

IBBY REFORMA Project

How can we, in IBBY, respond to the cruel situation facing children from the Northern Triangle of Central America?

In 2015 Oralia Garza Cortés, a noted US librarian and member of REFORMA, suggested that a joint delegation of IBBY and REFORMA people go to the US/Mexico border to see what was happening to the unaccompanied children coming to the US to seek asylum. We went to McAllen Texas, near Brownsville. We brought books, each with a name plate that had a printed statement by Lucia Gonzales. ***A book is a companion that will bring you light and comfort. Lucia Gonzalez This book is dedicated to all the refugee children. A present from IBBY and REFORMA.***



We visited Catholic Charities; a U.S. Customs and Border Protection (CBP) Processing Center, McAllen; ProBAR--a group of pro bono lawyers; a shelter run by Southwest Key the Nueva Esperanza Immigrant Youth Shelter, in Brownsville and in every case we asked if they could give the children the books that we had bought for them. Some of us were allowed into the shelter where we saw that the kids seemed to have decent accommodation and were being provided. These shelters were responsible for assessing the homes—mainly of relatives—where they were to be sent. Kids were not supposed to stay in the shelters more than a few months at the most. The situation seemed tragic—some of these kids only spoke Maya languages; they had left their parents behind; their futures were uncertain. When they went to court if they didn't have a lawyer (fewer than 10% did) their chances of being granted refugee status were very slim. And a number were being deported.

But still.... In general they seemed safe.

Today, as we all know, they are not safe at all. Their situation in Central America continues to deteriorate. They may well die on route. The Coyote system has been almost entirely taken over by the drug cartels. They are being asked to wait on the Mexican side of the border in some of the most dangerous cities in the world (Juárez, Tijuana, Matamoros) If they try to cross at less crowded areas of the border they risk dying of hunger in the desert. Aid workers who leave water for people in the desert have been charged with criminal activity and Border Patrol agents have frequently been documented emptying and kicking over water supplies. And in an act of extreme cynicism Guatemala and the US have signed an agreement that any refugee passing through Guatemala must stay there as it is a "Safe Third Country."

Another change that has taken place is the huge growth in the number of younger children who are travelling with a parent, either in caravans—in order to avoid traffickers--or in smaller units. As we know some of these children have died of disease in detention, been separated from their parents, or housed in shelters that can hold up to 3000 children.

People from Central America have in general been demonized. A statement by the president of the United States on May 30 and shown on the White House site says, "As everyone knows, the United States of America has been invaded by hundreds of thousands of people coming through Mexico and entering our country illegally. This sustained influx of illegal aliens has profound consequences on every aspect of our national life — overwhelming our schools, overcrowding our hospitals, draining our welfare system, and causing untold amounts of crime," the statement continues. "It must end NOW!"

The situation of children and families even if they make it into the US is a far cry from what the framers of the 1951 Convention and Protocol Relating to the Status of Refugees and its then signatories, including the US, imagined when they attempted to ensure that what had happened to Jews during the second World War would never happen again.

The children and their parents from the Northern Triangle are fleeing extraordinarily high levels of gang and other forms of violence--including femicide--; starvation due to climate change; and

social break down due to extreme corruption—especially in Guatemala and Honduras. Public institutions such as schools, hospitals, orphanages, and others are barely funded. Not only is the drug trade embedded in many government and army departments, children and their well being are almost solely the province of NGOs who are struggling valiantly to provide support to children. Unfortunately, the United States and Canada continue to support these governments. And the newly elected president of Mexico who initially had offered much better conditions for refugees passing through Mexico is now blocking them at the Mexican/Guatemala border. And shelters in Mexico are overrun, inadequate and unsafe.

It is worth noting here that under the Refugee Convention asylum seekers are not illegal by definition.

The past several meetings of the steering group of the IBBY REFORMA project which includes Patrick Sullivan, Oralia Garza Cortes, Tess Tobin and Elisabeth Garcia from REFORMA, Ellis Vance and myself from IBBY and Jenny Lizarraga of Cinco Books, have been dedicated to trying to figure out what we can do in this terrible situation. While recently Urban Librarians Unite and the REFORMA Children in Crisis Task Force were Awarded \$95,412 for New Books by First Book, wonderful news, and those books will be distributed to kids who in the United States, we have come to the conclusion that the best thing we can do is to support civil society initiatives in the Northern Triangle and Mexico.

No matter how bad the conditions in Central America, what faces kids who leave their homes and when they arrive in the US may very well be worse. And excellent work is being done in the Northern Triangle and along migration routes in Mexico that we can support.

IBBY El Salvador, which was founded and is mainly run by extraordinary author and poet Jorge Argueta, has now created 3 libraries: one in his backyard; one, weekly, in the market of San Jacinto in the city; and the newest in his Indigenous home village, Santo Domingo de Guzmán. [Jorge Argueta](#) learned what it is to be a reading promotor when working as a writer in the US. I have seen him in action. Jorge, and the people he works with, many of them teens that he has trained as reading promoters, are transforming the lives of children whose schools have hardly any books, who walk to and from school on streets that are beset by gangs, and whose parents are very likely illiterate or nearly so. IBBY and USBBY are supporting IBBY El Salvador and it is one of the most effective uses of funds I have ever witnessed. Children in these libraries practically eat the books they are given.





Another organisation doing outstanding work is the Riecken Foundation that has built an exceptional network of libraries in Honduras and Guatemala organised and funded and jointly managed with local communities. While these are general libraries, they do exceptional work with children. They are in rural communities and receive municipal support. The librarians who have emerged with the support of the Foundation are stars, fighters for their libraries, and trained in reading promotion. Bill Cartwright manages the project and is based in Honduras. The wonderful Paco Alcaide who is the director of Riecken libraries in Guatemala has devoted a great deal of time and energy helping to create an IBBY section in Guatemala. The president to be, Diana López, the very good publisher of Amanuense, is in the process of organising the section.

Finally, it must be mentioned that there are networks of people in Mexico, AHRC-GCRF Network “Children’s Literature in Critical Contexts of Displacement: Exploring how story and arts-based practices create ‘safe spaces’ for displaced children and young people” and REDLEEMOS Lecturas en Movimiento y Solidaridad.

IBBY Mexico is a participant in these networks that work with children in transit and in shelters despite the extremely difficult conditions. Evelyn Arizpe a British academic who helped to establish this network and undertakes training sessions with people in Guatemala and Mexico—as well as IBBY Egypt-- has a memorandum of understanding with IBBY. Arizpe and her collaborators in Guatemala and Mexico are doing cutting edge research on how best to support children in migration, as well as actively using books and reading with them and supporting them now, in this terrible time.

What can USBBY members do to help?

Advocate! For these children’s rights as asylum claimants, as children, as human beings to be safe, to be educated, to live and thrive.

Anyone who can access shelters in the US where unaccompanied minors, parents with children are housed can donate books and try to be given access to go in and read to the children. This is very hard to achieve though donated books might be accepted. Link with local REFORMA sections to work on this.

Travel to Central America is not advisable. People working with kids do not need to be burdened with providing safety to volunteers in this very volatile time.

Donate! Fundraising for any of these agencies, especially our two IBBY sections is the single most valuable thing that can be done. Books, dollars, etc. are desperately needed. Donations can be made through <https://www.usbby.org/donate.html>