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Obama Presses Central American Leaders to Slow a Wave of Child Migrants

By MICHAEL D. SHEAR and ASHLEY PARKER JULY 25, 2014

WASHINGTON — President Obama on Friday urged the presidents of Guatemala, Honduras and El Salvador to exercise what he called their “shared responsibility” to help stem the flow of migrant children toward the United States border, but the Central American leaders said America shares some of the blame for the crisis.

After a 90-minute meeting in the Cabinet Room of the White House, Mr. Obama told reporters that he and his counterparts had talked about the fates of thousands of unaccompanied children from Central America who have been pouring across the border with Mexico.

“Children who do not have proper claims and families with children who do not have proper claims at some point will be subject to repatriation to their home countries,” Mr. Obama said.

“The American people and my administration have great compassion for these children and want to make sure that they are cared for,” Mr. Obama said he told the presidents. “But I also emphasized to my friends here that we have to deter a continuing influx of children putting themselves at great risk.”

Mr. Obama called the meeting with Presidents Juan Orlando Hernández of Honduras, Otto Pérez Molina of Guatemala and Salvador Sánchez Cerén of El Salvador to try to strike at the root causes of what he has called a humanitarian crisis on the border between Mexico and the United States.

Mr. Obama said the Central American presidents are “excellent partners,” and thanked them for their efforts to discourage children from making the dangerous journey to the United States. But he also urged them to do more to combat the smugglers who, for a price, are transporting the children.

But in comments to reporters after the meeting with Mr. Obama, Mr. Hernández of Honduras said that the United States must accept that demand for illegal drugs in America is in part responsible for the violence that is causing the migrants to flee their homes in Central America. He called on the United States to help his country address what he called the root of the issue.

“Washington must understand that if you have a Central America with violence because of the drug traffic crime, a Central America without opportunities, without growth in the economy, it is going to always be a problem for the United States,” Mr. Hernandez said, as translated from Spanish by one of his aides.

In a joint statement by the four presidents issued by the White House after the meeting, the leaders pledged to “address the underlying causes of migration by reducing criminal activity and promoting greater social and economic opportunity.” But the White House did not make any announcements about further economic aid for Central America beyond what they have requested from Congress in recent weeks.

The meeting came as the administration continues to press Congress for more resources and authority to confront the flood of migrants, especially children, who have crossed into the Rio Grande Valley in Texas in recent months. More than 57,000 unaccompanied children and thousands more adults with children have crossed the border since October.

Before their meeting with Mr. Obama, the presidents of Guatemala and Honduras said they were working to crack down on drug trafficking and violence in their own countries but they also called on the United States to share in the responsibility for the crisis.

Mr. Hernández of Honduras said on Thursday that the surge in migration was due in part to “the ambiguity that has been the hallmark of the debate of the reform of the immigration process in this country.”

Administration officials reject the idea that Mr. Obama’s policies — including stopping deportations for young immigrants who were brought to the United States as children — are responsible for creating any confusion about who will be allowed to stay in the country.

Mr. Obama used the meeting with the presidents to ratchet up pressure on United States lawmakers to act soon on his request for emergency funding.

“It is my hope that Speaker Boehner and House Republicans will not leave

town for the month of August for their vacations without doing something to help solve this problem,” Mr. Obama said after the meeting ended on Friday.

The debate over how to handle the migrant children has all but stalled on Capitol Hill, where Senate Democrats and House Republicans this week unveiled competing proposals for Mr. Obama’s request for emergency funds — each far less than the \$3.7 billion the president initially requested.

A major issue dividing lawmakers is a 2008 law intended to combat human trafficking, but which has made it more difficult to quickly return Central American children to their home countries. Republicans refuse to support any legislation that does not change the law in order to expedite the deportation of the young migrants, and Democrats are reluctant to vote for any legislation that changes the law. Democrats say they fear it could hurt children who are fleeing dangerous situations in their home countries.

House Republicans on Friday left their special meeting on the border crisis more unified than many in the conference had expected, armed with the beginnings of a proposal that would allocate less than \$1 billion to the southern border.

In his comments on Friday after leaving the West Wing, Mr. Hernandez said that he told Mr. Obama that he could help convince lawmakers in the United States to support his request by helping them to see the situation firsthand.

“Maybe he took it as a joke, but I was being serious that the president should lend Air Force One to the members of Congress so they can go back to Honduras so they can see what is happening,” Mr. Hernandez said. “He thought I was joking, but I wasn’t.”

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