

Panama, August 06, 2014

The Latin American and Caribbean Movement for Children (MMI-LAC) calls for the protection of unaccompanied migrant children and adolescents

MMI-LAC¹ expresses its concern regarding the increasing northward migration of unaccompanied immigrant children, and calls on governments of origin, transit and destination countries to prioritize the best interest of the child and ensure the fulfillment of their rights as framed in the Convention on the Rights of the Child.

According to data from the U.S. government and the United Nations Agency for Refugees (UNHCR), in the last few years there has been a record increase in the number of unaccompanied children migrating to the United States from Central America, specifically from El Salvador, Guatemala and Honduras, and México. As organizations which are actively present in all the countries concerned, we request that the governments involved ensure the full protection of the affected children and seek to address the underlying factors that generate this unprecedented migration.

About 52,000 unaccompanied children have been detained along the south-west border of the USA in the past nine months, which is almost double the number for the previous year. The UNHCR estimates that at least 10,000 more children will try to cross into the United States without their parents before the end of September. Within this group of unaccompanied children migrants, there has been a dramatic increase in the number of very young children and of young girls, who are the most vulnerable and require special care and protection.

This crisis of unaccompanied child migration is a multi-causal phenomenon, influenced by complex social and economic factors. However, according to a recent study conducted by UNHCR in Central America², a significant number of children are being particularly affected by alarming levels of violence in their countries of origin. Violence linked to gangs and organized crime constitutes a major "push" factor. This is coupled with other regional trends including a lack of education and of employment opportunities, and family separation due to migration. The UNHCR found that most of the children migrants interviewed are clearly in a situation that merits protection from the international community.

The MMI-LAC appeals to the governments involved to ensure the "best interests of the child" in all their actions. The governments concerned include those in El Salvador, Guatemala and Honduras, but also any other countries of transit and destination for the child migrants. The movement calls on these countries to:

1. Apply the applicable and already-existing procedures to ensure the welfare and protection of children in accordance with the Convention on the Rights of the Child.
2. Avoid treating the unaccompanied migrant children as criminals, on the contrary provide them a humane and dignified treatment, while in shelters and during any temporary detainment, bearing in mind that depriving children of their freedom represents a violation of their rights.

¹ The Latin American and Caribbean Movement for Children (MMI-LAC) is a strategic alliance of leading organizations and networks in the region working in the promotion, protection and defense of the rights of children and adolescents, composed of the YMCA, SOS Children's Villages International, ChildFund Alliance, Child Helpline, Defence for Children International (DCI), ECPAT, the Inter-American Children's Institute (IIN) of the OAS, Plan International, Latin American and Caribbean Network for the Defense of the Rights of Children and Adolescents (REDLAMYC), ANDI International, Save the Children, UNICEF and World Vision International; with observers: Marist Foundation for International Solidarity-FMSI, ICMEC and Viva, Together for Children.

² UNHCR, "ACNUR insta a los países de las Américas a proteger a los niños no acompañados", <http://www.acnur.org/cartagena30/acnur-insta-a-los-paises-de-las-americas-a-proteger-a-los-ninos-no-acompanados>.

4. Destination country governments must ensure that repatriation of the unaccompanied children goes hand in hand with necessary measures to support the countries of origin, so that they have the minimum conditions to receive and provide for the children.

5. States in the region must increase international cooperation and ensure the necessary public investment to secure the rights of children and adolescents, through strengthening national child protection systems, fighting violence through a human rights approach, and generating work-study opportunities for the most vulnerable young people, especially those at risk of emigration and those who are returning to their home countries and communities.

6. States in the region must seek structural solutions to prevent and combat violence, focusing their efforts on the respect for human rights and institutional strengthening, rejecting repressive policies that may increase violence and cause children to flee from their homes and communities to seek safety and protection in other countries.

7. States in the region must coordinate efforts to implement the above measures, and their migratory and consular authorities should monitor and ensure the effectiveness of these recommendations.

Finally, the Latin American and Caribbean Movement for Children (MMI-LAC) appeals to the governments of the countries involved to ensure better conditions for children in their own territories, recognizing that the Convention on the Rights of the Child clearly defines the obligations of states to protect all children within their territories without discrimination, including refugees and migrants.

