

Koinonia House to be sanctuary for Central American r

By Chris Meehan

The Grand Rapids Press

Members of Koinonia House in Grand Rapids will formally declare their home a sanctuary for Central American refugees on the steps of the Gerald R. Ford Federal Building on Tuesday afternoon.

The declaration, scheduled for 3:30 p.m., will make the house the first sanctuary in the Grand Rapids area. There are sanctuaries in Kalamazoo, Lansing and Detroit.

What this means is that Salvadoran and Guatemalan refugees, in flight from political repression in their countries, can stay in Koinonia House, a refurbished three-story home at 424 LaGrave Ave. SE.

"We may be the first to do this, but we know there are others in town who are talking about doing the same thing," said Theresa Wylie, 20, one of six adults living in the home.

"We will be able to house four people, hopefully a family, in our home," she added. "We feel we have to do this. People are dying down there (in Central America.)"

Part of the statement they will read Tuesday at the Federal Building says: "We believe we are acting out of a long tradition of people who have given shelter to those fleeing death: like those who gave shelter to fleeing slaves in the underground railroad."

They are declaring their home a sanctuary on Tuesday because Oct. 7 is the sixth anniversary of the assassination of the Rev. Manuel Reyes, a Salvadoran priest murdered by government forces.

With their declaration, Koinonia House (it means house of hospitality) joins more than 300 other homes, churches and organizations across the country that have declared themselves places of sanctuary.

New Mexico and Wisconsin, as well as

cities such as Berkeley, Calif., have also declared themselves sanctuaries.

"We will temporarily house and care for the refugees until the United States changes its policy on Central America and they can go back," Wylie said.

In the past, at least one Grand Rapids church has given aid and shelter to Central Americans who had permission to be in the country temporarily while awaiting formal deportation charges. The church worked with other organizations to find permanent homes in Canada for a relatively small number of refugees.

But now, Koinonia House will offer refuge to persons who may be in this country illegally. This could cause them problems. The U.S. government, for instance, earlier this year prosecuted 13 people in Tuscon, Ariz., for their involvement in the sanctuary movement. The sanctuary workers in Arizona were either acquitted or received

suspended sentences.

"Even if what we're doing means we'll have to spend five years in jail, it's better than what they (the refugees) have been living under," said Jeff Smith, 26. "I know we'll learn a lot when they are here, especially about hope."

Residents of Koinonia House are working through the Chicago Religious Task Force to bring refugees to Grand Rapids. Chances are refugees won't arrive here until the first of the year.

"We've been aware of the (sanctuary) movement for several years," Smith said. "We started to think about it as a communal ministry at the first of this year. Then we decided late spring to do it."

Founded about two years ago, Koinonia House is based loosely on the Catholic lay worker movement started on the East Coast by Dorothy Day. Although residents consider the home ecumenical, many of

them are Catholics.

"What we have done here is offer hospitality to those who are in need," said Mike Judson, 21.

That means battered spouses, drug abusers, mental patients and others who need a bed, food and a roof over their heads have lived here.

"We see what we're doing now with sanctuary as just another way of doing hospitality," Judson said.

"We also see what we're doing as a being a deeper form of resistance. We can't just sit back complacently and watch people be butchered, raped, tortured and killed."

Once here, the refugees will share the story of the wars that have driven them from their homes.

"We feel a little like the people in Nazi Germany who took in the Jews," said Judson. "These people (the refugees) would be killed if they are sent back home."



While not related by blood, the refugees are a family in the sense that they are together in coming to a strange country for a better life. They are, from left, Filipi; Olida, holding her daughter, Gloria; Armando, (husband of Olida); Angelica, holding her daughter Maria; Javier, (husband of Angelica), and Ishmael. (Photo by Tammy Bergstrom)

Guatemalans Who Fled War-Torn Country Happy In GR

by Tammy Bergstrom

They live in Grand Rapids, in what some would call a poor section of town, in a house that cost \$5,000. Monthly expenses for this group of eight people, including food, heat, clothing, utilities and their house payment, is \$300.

While most of us would consider this situation unliveable, this group of Guatemalan refugees is relieved, even happy, to be here. Anything is better than the war-torn country

from which they fled.

The refugees are sponsored in this country by members of Koinonia House, a group of people who have declared a sanctuary for people like the Guatemalans, who have no legal right to be in this country but do not want to face death in Guatemala.

Through an interpreter, they recently gave a series of talks in the area to tell of their plight in Guatemala.

They revealed them-

selves as peaceful, non-political people who simply do not want to die, and for that reason alone are taking refuge in this country.

In Guatemala, they face death either by the military or the guerilla movement seeking to overthrow the government.

One of them, Ishmael, explained the Catch-22 situation.

"In 1981, (guerillas) began passing out (propaganda) in the streets.

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U.S. Bishops Sought Lower Profile At Annual Meeting

by William Bole
RNS Washington Writer

WASHINGTON (RNS) The nation's Roman Catholic bishops, who have taken on a wide range of controversial issues in recent years, show signs of beating a retreat from their highly visible posture.

One signal came at their annual meeting in Washington, which brought together approximately 300 bishops from around the country. In the closing hours of the Nov. 16-19 gathering, the bishops nearly backed off their long-standing opposition to U.S. policies toward Central America and to aid to Nicaragua's *contra* rebels. After much debate they reaffirmed their traditional stance.

The hierarchy also shied away from adopting a controversial new set of guidelines aimed at resolving disputes

The guidelines, which would have affirmed freedom of theological inquiry, also met with spirited opposition from conservative prelates.

between bishops and theologians. Relations between the two have been strained in recent years due to Vatican crackdowns on theological dissent.

The proposal was taken up as the final item on the agenda, as bishops were slipping out of the meeting room to catch planes. As a result, no vote was taken because the conference had lost its quorum. The guidelines, which would have affirmed freedom of theological inquiry, also met with spirited opposition from conservative prelates.

Archbishop John May of St. Louis, president of the National Conference of Catholic Bishops, set the tone of the meeting with his opening state-of-the-church address.

Past conference presidents have used this forum to confront pressing issues in the Church. In last year's address, Bishop James Malone of Youngstown, Ohio,

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Guatemalans Who Fled War-Torn Country Happy In GR

(Continued from Page 1)

Those people who received the paper, the military called guerillas, and they were killed.

"I lived near the mountains and the guerillas lived near the mountains. The guerillas bring the paper. If you didn't organize with them, they would kill you."

Villages were split in half, with people forced to join either the military or the guerillas.

"After a week, the guerillas would come and kill the people with the military," and vice-versa, he said.

Jeff Smith, a Koinonia House resident, also spoke at the presentation. He said military bosses would come to a village and draft men.

"If you're 14 or more, you are drafted to the military and you go get guerillas," he said.

Smith also presented a history of the country to give those in the audience an idea of what the Guatemalans fled.

Smith characterized the Mayan people who were natives of Guatemala, and their descendants, as a peaceful people. When Spanish explorers came to the country in the 1500s, "With that well-intentioned reason of coming to look for gold," they found none.

What they did find was a very fertile soil, due to volcanic activity in the area, and the peaceful Mayans, who were quickly recognized as "slave labor."

Most of the Indian population was wiped out with the arrival of the Spanish, and laws were passed saying all Indians had to work for the Spanish. In addition, land was confiscated by the Spanish.

Those in power in the country since the 1500s

have been the Spanish and their descendants.

In the early 1900s, the United States fruit companies of United Fruit and United Brands moved into Guatemala. United Fruit soon became the largest landowner in the country. The soil was ideal for growing crops, even those not indigenous to the country, such as bananas.

that there is no where to turn.

Through an interpreter, the Guatemalans spoke.

"In '82, the military came, killing people in the villages. They said that the people were guerillas, but they weren't," said Javier.

"They killed 75 people in my village. They killed my brother and two cousins. I would have been killed as

"They killed 75 people in my village. They killed my brother and two cousins. I would have been killed as well if I had been there."

Things finally started looking up for the suppressed natives in 1944 when the first non-dictator was elected, promising land reform. Although he didn't accomplish much, his successor made moves toward winning back land for the natives.

Smith said United Fruit was instrumental in getting President Truman to support propaganda against the Guatemalan government.

Then a coup overthrew the government during the Eisenhower administration, resulting in 1.5 million acres going back to United Fruit, according to Smith.

"To make it look OK, the (U.S.) government sent thousands and thousands of dollars down to set up a government that looked less Communist," said Smith.

Finally, in the early '60s, three guerilla movements, not very well organized, began making moves against the Guatemalan government. U.S. Green Berets were sent down to train death squads to stop the uprising, said Smith, and between 1960s and the present, they have killed 100,000 people.

The problem faced by people of the country is

well if I had been there. I was in the States.

"I went back to get my wife. There was hardly anybody left in my village.

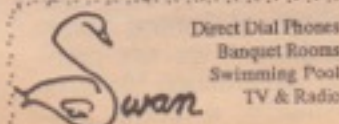
"Now we live in the United States. We're happy because there is no war here.

"I'd like to return to Guatemala when the war stops. If it doesn't, I'm not going back."

Filipi, whose family is

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still in Guatemala, spoke of the hard time he had getting to this country. "Many people died crossing the river," he said. He also talked about life in his village, where "They killed people with machetes, and put the bodies in one house."

"I was organized with the military," said Ishmael. "I went to look for guerillas in the mountains. I didn't find any," he said, smiling. He said they were forced to destroy the crops that belonged to the rebels.

In 1984 he left his family to come to the United States. He didn't have any money, but found some friends and little by little, worked his way into Los Angeles.

Now that they are here, they are also forced to send money back to Guatemala to pay for their

place in the civil patrol.

One of the members of Koinonia House explained the reason for the talks.

"We are learning so much about what the world is all about from the Guatemalans.

"Sanctuary is more than just hospitality. It's trying to stop the war in Guatemala, and we're trying to do that in our small way."

Those interested in sanctuary can contact Koinonia House members in writing at 424 LaGrave SW, Grand Rapids. Donations for the refugees are being accepted. Other needs include firewood, blankets, diapers (large and small) non-violent children's toys, an electric space heater, yarn, black beans, tools for the house, and jobs - all of them are looking for work.

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Michigan, once a key depot on the underground railroad smuggling black slaves to freedom in Canada, readily joined the Sanctuary Movement to transport Central American refugees along many of those same routes north. But new immigration laws, the Canadians' recent resistance to the influx of immigrants and a precedent-setting court ruling against church workers who provided sanctuary have hit hard at the loosely-knit network.

For thousands of years Judeo-Christian and Greek traditions have recognized houses of worship as sanctuaries. The U.S. movement to aid Central Americans sprang up six years ago — setting up a showdown between church groups and immigration officials who claim sanctuary is political, not religious, and good motives do not justify breaking the law.

Since then hundreds of churches or affiliated houses, including six in Michigan, have declared themselves sanctuaries. On March 28, 1986 — Good Friday on the Christian calendar — New Mexico Gov. Toney Anaya proclaimed his entire state a sanctuary.

The Rev. Dick Preston, a Roman Catholic priest connected with the Mariposa sanctuary in the Lansing area, says Salvadorans and Guatemalans seeking to escape the political violence in their countries must make their way across the Mexican border to receive help from church workers in the United States.

As they move north, from sanctuary to sanctuary, they are aided by informal networks sympathetic to the movement. By the time the refugees reach Detroit, which joins Buffalo as a main crossing point in the Great Lakes area, they may have been in the United States for years.

The Revs. Anita and Richard Buckwalter, co-pastors of the Church of the Brethren in Lansing, gave members of a Salvadoran family sanctuary in a makeshift apartment

in the basement of their church in 1985. Other members of the Medrano family — a pseudonym — sought refuge in Kalamazoo sanctuary. The family, two parents and nine children, eventually were reunited and this past May finally crossed into Canada — more than two years after they arrived in Michigan.

Normally, once refugees cross into Canada at Detroit, they are given hearing dates to appear before Ontario immigration officials

say the refugees are fleeing economic, not political, strife.

Armed with the latter argument, the Immigration and Naturalization Service last year took on eight leaders of the Sanctuary Movement in Tucson, Arizona, and won. A court found the eight, including a Presbyterian minister, two Roman Catholic priests and a nun, guilty on charges of smuggling Central Americans into the country. The precedent-setting convictions were accompanied by

Seeking Sanctuary

By Mary Dempsey

and temporary visas to allow them to return to the states until that date. But that process was complicated in February when the Canadians said they would no longer allow automatic entry of refugees.

Those who work with the immigrants say the crossings still continue, although at a slower pace, while the Canadian Parliament debates whether to close its borders to political refugees.

An immigration lawyer in Toronto said there is resentment in his country by those who believe U.S. foreign policy has created the political turmoil that prompts refugees to flee north. He said the Reagan Administration, not Canada, should handle the problem. U.S. immigration officials, meanwhile,

jail sentences, later suspended, and a determination that sanctuary workers be scared off from continuing activity in the movement.

Despite the optimism of the sanctuary workers, the government seems to view the movement as weakening.

"It's pretty dead," says Lonnie McDaniel, deputy director of the INS office in Detroit. "We're not too worried about them right now." He says refugees in sanctuaries are not considered to be taking away jobs that would otherwise be held by legal U.S. residents, and therefore, are not a top priority of his agency at this time.

He also says some INS attention has been diverted from the Sanctuary Movement by

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It's Detroit or Nothing

The new immigration law providing amnesty for undocumented workers who have been in the United States since before 1982 — and sanctions against employers who hire illegals — has created massive confusion among businesses and farm operations across Michigan. In the Grand Rapids area the problem is complicated by the lack of an Immigration and Naturalization Service office to interview aliens who want to become legalized. Pleas for help have prompted Michigan Civil Rights Director John Castillo to take on the INS.

The law grants temporary resident status to illegals who can prove they have lived in the United States since before Jan. 1, 1982, provided they have not been convicted of a felony and meet health and education criteria. INS officials had estimated there were at least 11,000 persons

in Michigan eligible for amnesty. By the end of August, three months after officials began accepting applications in the year-long amnesty program, only 700 had applied.

In Detroit, groups helping the immigrants collect the paperwork they need to apply for legalization say there is skepticism among undocumented workers who mistrust the INS and believe they will be deported, not given permission to stay and work in the United States. In Grand Rapids, however, the story is slightly different. The Kent County Hispanic Organizing Effort, aiding applicants, says there are not enough doctors to perform the medical examinations required for the applications and that traveling to Oak Park — the site of the lone INS interviewing office for the applicants — is a hardship.

"They've known about this for a long

time," says James Montgomery, director of the INS office in Detroit, in dismissing the complaints on grounds the new law — and its requirements — were publicized even before President Reagan signed the changes into law Nov. 6, 1986. He classifies the complaints as last-minute stalling efforts.

He also says he is willing to send a team of INS employees to Grand Rapids — or anywhere else in the state — to set up temporary offices for a week once 120 applications and accompanying documents have been forwarded to his agency in Detroit.

"These documents are too precious to turn over like that," says Sister Mary Ann Michaels, a Roman Catholic nun working with the Hispanic Organizing Effort. "Also, there are logistics here. We're talking about



These Guatemalans are sponsored by GR-area sanctuary workers.

boxes of documents." She says the INS is being uncooperative and the delay "is adding to the (undocumented workers') mistrust of the INS."

West Michigan residents concerned about the problem went to the state Civil Rights Department, claiming the issue was one of equal access to INS resources. Castillo was sympathetic, but he pulled out the big guns when he got reports there would be mass firings of non-citizens after a Sept. 1 deadline for some employers to prove their work forces were legal, and that legal workers might be turned away from jobs because of accents or physical characteristics that led potential employers to fear they were illegal aliens.

Under the new law, for the first time employers will be penalized if they hire illegal workers. The penalties, ranging from

fines of \$250 to \$10,000 for each alien, have businesses running scared and mean that U.S. citizens must now show proof of their legal status when applying for work. The muddled law, with grace periods and exceptions, has some employers so worried they do not know where to turn. The Civil Rights Department, meanwhile, has put them in a double bind by vowing state sanctions if they fire too quickly.

"This is a good example of the type of confusion that exists out there," says Castillo. "I think there's need for clarification. And I fault the INS for not explaining."

On Sept. 1, all employers had to be able to prove every worker since last Nov. 6 was a legal worker.

INS officials sent out a double message, cautioning employers not to engage in mass

firings but warning that they would be breaking the law by keeping illegals on their labor force. The INS says it will not begin penalizing farmers until December 1988 — even if they continue to hire undocumented workers — but they will round up any illegal employees they find in Michigan.

And even though the INS in Washington claims it is concentrating its resources on getting aliens processed for legalization, not tracking down those who break the new law, there have already been calls for roundups of illegal aliens and checks of their employers in Texas and other states.

Castillo, saying he cannot get a straight story from the INS, is urging employers to write to the Michigan Congressional delegation for guidance. "They passed this law, they should be able to explain it," he says.

GR



GR's Sanctuary

By David Benson

The immense house on LaGrave SE looks somewhat rundown. It's three stories, beige with red trim. Walking through the front door is like being transported back to the '60s. Political posters fill the walls, the entryway is lined with bicycles, plants sprout near every available window. The furnishings are sparse, and show evidence of years of wear and tear, more spartan than cosmopolitan.

But it's not the '60s, although the majority of the inhabitants' dress, hairstyles or beards still seem reminiscent of those politically charged days. This house isn't a center of resistance to the war in Vietnam but toward the violence in Central America and to policies of the Reagan administration believed to nurture that violence. This is Koinonia House, an outpost of the Sanctuary Movement in Grand Rapids.

On the second floor three Guatemalans, sponsored by sanctuary workers who live here, are seated on old couches and chairs, pestered by an aggressively friendly dog named Moses.

They and three other Guatemalan adults and two children now live in their own dwelling about a mile away though they, too, occupied Koinonia House when they first arrived. This arrangement is common for sanctuaries. For the sake of privacy and independence, the sponsored family or families occupy their own quarters when possible while still receiving economic, medical and legal assistance. "They were happy to move out," explained Koinonia House's Jeff Smith good-naturedly. "They didn't like our food."

These three men are dark-skinned Mayan Indians, all *campesinos*, or peasants. To avoid retributive acts on their friends and relatives still in Guatemala, the three use assumed names. Part of the sanctuary agreement of sponsorship is that Central American refugees meet with the media and speak of the situation in their countries. The three have been in Grand Rapids since April and inside the United States for about 2½ years.

Only Jabar (pronounced Hah-vair), wearing a white straw cowboy hat and T-shirt, is actually fluent in Spanish. Brothers Armando and Felipe, wearing American jeans or dress pants and sneakers, are more adept at their Indian dialect, though Armando, smiling



Top photo: Koinonia House residents and friends get together for a potluck celebrating the autumnal equinox. Bottom photo: Koinonia House, lone outpost of the Sanctuary Movement in GR.

broadly, occasionally interjects a few words. Smith, admitting to less than perfect Spanish, translated questions and answers.

The Guatemalans insisted they left their country only "cause of the war ... A lot of people are being killed in Guatemala," they said, especially Indians — Spanish and mixed-blood Guatemalans are more likely to be part of the power structure, less likely to be farmers caught in the open countryside between the wealthy landowners and the military on one side, the guerillas on the other. Forty-six people from Jabar's village were killed by the military, including his brother, uncle and cousin. Jabar said the military comes to peasants and demands they participate in the war. Those who do not cooperate are shot.

The Guatemalans think about friends and relatives there often, they said, sending letters or cassette tapes back and forth. Few *campesinos* can read or write. They are greatly relieved when they receive tapes. Returned tapes testify family or loved ones are still alive. Smith says life expectancy in Guatemala is 44 years.

The Reagan administration and INS offi-

cials frequently assert those migrating through Mexico and into the United States from Central America are economic refugees seeking better-paying jobs and are not political refugees fleeing for their lives. It seems the ultimate irony to the Guatemalans. Armando laughed and said, "We don't have anything, and what little we have we send back." Jabar reiterated, "We came because of the war, not because of needing money." More than 500,000 Guatemalans (the population is seven million) have been displaced from their homes according to the American Friends Service Committee; 200,000 have become refugees.

Since coming to Grand Rapids the men have worked picking fruit and trimming trees and shrubs. Asked if they enjoy the work, Smith, translating, said, "That makes them happy, yeah ... There's no people running around with guns in the fields, they say." Although many sanctuary refugees work, as the Guatemalans here, sanctuary sponsors agree to take care of all material needs for refugees, shouldering house payments, insurance and other costs so refugees can send whatever money they earn back to their

Depot

families. GR sanctuary workers emphasize, too, the important support of friends outside Koinonia House, both individuals and organizations, which have pledged financial or other support. The household of eight Guatemalans is run on about \$300 a month.

Since they are considered undocumented aliens, and since only about 4 percent of Guatemalan and Salvadoran refugees are accepted for citizenship, deportation is a constant danger. Smith translated Armando's and Jabar's comments, "They know if they get caught, they get deported, and if they get deported, they'll be dead probably ... They think that our president doesn't think there's any killing going on there." In fact, human rights organization Americas Watch estimates 100,000 have been murdered in political violence since the mid-'60s. GR's Guatemalans are aware, said Smith, paraphrasing their speech, our president "sends lots of money to the government" so the military has lots of guns to kill people. "The people don't like our policy down there, basically," interpreted Smith.

Sanctuary is billed as an "underground railroad" but Canada began restricting the flow of Salvadorans and Guatemalans across its borders, and sanctuary houses have become more like railroad depots. At present there is nowhere for fleeing Central Americans to go. Their first hope is that the conflict in their homeland will end so they can return in safety.

Five sanctuary workers currently live at Koinonia House. Their commitment is to continue whether or not INS tries to prosecute them, although "the number one thing would be the legal counsel to the refugees themselves," said Smith. "If they're willing to stick here, we'd be willing to stick by them."

They sometimes fear harassment like that received by sanctuary workers in Arizona eventually sentenced to jail terms. "For all we know we (the phone) could be tapped," said Smith. But he insists, "I think they're (the Guatemalans) taking a bigger risk than we are." Koinonia House resident Joe Kohley noted the recent death threats against Salvadoran refugees in California by Salvadoran death squads.

Koinonia House members aren't dissuaded by the argument they're breaking the law. "First of all, I don't think we're breaking the law," said Smith, pointing to the 1980 Refugee Act which allows all "political" refugees

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Sanctuary: from page 26

the recent change in immigration laws, giving amnesty and legal residency to any illegal aliens who prove they have been in the United States since before Jan. 1, 1982.

In Washington, INS Assistant Commissioner for Employer and Labor Relations John Schroeder says the Sanctuary Movement "has lost a great deal of momentum." He adds the new immigration law may have lured some people out of sanctuary and into the lines of those seeking legal residency status.

That same law, signed by President Reagan, Nov. 6, 1986, exacerbated the friction at the Canadian border. Aimed at controlling the estimated 3.5 million to six million illegal immigrants in the United States, the law penalizes employers who hire undocumented workers. Illegals who did not meet the criteria to become legalized, and who faced the prospect of no work and likely deportation, panicked and fled to Canada — claiming they were political refugees.

The Canadian officials, accustomed to admitting about 60 refugees a month from El Salvador and Guatemala, found that figure swelling to 2,000 men, women, and children in the month of January this year — two months after the immigration law took effect.

Despite this, refugees still risk crossing into the United States, showing church workers the scars they bear from torture at the hands of police and military personnel in their own country or with tales of the deaths of family members. **GR**

Depot: from page 29

asylum. He said it is Reagan who is denying the law. "If they admit to them being here for political reasons, they're admitting to their involvement," he charged.

Even if harboring Central American refugees is construed as law-breaking, Smith asserted, "I personally don't have a problem breaking an unjust law to keep a higher law." The "higher law" is that of the spiritual dimension, the core of the Sanctuary Movement. Smith said, "For me, that's the root of why I'm doing what I'm doing. My faith calls me to do it." Koinonia residents (Koinonia is a Greek word meaning "fellowship" or "community") call themselves "an ecumenical faith-based community." In answer to those who say sanctuary confuses politics and religion, Smith said flatly, "For my thinking, I can't separate politics and religion." "It's all intertwined," agreed Koinonia colleague Janet Moomaw.

Perhaps in part because of their faith, GR sanctuary workers discount INS assessments that the movement has been crumbling since the Arizona trial. "If anything, it helped the Sanctuary Movement," Smith asserted, citing all the attention the legal hoopla focused on the cause of sanctuary. "As long as we (the U.S.) continue to support the governments of Guatemala and El Salvador, as long as we continue to do that, people are going to continue to take people in," said Smith. "I don't think it's going to stop."

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