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U.S. to Expand Refugee Program to Include Central American Migrants

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The goal is to provide Central American families a “safe and legal alternative to the dangerous journey many are currently tempted to begin, making them easy prey for human smugglers,” Kerry said in a speech at the National Defense University.

He did not specify how many additional migrants would be allowed into the United States, which will receive help from the United Nations in vetting these Central American asylum-seekers, senior administration officials told the New York Times on Tuesday.

The current U.S. ceiling for refugees in 2016 is 85,000, which is 15,000 more than last year and includes 10,000 Syrians.

The State Department said it would work with the Office of the United Nations’ High Commissioner for Refugees and non-governmental agencies to identify human rights defenders, people targeted by criminal gangs and others who are “at immediate risk of harm.”

The plan calls for the UNHCR to set up processing centers for asylum-seekers from El Salvador, Guatemala and Honduras in “nearby countries,” where migrants “would be temporarily out of danger,” the New York Times said.

Citing administration officials, the paper said the measure would allow “thousands – perhaps as many as 9,000 – migrants each year” from those three countries to eventually settle in the United States.

It added, however, that some people granted refugee status also could be sent to other countries in the Americas.

The announcement comes at a time when the Obama administration is under fire from numerous Democratic lawmakers and immigration activists for rounding up 121 undocumented adults and children for deportation after they failed to win asylum.

Most of those detained over the holiday season were from Central America.

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