



## **Pence's Latin American Tour**

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On Tuesday, June 26, 2018, Vice President Mike Pence arrived in Brazil to begin his Latin American tour; this trip comes only three months after he replaced President Trump at the 2018 Summit of the Americas in April. After meetings and press conferences with the leaders of Brazil, Ecuador, Guatemala, El Salvador, and Honduras, the narrative is concerningly clear: the Trump Administration supports refugees and families—as long as they are not coming to the United States; Latin Americans need to respect U.S. sovereignty and simultaneously isolate Venezuela; and Latin Americans must manage the U.S. War on Drugs better on their own soil. Overall, Pence's visit continued to press the administration's policy vision without much empathy for the constraints facing Latin American nations.



## **Brazil**

Pence's original Brazilian objectives were likely to discuss improving bilateral trade, but, the controversial family separation policy took center stage. Prior to his arrival, Brazil's Foreign Service Ministry issued a statement regarding immigrant children separated from their families: "It is with great concern that the Brazilian Government is following the increase in cases of Brazilian children that are separated from their parents or guardians and are held in custody in shelters in the United States, which is a cruel practice and in clear dissonance with international instruments for the protection of children's rights." [i] In a joint press conference, President Michel Temer stated that "this is [an] extremely sensitive issue in the eyes of the Brazilian society," and asked Pence to pay special attention to Brazilian children separated at the U.S. border in order to facilitate a swift return to their families. [ii] Pence dropped all pretense of any pseudo-sympathy so that he could remind potential refugees not to "risk your lives or the lives of your children by trying to come to the United States on the road run by drug smugglers and human traffickers...If you can't come legally, don't come at all." [iii] Pence failed to mention how difficult and expensive the citizenship process is.

The Temer-Pence talks then shifted focus to issues surrounding Venezuela. Pence announced that the United States would donate 1 million USD in order to help Brazil address the thousands of Venezuelan refugees fleeing via the Northern border. [iv] Although, despite this aid and concern for the neighboring political situation, Temer has publicly stated that he would not interfere with the domestic political problems of the Maduro Administration. [v] While the Trump Administration opens its wallet to help other countries deal with the refugee crisis, many juvenile refugees at the Mexico-U.S. border are sleeping in tents. U.S. aid to help Latin American countries accommodate Venezuelan refugees, from a humanitarian point of view, is just as important as domestically implementing services and aid to support Latin American refugees fleeing to the United States in search of asylum. A refugee is a refugee, no matter the intended area of refuge. Nevertheless, the aid comes with the likely ulterior motive to keep Venezuelan refugees in Latin America and away from the U.S. border. This aid is not as humanitarian as it may seem.

## **Ecuador**

Pence's priorities in Ecuador were similar to those in Brazil—immigration and separated children, drug trafficking, and isolating Venezuela. More bluntly, Pence stated "we respectfully urge Ecuador and all of our allies across the region to take steps to further isolate the Maduro regime." [vi] Like his Brazilian offer, Pence sweetened the pot with an offer of 2 million USD in assistance to help handle Venezuelan refugees and he commented on how "the Ecuadorian people have shown remarkable compassion." But, despite pleasantries and financial promises, President Moreno held that "the solution for Venezuela can only be provided by Venezuelans," stopping short of isolating Caracas and instead urging United Nations involvement. [vii]

Moreno and Pence agreed to work with the Organization of American States "to promote citizen rights and fundamental freedoms throughout Latin America." [viii] Notably, Ecuador-U.S.



relations have warmed since former president and Maduro ally Raphael Correa left office in 2017. According to the Chicago Tribune, Moreno was “elected last year with Correa’s backing but has since broken with his mentor in adopting a more business and press-friendly stance that has earned him bipartisan praise in Washington as something of a bridge builder in ideologically polarized Latin America.” [ix] Moreno has slowly won back trade privileges formerly rejected by Correa and was praised by Pence for his leadership and fight against international drug trafficking. The somewhat cooperative outcome of Pence and Moreno’s interactions show a potential shift in strained Ecuador-U.S. relations

## Guatemala

Guatemala was Pence’s last stop on his Latin American tour and, due to the recent immigration unrest, his most demanding performance. While he addressed Central American leaders, Second Lady Karen Pence visited families affected by the recent Vólcan de Fuego disaster that left close to 100 people dead and around 200 still missing. [x] Pence was face-to-face with presidents of the so-called “Northern Triangle”—Guatemala’s Jimmy Morales, El Salvador’s Salvador Sánchez Cerén, and Honduras’ Juan Orlando Hernández. Guatemala was a particularly fitting location for this meeting. With Guatemalans making up 45 percent of people attempting to enter the United States through the Southern border, the change in policy has resulted in a 71 percent year-on-year increase in deportations from the United States to Guatemala in the first five months of 2018. [xi] Morales hoped that Trump would grant Guatemalans in the United States Temporary Protected Status due to the recent volcanic disaster. Signs that gangs may have infiltrated the military and growing violence potentially explain the spike in Guatemalan migration. [xii]

At the summit, the leaders discussed the more than 150,000 Guatemalans, Hondurans and Salvadorans that have journeyed to the U.S. Southern border seeking illegal entry in 2018 alone. [xiii] These illegal entries come at great risk. Morales highlighted “son necesarias más campañas de sensibilización para decirles a los ciudadanos que no se puede viajar ‘como dicen los coyotes o mercaderes’” (more awareness campaigns are needed to tell citizens that you cannot travel like the Coyotes or merchants say). [xix] Hernández explained the migration phenomenon as “un monstruo de varias cabezas y de varias caras, una de esas es narcotráfico, que se consume en el norte y se produce en el sur, pero pasa por los pueblos nuestros, dejándonos una estela de luto y dolor”(the trafficking of arms, people and narco-trafficking are the problems that we must strike at the root of. To put this into context, we face a monster of several heads and faces and one of those faces is drug trafficking). [xx]

Pence impressed upon the Central American leaders the necessity to end the “exodus” of migrants and stated that “our nation needs your nations to do more.” [xxi] The structural issues that spur mass Central American migration seem to be a moot point for the Trump Administration. Homeland Security Secretary Kirstjen Nielsen was heard saying “we know that family separation is a difficult issue, but that would not be a problem if [migrants] seek asylum correctly.” [xxii] Nielson did not proceed to explain her nuanced view of “correct asylum seeking.” Should these structural issues not be easily resolved considering that “the United States



has invested significant resources to help Guatemala, Honduras, and El Salvador stop the flow of drugs and cripple the criminal syndicates that plague the region," as stated by Pence? [xxiii] Although the three Central American countries have received several billions of dollars in U.S. aid over the last decade, they still suffer from extreme violence, poverty, and political instability. [xxiv] In a similar manner, money has not resolved the War on Drugs and Latin American refugees are paying the price at home and in their journeys abroad. As stated by former Guatemalan Foreign Minister Fernando Carrera, "you have to increase resources massively to reduce [the] poverty and violence" that pushes families to leave their homes and risk their lives. [xxv] Yet, Pence's trip did not lead to any tangible, substantive, or productive policy decisions with any potential for long-term resolution of structural causes of the refugee crisis.

### **Concerningly Clear**

Although the goals of Pence's Latin American tour are concerningly clear, his comments were riddled with mixed messages. For Pence, the situation lacks nuance and simply boils down to: "just as we respect your borders and your sovereignty, we insist that you respect ours." [xxvi] Simultaneously, Pence attempted to mobilize Latin American leaders to isolate Venezuela—Washington's crisis-stricken ideological adversary. Does that mean that true sovereignty is only border-deep? Pence applauds the compassion of Ecuador and Brazil for accepting Venezuelans fleeing to their borders, grants them millions in aid, but rips apart Latin American families "improperly" seeking asylum in the United States. Pence tells Central American leaders that they need to do more to fight drug trafficking, but the Trump Administration has cut funding aimed at reducing violence, promoting economic development, and strengthening institutions. [xxvii] Ultimately, the Trump Administration's Latin American agenda remains contradictory. Trump's failure to even step foot in the region after over a year into his presidency further demonstrates the administration's struggle to craft a coherent and viable long-term plan.

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*Image: VP Pence tells Central America that the 'exodus must end'*

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