

Testimony of Sonia Nazario, Journalist, KIND Board Member and Author of
Enrique's Journey
Senate Foreign Relations Committee
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Good morning. My name is Sonia Nazario; I am a journalist, author, and serve on the board of Kids in Need of Defense (KIND), a nonprofit founded by Microsoft and Angelina Jolie that recruits pro bono attorneys to represent unaccompanied children.

I first went to Central America to write about civil wars in Guatemala and El Salvador in the early 1980s. I focused on unaccompanied children 15 years ago, writing the modern-day odyssey of one boy, Luis Enrique Motino Pineda, whose mother leaves him in Honduras when he is five years old, and who sets off 11 years later to go in search of her in the United States by riding up the length of Mexico on top of freight trains.

Last month, I returned for the first time in a decade to Enrique's home in the Nueva Suyapa neighborhood of Tegucigalpa. I lived there for a week. I saw a huge change in why children are migrating north to the U.S.—a level of violence directed at them that honestly astounded me. I have lived through Argentina's dirty war and ridden on top of seven freight trains controlled by gangs through most of Mexico. I am not easily spooked. But after a week, I thanked God that I got out of Enrique's neighborhood in one piece.

Gangs have long ruled parts of Nueva Suyapa, but the recent control by narco cartels has brought a new reach and viciousness to violence children in particular face in this neighborhood and throughout the country. People are found hacked apart, heads cut off, skinned alive. Children are kidnapped. People are routinely killed for their cell phones. On some 20 or 30 buses daily, passengers are all robbed at gunpoint; in one instance 23 were killed. Sometimes, at night, men show up in face masks and strafe anyone out on the street. Threatened families have had to abandon homes and flee with only the clothes on their backs.

Several neighborhoods are worse than Nueva Suyapa; no one can go in without permission from gangs or narco traffickers, and war taxes are imposed on every resident. If you don't pay, they kill you. World Vision International, a Christian nonprofit group, has shut down operations in a nearby neighborhood because thugs won't let their staff enter.

Cristian Omar Reyes, an 11-year-old 6th grader in Nueva Suyapa told me he had to get out of Honduras soon—"no matter what." He has been threatened twice by narcos who said they would beat him up if he did not use drugs, and he fears worse.

Last March, his father was robbed and murdered by gangs. Three people Cristian knows were murdered this year; four others were gunned down on a nearby corner in the span of two weeks at the beginning of this year. A girl his age resisted being robbed of \$5. She was clubbed over the head and dragged off by two men who cut a hole in her throat, stuffed her panties in it, and left her arms and hips broken. She was found in a ravine across the street from Cristian's house.

“I can’t be on the street,” says Cristian, adding that there are *sicarios*—narco hit men—who pass by in *mototaxis*, three-wheeled motorcycle taxis, on his Nueva Suyapa street where crack is sold. “They shoot at you. I’ve seen so much death.”

“I’m going this year,” he told me. “Even if I need to ride on the train.” He promises himself he’ll wait until he finds a freight train moving slowly before jumping on to avoid being pulled under and losing an arm or leg.

A decade ago, when children left Honduras planning to ride on the train through Mexico, many of them didn’t fully grasp how dangerous this is. That’s no longer the case. Neighborhoods are dotted with people who have lost arms and legs to the train, visible reminders of what *La Bestia*, or the so-called Train of Death, can do.

Many know someone who has died in the attempt. They know that the Zetas, the most bloodthirsty narco cartel in Mexico, is kidnapping 18,000 Central Americans off those trains every year, and they prefer to grab children. They know the Zetas beat these children until they provide the telephone of a relative in the U.S., then demand \$2,500 in ransom, and kill children whose parents don’t or can’t pay. I spent three months, off and on, riding on top of seven trains in 2000. It’s much worse now. You’d have to be crazy to do it—or desperate enough to fear for your life if you stay at home.

I consider many of these children—*not all*—to be refugees. Why? Unlike an immigrant, who sets off for a new land to better their lives, a refugee is someone who must flee their country primarily for safety because their government cannot or will not protect them. If they stay, they face persecution and possible death.

The U.S. has spent billions to disrupt the flow of drugs from Colombia up the Caribbean corridor. The narco cartels, mostly Mexican, have simply re-routed inland, and four in five flights of cocaine bound for the U.S. now land in Honduras. These cartels are vying for control over turf and to expand drug distribution, sales, and extortion in these neighborhoods.

Around 2011 the narcos grip seemed to tighten in neighborhoods like Nueva Suyapa. That was not coincidentally the first year the U.S. started to see a surge in unaccompanied children.

They are forcibly recruiting children as young as 10 and 11 to be their foot soldiers. Children told me they felt they had two choices: join with delinquents who worked for the narcos or reject them and get out to stay alive. This is no different than child soldiers who are forcibly conscripted in Sudan or in the civil war in Bosnia. Schools in Nueva Suyapa have become the narcos’ battleground. Teachers must pay a war tax to teach; students must pay “rent” to go to school.

Building costly walls may make good politics, but they don’t work. We must instead focus on dealing with this exodus at its source. Folks in Honduras feel the U.S. hasn’t paid any attention to them since the Kennedy administration. Less than a tenth of the President’s proposed \$3.7 billion supplemental funding request focuses on aid to these three countries. USAID had closed its program in Nueva Suyapa there due to lack of funding.

If you want to fix this crisis you must do three difficult things. You must summon the political will to treat these kids humanely, and that means more than using that word in the title of legislation. It means giving them a full, fair and timely

immigration hearing, as required under the Trafficking Victims Protection Reauthorization Act (TVPRA) of 2008. To roll back basic protections of the TVPRA and expedite deportation—treat Central American children the same way we handle Mexican children—means Border Patrol agents will give at most a cursory screening to children, even those who are trafficking victims. These are folks trained to be law enforcers, not in child-sensitive techniques designed to get traumatized kids to talk. The UN, among others, has found that the screening of Mexican children for protection concerns by Border Patrol has been a failure.

It means providing every child who stands before an immigration judge an attorney. KIND has worked hard to recruit volunteers, and these more than 7,000 lawyers have done incredible work. But it's a drop in the bucket, especially now given the surge. KIND estimates more than 70% of children are standing before a judge without anyone to help them mount and present complex immigration cases. These children face U.S. government attorneys arguing why they should be deported. No one in their right mind would consider this a fair fight, or anything approaching due process. I saw a seven-year-old boy alone in court, and KIND staff has seen five-year-old children, answering judges' questions, shivering with fright, clutching teddy bears.

We also have to deal with insecurity in Honduras in a way that doesn't fund corrupt police and the military that are a big part of the problem. We must strengthen the judiciary in Central America, accountability, as well as national child protection systems.

How can we have so much concern for girls kidnapped in Nigeria, but not for girls being kidnapped by narcos in Honduras who demand they be their "girlfriend" or they will kill them? How can we ask countries that neighbor Syria to take in nearly three million refugees, but turn our backs on tens of thousands of children from our hemispheric neighbors to the south? If we short-change due process for these children, I believe Congress and this administration will be sending many children back to their deaths.