

# Sáenz: U.S. should own up to its role in the plight of Salvadorans

## Those granted haven after quakes face even worse danger if deported

By Rogelio Sáenz and Cecilia Menjívar: Reprint from Houston Chronicle, January 13, 2018  
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San Salvador, along with the rest of El Salvador, is bracing for the return of as many as 200,000 Salvadorans who have been living in the United States.

The U.S. government has a short and selective memory.

This was in full display on Jan. 8, when Kristjen Nielsen, secretary of Homeland Security, announced her decision to end Temporary Protected Status for Salvadorans.

TPS was created as part of the Immigration Act of 1990 to provide temporary relief to people already in the United States who could not return safely to countries ravaged by war or natural and environmental catastrophes. In the midst of their country's civil war, which ended in 1992, many Salvadorans at that time were able to get short-term relief from the TPS program; this status was terminated in 1994.

In 2001, El Salvador was again designated for TPS, this time following two devastating earthquakes and violent aftershocks that devoured much of that small country, taking nearly 1,000 lives and destroying close to 110,000 homes. Today overall conditions have remained a challenge for the large majority of Salvadorans. If anything, over the past 17 years the situation has deteriorated as the postwar economy and weakened institutions have not recovered, while inequality has deepened.

Yet, the present conditions in El Salvador did not come about independent of U.S. actions. In fact, the United States has played a key role in their making. The United States has a long history of involvement in the economic and political affairs of El Salvador. As the civil war erupted in the country in the late 1970s, President Ronald Reagan sent significant support to the existing right-wing government during the war, to the tune of \$1.5 million a day - \$3.3 million in today's dollars - in military aid alone. The civil war resulted in countless deaths and the uprooting of thousands of people. The number of Salvadorans migrating to the United States increased five-fold between the 1970s and 1980s.

But because Salvadorans were fleeing a U.S.-supported right-wing dictatorship, very few - less than 3 percent - seeking political asylum between 1983 and 1990 were granted this status. To partially remedy the incongruence between the thousands of individuals fleeing state-sponsored terror and the U.S. reluctance to extend refugee protection to them, President George W. Bush created TPS and El Salvador was the first country to be designated for this relief. Immigrant rights groups seeking formal recognition for the plight of Salvadoran refugees played a key role in these immigrants gaining this temporary relief.

During the Clinton administration, through new laws that would enable an

unprecedented number of deportations, many Salvadorans who had come to the United States as young children were deported. Among these were youths who had joined gangs in the United States as a way to fit into a society that marginalized them. Returning to an essentially foreign country with few economic prospects and extremely limited opportunities, some of these youth found fertile ground to recreate their networks. El Salvador had been thoroughly militarized during the war years and was still awash in weapons. This is how the seeds for the recent waves of violence in El Salvador were planted, the violence that has forced thousands to flee the country and come to the South Texas border in search of political asylum. To this day, the U.S. government does not recognize its role in creating the current instability and rising violence in El Salvador. Instead, it distances itself from that violence and advocates military strategies to address the instability it helped create.

Indeed, memory is selective and short.



Members of XIII Caravan of Central American Mothers' "4,000 Kilometers of Search, Resistance and Hope" hold Salvadoran flags at a protest in front of the U.S. Embassy in Mexico City last month.

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Nielsen's decision means that there are now about 200,000 Salvadorans who will become undocumented and run the risk of deportation if they do not return to El Salvador by Sept. 9, 2019. They are being thrown to the wind to find their fate in a country that cannot support this massive level of new arrivals. In the mix, of course, is the uncertain future of their nearly 193,000 U.S.-born children.

The impact of the termination of TPS designation for Salvadorans hits close to home. Texas with more than 36,000 Salvadorans with TPS designation has the second largest population behind California. Among U.S. cities, Houston has the third largest population of impacted Salvadorans with 19,000 losing their TPS designation, followed by Dallas with approximately 10,000.

These individuals are not strangers. They are our family, friends, coworkers and fellow congregants who have lived here, on average, for 20 years. They have established deep roots in this country and their communities. Taking this status away destroys their worlds and stifles their children's future. It harms their communities in this country, while also amplifying economic and political instability in El Salvador.

Rather than taking away their temporary legal status, these Salvadorans should be granted permanent legal status. This act would formally recognize their deep roots in this nation, but it would also begin to redress for the havoc created by decades of U.S. policy in El Salvador.



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issues in San Antonio and addressing inequality in education, a lack of livable wages, the lack of health/mental health care, and the lack of truly affordable housing (not \$1000 for a 500 sqft studio).

This complex if moved forward, will block the view of this 100 plus year old gem. This gesture reaches back to the mandated segregation of this side of town robbing residents of an iconic symbol they take pride in and worked

hard to save in order to connect the Eastside to the heart of the City. We need to demand to HDRC, housing development, and City Council that San Antonio acknowledge our his-

tory, and recognize our historic buildings/views as treasures. They should demand the same standards in new development.

We want new development but we expect that it be thoughtful, respectful, and beautiful in design. If this development moves forward, this precious view will no longer be enjoyed by everyone in the city, but rather become another historical commodity that 25 residents will pay the premium for from their upscale apartment window.



*"Can you imagine this location with a park in the foreground featuring a local artist installation, a lighted walking trail around the park, a dog park, and a restroom facility like the new one downtown?"*  
Photo: Kristel A. Orta-Puente

*Bio:* Kristel A. Orta-Puente, born and raised in San Antonio, is a professional photographer in SA specializing in commercial, ethnographic portraiture.