on Earth.

And they are recruiting children to control that turf, to serve as lookouts, to sell drugs in those neighborhoods, and to work as *sicarios*, to kill people, ultimately. And I saw children as young as 11. I spoke to an 11-year-old boy in a [piece](#) I did 14 months ago in *The New York Times*. He said, "I'm 11 years old. I'm in the sixth grade. And these narcos are telling me as I come out of my elementary school, which they control, 'You are going to start using crack. And if you don't—and get hooked on crack and start working for us—we are going to kill you.'" And so, your options, for a lot of these children, are start working for the gangs, start working for the narcos that the gangs often report to, or flee. Those are the options.

And what we're seeing is, the kids coming through Mexico are younger and younger, a half that are caught in Mexico 11 and younger, and more of them are girls. The girls I saw in that neighborhood, they were—40 percent now of the girls—of the children caught in Mexico now are girls. They are being taught—told, "You will be my girlfriend," by the gang leader, the

narco leader, "or I'm going to kill you, I'm going to exterminate your whole family." And so, I'm seeing many more girls and women coming through Mexico. At the shelter I was at, there was a 28-year-old woman. She had been kidnapped by the gang, the 18th Street gang, in her neighborhood, that's basically the law in her neighborhood. There is no government to turn to in certain parts of Honduras. And she came out of her job. They grabbed her, four gangsters, took her to a house. And there was a man tied up there, and they forced her to watch as they beat this man to death, stabbed him in his arms and legs, and then cut him up in pieces—she doesn't know if he was alive or dead when that happened—and then forced her to hold the garbage bag as they put his pieces into it and told her, "You're going to be my girlfriend tomorrow, or this is what will happen to you tomorrow." She fled without even saying goodbye to her four children, without giving them a hug, because she thought they would have questions, and that might put them in greater danger. She fled to Mexico, where she is now at, at that shelter, trying to get through Mexico and trying to reach safety in the United States. This is what people are fleeing, and this is very different from someone who is an immigrant coming here for a better life, like my parents came here from Argentina. They wanted a better life for themselves, but they were not fleeing for their lives.

**AMY GOODMAN:** Well, I want to thank you very much, Sonia Nazario. Your [piece](#) is just astounding in *The New York Times*. We will link to it, called "The Refugees at Our Door." Sonia Nazario, a Pulitzer Prize-winning journalist, author of *Enrique's Journey: The Story of a Boy's Dangerous Odyssey to Reunite with His Mother*. We will also link to our own *Democracy Now!*'s Renée Feltz's award-winning reports [[Part 1](#) and [Part 2](#)] on the private immigrant detention centers run by for-profit corporations on the border of the United States at [democracynow.org](http://democracynow.org).

When we come back, *The Devil's Chessboard: Allen Dulles, the CIA, and the Rise of America's Secret Government*. Stay with us.



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