

Children 'as young as one' involved in US separation of migrant families – UN rights office

The current policy in the United States of separating “extremely young children” from their asylum-seeker or migrant parents along the country’s southern border “always constitutes a child rights violation”, the UN human rights office, [OHCHR](#), said on Tuesday.

Since last October, “several hundred” youngsters – including a 12-month-old infant – have been separated from their families while their parents serve out prison sentences for entering the U.S. illegally, or wait in detention while their asylum claims are processed, OHCHR spokesperson Ravina Shamdasani told journalists in Geneva.

She said OHCHR had received information on cases dating from last October; although the policy had begun in January 2017 when the newly-inaugurated President, Donald Trump, issued two executive orders related to migration.

The current separation of children “was a direct consequence of that decision”, Ms. Shamdasani said, adding that the policy is applied to asylum-seekers and other migrants “in vulnerable situations”.

There is nothing normal about detaining children – *Ravina Shamdasani (OHCHR)*

Thanks to the strong civil rights movement in the U.S. Ms. Shamdasani noted that a class action has been brought by the American Civil Liberties Union, on behalf of hundreds of parents – mainly from Central and Latin American countries – who have been separated from their children.

Ms Shamdasani noted that there is “nothing normal about detaining children”, and that it “is never in the best interests of the child and always constitutes a child rights violation”.

And on the legal issue of entering a country “without the right papers”, the UN human rights office spokesperson insisted that it should not be a criminal offence and “does not warrant jailing children”.

Once separated from their parents, Ms Shamdasani said that children are often transferred into the care of the U.S. Office of Refugee Resettlement, and that efforts are made to find them a temporary guardian.

When their parents are released, youngsters are reunited with them and deported back to their country of origin.

For the majority this means to Honduras, Guatemala and El Salvador, where “rampant insecurity and violence” has forced them to flee, the OHCHR official explained.

In a call for an end to the practice, Ms Shamdasani noted that the U.S. “generally held in high regard” the rights of children.

And although it is the only UN Member State not to have ratified the Convention on the Rights of the Child, it had signed the international accord and ratified others, which meant that it had legal obligations to children in its car, the OHCHR spokesperson explained.

Also present in Geneva, a spokesperson for the UN Refugee Agency, [UNHCR](#), said that it was following the situation closely on the US southern border, but that it had no information on whether asylum requests had changed significantly since last year.