

## “Public Funds, Private Agendas: NGOs Gone Wild”

A hearing before the House Committee on Oversight and Government Reform,  
Subcommittee on Delivering on Government Efficiency

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During the 2021-2025 administration of President Joe Biden, the United States devoted significant taxpayer funds to a network formed in 2019 that consisted of United Nations agencies and non-government organizations (NGOs). The partnership established aid waystations all along Latin American illegal-migration routes, and it encouraged and facilitated at least 10 million foreign nationals from 180 countries to cross the U.S. southern border during those four years – at U.S. taxpayer expense.

The Center for Immigration Studies (CIS) has documented that this vast UN-NGO support network operated (and still does as of this testimony, albeit at reduced capacity) as the “Inter-Agency Coordination Platform for Refugees and Migrants from Venezuela”, which expanded to assist non-Venezuelan migrants after its 2019 establishment. What CIS has learned about this transnational organization’s financing, the 240 NGOs as of 2025 partnering with 15 UN agencies, their aid-distribution strategy, and programming comes from field reporting and annual published budget projections and needs analyses the network calls the “Regional Refugee and Migrant Response Plan.” (See most recent one here: <https://www.r4v.info/en/rmrp2025-2026>.)

Although migration along the routes has been substantially deterred under detain-and-deport policies of the second Trump administration, the UN-NGO network is able to resume its migration-facilitation activities in the countries of South America, Central America, and Mexico in the future.

The UN-NGO operations were often justified as providing a humanitarian safety net to those who would travel with or without one. But they amounted to coordinated, well-funded assistance designed to undermine U.S. immigration laws. They provided millions of intending illegal border-crossers with “cash-based interventions” in the form of debit cards and even cash in envelopes, as well as legal coaching that involved narrative engineering for fraudulent asylum claims, transportation facilitation, food, camping equipment, trail advice, and lodging assistance.

Tapachula in southern Mexico, near its border with Guatemala, is an important transit point for third-country migrants headed for the Rio Grande. In Tapachula, the Center discovered UN-funded NGOs that provided a curious kind of “psychological service”. They provided psychologists to help third-country migrants who had been rejected for asylum in Mexico with “therapy” to retrieve “repressed memories” of traumatic persecution that they supposedly couldn’t remember during their initial interviews with Mexican asylum officers. After this “therapy”, the migrants would show up on appeal with lawyers and a clinical report attesting to the newly remembered persecutions that qualified them for Mexican asylum cards. These, in turn, entitled migrants to pass military checkpoints until reaching the U.S. border, where they would discard the cards on the riverbank and could use the “repressed memory” documents to claim U.S. asylum. (See: [UN Funds Harvesting ‘Repressed Memories’ of U.S.-Bound Migrants in Mexico](#) by Todd Bensman)

In a migrant camp in Reynosa (opposite McAllen, Texas) in early 2021, the Center discovered the UN handing out debit cards to hundreds of migrants who said the cards were charged with nearly \$400 every two weeks in that area. Subsequently, Center staff found many migrants holding such cards elsewhere in Mexico and beyond, and learned the giveaways were a key program of the UN-NGO group called “cash-based intervention”. (See: [United Nations Grantee Uses U.S. Tax Dollars to Fund Illegal Immigration](#) by Todd Bensman)

In South America and Central America, the NGOs handed out millions of dollars' worth of trail-friendly food provisions, camping equipment, and personal hygiene products, clearly intended to assist the recipients in their plans to illegally breach the borders of a half-dozen nations up-trail, up to and including the United States. (See: [Dispatch from Colombia](#) by Todd Bensman)

In Colombia, the Center found small storefront “villages” of NGOs in territory controlled by the murderous Clan Del Golfo paramilitary organization (also known as the Gaitanist Self-Defense Forces of Colombia), which is responsible for transporting much of the cocaine brought into the United States – and also used the smuggling lanes it controls into Panama to charge some 1.5 million U.S.-bound migrants to pass during the Biden years. At the very least, the NGOs could not possibly have operated in these areas of northwestern Colombia without this drug-smuggling paramilitary group’s permission, in full knowledge that this criminal organization of 6,000 men under arms was reaping massive illicit profits from the human smuggling. NGOs were operating inside a clan-guarded final staging camp in the village of Acandi for journeys through the Darien Gap, the Center observed. At worst, the UN-NGO network might have used U.S. taxpayer money to pay the clan to operate in support of mass migration. But at no point could the NGOs in Colombia not have known that all the people it served were about to illegally cross into Panama, as they carried backpacks, equipped themselves with camping gear sold in street kiosks and stores, and spoke openly about their plans.

Operations in Colombia and Panama under these circumstances prove beyond any doubt that the UN-NGO network was knowingly complicit in illegal activity.

For an idea of how U.S. tax money was spent to flood the American border, the far northwest Colombian town of Necoclí provides a window. This is a major staging town for migrants preparing to boat across the Gulf of Urabá for smuggler-guided backpack trips through the so-called “Darien Gap” jungle passage that leads into Panama and eventually Mexico and the U.S.

In Necoclí, the UN and NGO agencies arrayed themselves in something like an outdoor swap meet of NGO booths and an IOM mobile bus office on a few acres next to the beach, the Center for Immigration Studies observed during an August 2024 research trip to the region. The Jewish NGO [Cadena](#) was set up in a booth next to the Adventist Development and Relief Agency (ADRA).

NGO and UN workers there said they provide a variety of trail advice and plenty of supplies to the immigrants, including socks, underwear, backpacks, bug repellent, water filters, sunscreen, and Vaseline. In addition, they offer survival advice, like classes for children on how to avoid sexual predators among the strange men traveling the Darien Gap.

And food.

“Like things easy to carry so they can eat and be done with it,” the Cadena worker said.

On that day, the Cadena worker our researcher spoke to said she’d given out thousands of food items such as packaged soup to more than 3,000 migrants during the previous few months, showing the last of it: a box with a handful of granola bars she hoped to hand out soon so she could go home.

Our researcher asked, What about critics who say NGOs like Cadena are helping migrants break the laws of many countries?

“As an organization,” [the Cadena worker responded](#). “We’re not here to judge. We’re just here to provide a service.”

But aren’t you helping them migrate?

“Only by giving them the things that I mentioned, not money or fare, just certain resources for the trip,” she explained.

Yet, these programs were among many that operate on budgets that, since 2019, have reached into the billions of dollars, the majority of it coming from the U.S.

State Department and congressional allocations administered mainly through the UN's International Organization for Migration (IOM) and the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR). That means the activity that facilitated an unprecedented mass migration crisis was backed by the U.S. taxpayer.

In 2023, the United Nations budgeted \$1.6 billion for its Regional Refugee and Migrant Response Plan (RMRP) to cover operations across 17 Latin American countries.

In 2024, the RMRP budget was renewed at \$1.59 billion, with a large portion allocated for “cash-based interventions” and transit support. (See: [UN Budgets Millions for U.S.-Bound Migrants in 2024](#) by Todd Bensman)

Looking ahead, the 2025–2026 RMRP projects an annual budget of \$1.62 billion to continue these operations, including psychological services, legal coaching, and movement assistance logistics. (See: [As Trump 2.0 Approaches, NGOs Continue to Fund Mass Migration with U.S. Tax Dollars](#) by Todd Bensman) The most recent document calls for maintaining spending levels as high as when a mass migration torrent was at full throttle in recent years. It wants to support 2.3 million foreign nationals from throughout the world it thought would be on the move toward the U.S. southern border through 17 Latin American countries, and \$1.2 billion to do the same in 2026, although new Trump policies have dramatically reduced interest in the illegal north-bound journey to the U.S. border. (In fact, the [London Times](#) and the [New York Times](#) have reported that the traffic has reversed direction as some in the U.S. are self-deporting and others who didn't make it are turning around and going back.)

The operations undertaken by NGOs and United Nations agencies across Central and South America form a critical element in the support system of unauthorized migration into the United States. From field deployments in Colombia's jungle corridors to transit shelters in southern Mexico, these organizations have developed and maintained a sort of legal gray area in which foreign nationals are not only encouraged to undertake illegal journeys but are actively assisted in their efforts. It remains in place even in the face of vastly decreased traffic due to

Trump administration policies implemented in January 2025, and unless exposed and dismantled, remains ready to spring into action if and when future policies reignite mass migration.

In Tapachula, Mexico, as recently as October 2024, the Center discovered a UN-NGO mass migration “mall” under construction that would house UN and NGO agencies under one large roof, with a large area for tent camping. (See: [A One-Stop Shop for Illegal Migration](#) by Todd Bensman). The Tapachula mall suggests the expansive migration-route safety net remains even after President Trump’s inauguration.

It plugs into [two other huge, one-stop-migration malls](#) erected in the northern Mexico cities of Monterrey and Tijuana. These gleaming new Mexican facilities and plenty of UN and NGO substations in other Mexican towns and cities form the terminus of the trails to the United States lined with pots of U.S. tax money all along the way. But they are representative of what’s happening throughout Latin America.

The UNHCR, which received [\\$1.9 billion in U.S. taxpayer funds](#) in 2024 and \$2.1 billion in 2023 (compared to [\\$377 million in 2019](#)) for migration assistance throughout Latin America, started building the Tapachula facility on land donated by the state of Chiapas as [part of the deal with Mexico to run it](#).

The roughly 240 participating NGOs at the heart of this parallel immigration system are highly diverse, ranging from those that are based abroad and many that are U.S.-based. Some provide specialty services such as medical treatment. Others provide food, shelter, and transportation.

One CIS analysis found that more than 30 faith-based nonprofits were among the UN’s hundreds of NGO partners — representing Jewish, Lutheran, Seventh Day Adventist, Catholic, and nondenominational evangelical organizations. (See: [Biden Admin. Sends Millions to Religious Nonprofits Facilitating Mass Illegal Migration.](#)) It showed that that the U.S. State Department’s [Bureau of Population, Refugees, and Migration](#) (PRM) and the U.S. Agency for International Development (USAID)

had been providing taxpayer funds to these and other NGOs, which then distributed them to keep hundreds of thousands of migrants comfortably moving toward illegal U.S. southern border crossings.

For example, the [nonprofit organization HIAS](#) of Silver Spring, Md. (incorporated in 1903 as the Hebrew Immigrant Aid Society) pledged \$17.1 million in aid to immigrants in at least seven Latin American nations during 2024, the UN's RMRP planning documents show. It turns out that in FY 2022, [47 percent](#) of revenue reported by HIAS came as grants from government agencies, the majority from the State Department, but some also from the Department of Homeland Security, according to the group's tax filings and other sources, with the balance coming from a mix of major corporate sponsors and other sources.

But there can be little question about the origins and purpose of at least some of HIAS's \$17 million pledge to the UN's Latin America migrant trails project. Last year, the State Department's PRM gave HIAS a \$6 million grant for it, [according to USAspending.gov](#), a database that tracks federal spending.

The first infusions of another \$5.2 million State Department PRM grant to HIAS — explicitly for the UN endeavor in Latin America — started arriving in September 2023 with the last of it coming in September of 2024, [according to USAspending.gov](#).

All \$11 million was earmarked to HIAS by the State Department's overseas refugee assistance programs for the Western Hemisphere, which the UN plan aimed to support through “direct emergency humanitarian assistance such as food, non-food items, shelter, health, psychosocial support” in major migration transit countries like Colombia, Ecuador, and Peru.

A UN [“activity explorer” database](#) of the participating NGOs shows that some \$6.1 million of 2024's HIAS commitment would go out as cash cards, cash vouchers, and cash in-kind services, while most of the rest goes to transportation, food, shelter, and various services.

The State Department has openly acknowledged issuing guidance to field staff on budget and planning coordination for the Latin American effort, and it had even turned over operation of major U.S. government policy initiatives in Latin America, such as an expansion of “refugee” centers and management of a no-interest “international travel loan” program.

The State Department’s PRM, USAID, and UN agencies all saw this straight-line pass-through of American taxpayer assistance with “multilateral organizations” as “social and economic protection and risk reduction” for vulnerable stateless people “forced” to flee home countries, as the 2023 PRM grant to HIAS put it.

Until it was changed a few days after President Trump’s inauguration, PRM’s [mission statement](#) said that it “promotes U.S. interests by providing protection, easing suffering, and resolving the plight of persecuted and forcibly displaced people around the world.” (The relevant sentence in PRM’s [current mission statement](#) now reads “PRM promotes U.S. interests by working to reduce illegal migration, to provide humanitarian assistance to those fleeing persecution, crisis, or violence, and to seek durable solutions for forcibly displaced people around the world.”)

But a more critical interpretation of such direct Biden government infusions of taxpayer money — and operational closeness with the UN agency recipients during those years — is that it harmed American interests by easing the northward path for mainly economic immigrants who voluntarily made the journey knowing in advance that their basic needs would be provided for and that border policies virtually guaranteed their entry and long-term stay.

HIAS was hardly alone among faith-based NGOs essentially passing U.S. taxpayer money to illegal migrants in just these ways.

The Seventh-day Adventist Church’s “global humanitarian arm”, the Silver Spring, Md., [Adventist Development and Relief Agency](#) (ADRA), planned to distribute more than \$10 million, nearly 38 percent of it as cash and cash vouchers, and the

rest as food, shelter, and hygiene needs in Brazil, Colombia, Ecuador, Argentina, and Peru.

ADRA received significant funding from USAID and the State Department from 2021-2023, [nearly \\$51 million in 2021, \\$32 million in 2022, and more than \\$9 million in 2023](#) and two unspecified grants in 2024, according to USAspending. It's unclear how much of that was earmarked for U.S.-bound immigrants in Latin America, but clearly some of it was in 2024. Brazil and Honduras were among the top countries where ADRA spent money.

Organizations associated with the Catholic Church, collectively, moved among the largest volumes of cash and other aid into the hands of U.S.-bound foreign nationals, more than \$26 million. Three Jesuit-associated groups moved some \$5.3 million into immigrant hands, while the Catholic Commission for Social Justice sent out nearly \$2 million.

The highly visible [Catholic Charities USA](#) is not on the list of those working south of the border with this UN project, although the NGO and its many affiliate components receive tens of millions of dollars in federal awards to manage illegal immigrant transportation north from the border and resettlement activity in the United States interior.

But some 13 franchises of the nonprofit Caritas, whose website states that it is “inspired by the Catholic faith” and is “the helping hand of the Church”, were to dole out \$12.3 million to immigrants south of the border, much of it as cash and cash vouchers, the activity explorer search tool showed.

USAID and the State Department's PRM have given more than \$11 million to one of them, [Caritas Brazil](#), since the mass migration began in 2021, including \$3 million pledged through December 2024 for “overseas refugee assistance programs for the Western Hemisphere” that include “food, non-food items, shelter, health, [and] psychosocial support”, [USAspending shows here](#) and [also here](#).

By way of explaining its views on this aid, Caritas Switzerland, one of the most giving of the 13 franchises, [says on its website](#) that migration “globally across international borders in non-regulated forms ... represents a legitimate strategy of people to improve their lives” – no matter that nations along the way don’t want this traffic coursing through their territories. Caritas is going to “cover basic needs, such as food, personal hygiene products, clean clothes, safe decent accommodation and subsidized transport”.

Other faith-based NGOs representing Christian denominations are also well represented, and also funded, in part, by the U.S. treasury.

In FY 2023, USAID awarded Lutheran World Relief [a million-dollar grant](#). The group would hand off about \$181,000 supporting immigrants in Latin America.

USAID in recent years has given the nondenominational Boone, N.C., [Samaritan’s Purse](#) \$29 million “for programs overseas”, albeit much of it for activities in Africa. But Samaritan’s Purse pledged \$718,513 to the UN project in Latin America.

This examination of some of the religion-oriented NGOs suggests probable Biden administration taxpayer funding for many more of the others. But pending further research, the extent of tax money diversion to them is not publicly known.

The UN plan lists 57 “international NGOs” like HIAS and ADRA, and also 132 “national NGOs”, probably based in foreign countries transited by illegal migrants. Further investigation would need to determine whether the State Department and USAID send pass-through money to these, as well. The plan also names a category of “Others” such as the Red Cross Movement and “academia”.

Language in the UN plan for Latin America in 2024 leaves no doubt that its architects in both the UN and U.S. agencies are in lockstep about one thing: aggressively expanding the ranks of NGOs working on the migration trails, which if logic follows, would portend even greater diversions of U.S. taxpayer money to support them.

In different migration zones, from Colombia to Guatemala to southern Mexico, these programs not only aid the journey — they make it possible. Without U.S. dollars, these systems would collapse. And yet, oversight remains absent, accountability is nonexistent, and Congress has not exercised the authority necessary to halt this abuse. Through cash aid, legal advice, mental health sessions, and travel help, these actors have constructed a de facto shadow immigration system. This parallel system operates in direct defiance of U.S. federal immigration law yet is financed in part through congressional appropriations. In locations such as the Darien Gap, migrants encounter a network of coordinated aid stations, each offering crucial resources: food, transportation vouchers, and prepaid debit cards that serve as encouragement, not deterrents. Evidence from Center investigations supports the claim that these structures are not passive humanitarian responses but are embedded with a pattern that lines up with open-border goals.

In testimony gathered from migrants themselves and NGO workers can be found repeated confirmation that U.S.-funded aid agencies actively promote the journey northward and prepare individuals with narratives designed to meet U.S. asylum thresholds — even if those narratives do not originate from credible persecution claims. Congress needs to act now — investigate, cut funding, and hold any group accountable that acts in contradiction to U.S. laws and national interests.

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