

QUESTION TAKEN ON NOTICE

SUPPLEMENTARY BUDGET ESTIMATES HEARING : 17 October 2016

IMMIGRATION AND BORDER PROTECTION PORTFOLIO

(SE16/038) - Costa Rica protection transfer agreement - Programme 2.4: Refugee and Humanitarian Assistance

Senator Carr, Kim (L&CA 100) asked:

Mr Colquhoun: There was a press release, yes. That is when we first became aware. We had heard indications that the United States was undergoing negotiations with a country in Central America, but it was confidential because no arrangement had been signed or agreed in the United States. It was nothing more than a rumour until it was agreed by both countries. The state department issued a press release. So, through discussions with the United States on a range of topics, this was one of the things that came up as an option for Australia, and I believe the United States—

Senator KIM CARR: I see. A press release alerted you to this possibility of participating—

Mr Pezzullo: Well, to the existence of a protection mechanism.

Senator KIM CARR: I see. So what did Australia get out of this agreement?

Mr Colquhoun: As Ms Noble and the secretary have alluded to previously, it is one of the different ways that we can expand the program and work with the United States and other partners. These are UNHCR referred refugees. Our program is broken down into certain cohorts, and this is another way of filling the program.

Senator KIM CARR: What was the date of this press release that you speak of?

Mr Colquhoun: I would have to check that.

Senator KIM CARR: Could you provide us with a copy of the press release, please.

Mr Colquhoun: Certainly.

Answer:

A copy of the United States Department of State's press release 'U.S. Expands Initiatives to Address Migration Challenges', dated 26 July 2016 is below.

U.S. Expands Initiatives to Address Migration Challenges

Office of the Spokesperson, Washington, DC

July 26, 2016

<http://www.state.gov/r/pa/prs/ps/2016/07/260507.htm>

Over the past year, the United States has taken a series of steps to address the ongoing humanitarian challenges in Central America, particularly for the many vulnerable individuals attempting to leave the region and come to the United States, while also promoting safe and orderly migration and border security. As part of this ongoing effort, the United States is announcing the following initiatives to help vulnerable families and individuals from El Salvador, Guatemala, and Honduras.

Today, the Government of Costa Rica has announced that they have agreed to enter into a protection transfer arrangement (PTA) with the UN High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) and the International Organization for Migration (IOM) to help address this regional migration challenge. This announcement is an important step forward for this program and the United States applauds Costa Rica's consistent leadership on human rights and demonstrated capacity as a capable partner in addressing this regional migration challenge.

Through coordination with UNHCR and IOM, the United States government will pre-screen vulnerable applicants from the region seeking protection. After pre-screening, this arrangement will allow UNHCR and IOM to transfer applicants most in need of immediate protection to Costa Rica, where they will undergo refugee processing before being resettled to the United States or another third country.

Additionally, for cases not requiring immediate transfer to Costa Rica, the United States is establishing an in-country referral program to enable vulnerable residents in this region to be considered for refugee protection in the United States after being screened and interviewed by Department of Homeland Security officers in their countries of origin.

The United States is also pleased to announce an expansion of our existing Central American Minors program, which currently provides children in El Salvador, Guatemala, and Honduras with a safe and orderly alternative to the dangerous, irregular journey that some children are currently undertaking to reach the United States. As of today, the United States has received more than 9,500 applications for this program, which allows a lawfully-present parent within the United States to request refugee status for their children located in one of these three countries. When accompanied by a qualified child, the following additional categories of applicants may also be considered under this program:

- sons and daughters of a U.S.-based lawfully present parent who are over 21 years old;
- the in-country biological parent of the qualified children;
- caregivers of qualified children who are also related to the U.S.-based lawfully present parents.

As the United States has made clear in the past, we are committed to protecting Central Americans at risk and expanding resettlement opportunities in the region. The steps taken today, and over the past year, are another example of the creative solutions being taken across the federal government to make progress on this issue. Today's actions will not solve this challenge alone, but are steps in the right direction and are a further example of the United States' continued commitment to this ongoing situation.

For further information, please go to <https://www.uscis.gov/CAM> or contact PRMPress@state.gov