



Written by [Warren Mass](#) on August 13, 2019

Guatemalan President-elect Wants to Renegotiate “Safe Third Country” Deal With U.S.

Guatemala’s President-elect Alejandro Giammattei (shown) said recently that he wants to change the “safe third country” agreement with the United States that outgoing President Jimmy Morales agreed to on July 26. The agreement requires migrants traveling through Guatemala to seek asylum there first, rather than moving on directly into Mexico and, ultimately, the United States. Giammattei, a conservative who defeated his center-left opponent, Sandra Torres, by a margin of 58 percent to 42 percent in the nation’s August 11 presidential election, made the statement a few hours before being declared the winner.



“I hope that during this transition [from now until he takes office in January] the doors will open to get more information so we can see what, from a diplomatic point of view, we can do to remove from this deal the things that are not right for us, or how we can come to an agreement with the United States,” Giammattei told Reuters in an interview.

“It’s not right for the country,” Giammattei said of the “safe third country” agreement. “If we don’t have the capacity to look after our own people, imagine what it will be like for foreigners.”

Reuters cited a poll published this month by Guatemalan newspaper *Prensa Libre* (Free Press), showing that more than eight out of 10 Guatemalans rejected the idea of the country accepting foreign migrants seeking asylum.

A memo issued by U.S. officials stated that the agreement includes “a phased implementation relying upon a mutual understanding and agreement of the number of people who might seek protection in Guatemala and what volume of protection seekers the Guatemalan system could process.”

The deal was so unpopular in Guatemala, *Foreign Policy* reported, that Morales negotiated it in secrecy, presumably to deflect criticism. On July 14, the country’s Constitutional Court ruled that the safe third country deal required legislative approval.

Morales, however, refused to define the accord as a “safe third country” agreement, calling it a “Cooperation Agreement” instead, apparently to circumvent the Constitutional Court’s ruling.

The agreement takes effect later this month, more than four months before Giammattei takes office. That is long enough for large numbers of migrants applying for asylum in Guatemala to have an impact on the already impoverished nation’s economy. And if Giammattei tries to change the agreement or black it’s implementation unilaterally, he faces repercussions from the United States, which buys around 40 percent of Guatemala’s exports. President Trump has already cut aid to Guatemala, and has threatened to place tariffs on the nation’s goods if the deal isn’t put into force.



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Trump announced on May 30 that he would impose tariffs on Mexican imports if our southern neighbor did not adequately stop illegal migrants from traversing its territory and crossing the U.S.-Mexican border. However, the matter was resolved by June 9, when the president tweeted that he was suspending his plan to impose steep tariffs on Mexico because that country “has agreed to take strong measures” to halt the use of their country as a highway into the United States for illegal immigration.

Photo of President-elect Alejandro Giammattei: AP Images

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Warren Mass has served The New American since its launch in 1985 in several capacities, including marketing, editing, and writing. Since retiring from the staff several years ago, he has been a regular contributor to the magazine. Warren writes from Texas and can be reached at wmass@thenewamerican.com.



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