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U.S. to expand refugee program for Central Americans

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The U.S. State Department said Wednesday that it will expand its refugee program to help more people fleeing violence in Central America in what activists said was an important acknowledgment that residents of the region could qualify for international protection.

The announcement by Secretary of State John Kerry, coming a day after House Democrats issued a blistering letter criticizing the Obama administration's deportations of Central American women and children, was brief, disclosing little detail about how the program would work.

"We have plans to expand the U.S. Refugee Admissions Program in order to help vulnerable families and individuals from El Salvador, Guatemala and Honduras, and offer them a safe and legal alternative to the dangerous journey that many are tempted to begin," Kerry said in a speech at the National Defense University in Washington, D.C.

Advocates said the move was significant, recognizing that some migrants are escaping armed conflicts in these three countries that are similar to war, making them deserving of protection.

"This is definitely a paradigm shift," said Wendy Young, executive director of Kids in Need of Defense, a national advocacy group for unaccompanied migrant children. "As important as the few thousand are who this program could help, now we can start a new conversation about who makes up refugees."

Proponents of reducing immigration also lauded the administration's plan, saying it could help discourage a new surge of Central American migrants at the border and enable a more orderly processing of claims for protection.

"They're thinking in the right direction," said Roy Beck, executive director of NumbersUSA, a national organization advocating reduced immigration.

Nearly 100,000 Central American children and almost as many families have streamed across the southwest border, mostly around McAllen, since October 2013, overwhelming the federal

government and causing a political crisis in 2014. Many of them are fleeing violence that has made El Salvador in particular one of the most dangerous countries in the world. The tiny nation surpassed Honduras last year after its murder rate jumped 70 percent.

But until now, the Obama administration has largely framed the influx as one of illegal immigration, expediting the court cases of recently arrived Central American migrants and locking up mothers and children until a federal judge ruled last fall that it could no longer do so.

On New Year's weekend, the administration conducted high-profile raids in Texas, Georgia and North Carolina, detaining 121 Central American women and children who had not won asylum. The operation infuriated Democratic lawmakers and immigrant advocates, who called a scathing news conference just hours before the president's State of the Union address on Tuesday. Kerry announced the refugee program less than 24 hours later.

"The urgency in announcing it is clearly politically motivated," said Alex Nowrasteh, an immigration policy analyst at the Cato Institute, a libertarian think tank in Washington, D.C. "I don't think it's a significant policy change."

Under the new plan, the United Nations would determine if Central American migrants could qualify for refugee status as the agency already does in other war-torn nations. Administration officials told the New York Times that as many as 9,000 migrants from the three countries could be resettled in the U.S. each year. They said the applicants could be held in temporary centers - possibly in Belize, Costa Rica and Mexico - until they have been processed and could also be sent to live in other Latin American countries.

The idea builds on a program the Obama administration initiated in December 2014 as a response to that summer's migrant crisis. It offered either refugee status or a legal status known as humanitarian parole to children in El Salvador, Guatemala and Honduras if they have parents already living legally in the United States. Thousands applied, and the process moved so slowly that only a handful of children have been approved.

Success of the new program, which would also include adults, will largely depend on how quickly it can process applicants, said Faye Hipsman, a policy analyst at the Migration Policy Institute, a think tank in Washington, D.C.

"To make this program successful, it really has to keep people safe in the process and it has to go quickly," she said. "For someone who is really in danger, are they willing to wait six months to a year and possibly longer to reach a safe destination?"

Still, she added: "It's a big step on its face, and it has the potential to help a lot of people, but a lot of questions remain."

Processing refugee applicants in their own countries has been a part of the U.S. refugee system since 1979 after it was first used to help South Vietnamese flee their newly communist nation.

Intended to assist countries in periods of political repression or in the aftermath of war, in-country processing has also occurred in Haiti from 1992 to 1995 and in Cuba since 1987. There has also been a narrowly focused program in Iraq.

But Hipsman and others said such a program is not likely to end the tide of Central American migrants at the southwest border. In the past three months alone, the number of arrivals has spiked dramatically to near 2014 levels, with Border Patrol agents apprehending more than 17,300 children and almost 21,500 families.

"Unless you let the whole country in, however you set your bar there's going to be all kinds of people living in fear who are not going to be accepted," Beck said.

He advocates for refugee and displaced persons camps in other Central American countries and in Mexico until "order is restored and they can move back and forth as needed."

But others, like Ashley Kaper, a managing attorney in Houston for Human Rights First, said that's why it's crucial to continue to allow people to seek asylum at the U.S. border and assist them in that process.

"This strengthens our arguments that this is a population with a well-founded fear of violence," she said.