



January 28, 2019

PM-602-0169

Policy Memorandum

SUBJECT: Guidance for Implementing Section 235(b)(2)(C) of the Immigration and Nationality Act and the Migrant Protection Protocols

Purpose

This memorandum provides guidance to immigration officers in U.S. Citizenship and Immigration Services (USCIS) regarding the implementation of the Migrant Protection Protocols (MPP), including supporting the exercise of prosecutorial discretion by U.S. Customs and Border Protection (CBP). This memorandum follows the Secretary of Homeland Security's January 25, 2019, memorandum, *Policy Guidance for Implementation of the Migrant Protection Protocols*.

Background

Section 235(b)(2)(C) of the Immigration and Nationality Act (INA) provides that aliens arriving by land from a foreign contiguous territory (i.e., Mexico or Canada)—whether or not at a designated port of entry—generally may be returned, as a matter of enforcement discretion, to the territory from which they are arriving pending a removal proceeding under Section 240 of the INA.

On December 20, 2018, Secretary of Homeland Security Kirstjen M. Nielsen announced that the Department of Homeland Security (DHS) will begin the process of implementing Section 235(b)(2)(C) of the INA on a large scale. That statutory provision allows for the return of certain aliens to a contiguous territory pending Section 240 removal proceedings before an immigration judge. Under the MPP, aliens who are nationals and citizens of countries other than Mexico (third-country nationals) arriving in the United States by land from Mexico—illegally or without proper documentation—may be returned to Mexico for the duration of their immigration proceedings as a matter of prosecutorial discretion. *Accord* 8 C.F.R. § 235.3(d).

In her January 25, 2019, memorandum, Secretary Nielsen issued general policy guidance concerning DHS's implementation of Section 235(b)(2)(C) at the southern border consistent with the MPP. Memorandum from Kirstjen M. Nielsen, Secretary of Homeland Security, *Policy*

Guidance for Implementation of the Migrant Protection Protocols (Jan. 25, 2019) (Jan. 25, 2019, Memorandum). The Secretary advised that such authority should be implemented consistent with the *non-refoulement* principles contained in Article 33 of the 1951 Convention Relating to the Status of Refugees (1951 Convention)—as incorporated in the 1967 Protocol Relating to the Status of Refugees¹—and Article 3 of the Convention Against Torture and Other Cruel, Inhuman or Degrading Treatment or Punishment (CAT).²

The Secretary specifically advised that, consistent with those principles, “a third-country national should not be involuntarily returned to Mexico pursuant to Section 235(b)(2)(C) of the INA if the alien would more likely than not be persecuted on account of race, religion, nationality, membership in a particular social group, or political opinion (unless such alien has engaged in criminal, persecutory, or terrorist activity described in Section 241(b)(3)(B) of the INA), or would more likely than not be tortured, if so returned pending removal proceedings.” Jan. 25, 2019, Memorandum at 3-4. Article 33 of the 1951 Convention and Article 3 of the CAT require that the individual demonstrate that he or she is “more likely than not” to face persecution on account of a protected ground or torture, respectively.³ That is the same standard used for withholding of removal and CAT protection determinations. See 8 C.F.R. § 208.16(b)(2), (c)(2); Regulations Concerning the Convention Against Torture, 64 Fed. Reg. 8478, 8480 (1999).

At the same time, under the MPP, the United States “understands that, according to the Mexican law of migration, the Government of Mexico will afford such individuals all legal and procedural protection[s] provided for under applicable domestic and international law,” including the 1951 Convention and the CAT. Letter from Chargé d’Affaires John S. Creamer to Sr. Jesús Seade, Subsecretaría para América del Norte, Secretaría de Relaciones Exteriores (Dec. 20, 2018). Further, “[t]he United States expects that the Government of Mexico will comply with the commitments articulated in its statement of December 20, 2018.”⁴

¹ The United States is not a party to the 1951 Convention Relating to the Status of Refugees but is a party to the 1967 Protocol Relating to the Status of Refugees, which incorporates Articles 2 to 34 of the 1951 Convention. Article 33 of the 1951 Convention provides that: “[n]o Contracting State shall expel or return (*‘refouler’*) a refugee in any manner whatsoever to the frontiers of territories where his life or freedom would be threatened on account of his race, religion, nationality, membership of a particular social group or political opinion.”

² Article 3 of the CAT states, “No State Party shall expel, return (*‘refouler’*) or extradite a person to another State where there are substantial grounds for believing that he would be in danger of being subjected to torture.” See also Foreign Affairs Reform and Restructuring Act of 1998 (FARRA), Pub. L. No. 105-277, Div. G, Title XXII, § 2242(a) (8 U.S.C. § 1231 note) (“It shall be the policy of the United States not to expel, extradite, or otherwise effect the involuntary return of any person to a country in which there are substantial grounds for believing the person would be in danger of being subjected to torture, regardless of whether the person is physically present in the United States.”).

³ See *INS v. Stevic*, 467 U.S. 407, 429-30 (1984); *Auguste v. Ridge*, 395 F.3d 123, 132-33 (3d Cir. 2005); *Pierre v. Gonzales*, 502 F.3d 109, 115 (2d Cir. 2007); see also Senate Resolution of Advice and Consent to Ratification of the Convention Against Torture and Other Cruel, Inhuman or Degrading Treatment or Punishment, S. Treaty Doc. No. 100-20, II(2), available at <https://www.congress.gov/treaty-document/100th-congress/20/resolution-text>; Regulations Concerning the Convention Against Torture, 64 Fed. Reg. 8478, 8480 (1999).

⁴ Jan. 25, 2019, Memorandum at 4.

The Secretary also advised that, where an alien affirmatively states a concern that he or she may face a risk of persecution on account of a protected ground or torture upon return to Mexico, CBP should refer the alien to USCIS, which will conduct an assessment to determine whether it is more likely than not that the alien will be subject to persecution or torture if returned to Mexico. The Secretary directed USCIS to issue appropriate internal procedural guidance to carry out this policy. That guidance is explained below.

Guidance

Upon a referral by a DHS immigration officer of an alien who could potentially be amenable to the MPP, the USCIS asylum officer should interview the alien to assess whether it is more likely than not that the alien would be persecuted in Mexico on account of his or her race, religion, nationality, membership in a particular social group, or political opinion (unless such alien has engaged in criminal, persecutory, or terrorist activity described in Section 241(b)(3)(B) of the INA),⁵ or that the alien would be tortured in Mexico. The process or procedures described in INA Sections 208, 235(b)(1), (3), and 241(b)(3) and their implementing regulations, as well as those in the CAT regulations, do not apply to the MPP assessments.

A. Interview

Upon receipt of such a referral, the USCIS officer should conduct the MPP assessment interview in a non-adversarial manner, separate and apart from the general public. The purpose of the interview is to elicit all relevant and useful information bearing on whether the alien would more likely than not face persecution on account of a protected ground, or torture, if the alien is returned to Mexico pending the conclusion of the alien's Section 240 immigration proceedings.

The officer should conduct the assessment in person, via video teleconference, or telephonically. At the time of the interview, the USCIS officer should verify that the alien understands that he or she may be subject to return to Mexico under Section 235(b)(2)(C) pending his or her immigration proceedings. The officer should also confirm that the alien has an understanding of the interview process. In addition, provided the MPP assessments are part of either primary or secondary inspection, DHS is currently unable to provide access to counsel during the assessments given the limited capacity and resources at ports-of-entry and Border Patrol stations as well as the need for the orderly and efficient processing of individuals.⁶

In conducting the interview, the USCIS officer should take into account the following and other such relevant factors as:

⁵ The disqualifying grounds for *non-refoulement* vis-à-vis the 1951 Convention and 1967 Protocol are reflected in Section 241(b)(3)(B) of the INA. However, the reference to Section 241(b)(3)(B) should not be construed to suggest that Section 241(b)(3)(B) applies to MPP.

⁶ See 8 C.F.R. § 292.5(b).

1. The credibility of any statements made by the alien in support of the alien's claim(s) and such other facts as are known to the officer. That includes whether any alleged harm (i.e., the alleged persecution or torture) could occur in the region in which the alien would reside in Mexico, pending their removal proceedings, or whether residing in another region of Mexico to which the alien would have reasonable access could mitigate against the alleged harm;
2. Commitments from the Government of Mexico regarding the treatment and protection of aliens returned under Section 235(b)(2)(C) (including those set forth in the Government of Mexico's statement of December 20, 2018),⁷ the expectation of the United States Government that the Government of Mexico will comply with such commitments,⁸ and reliable assessments of current country conditions in Mexico (especially those provided by DHS and the U.S. Department of State); and
3. Whether the alien has engaged in criminal, persecutory, or terrorist activity described in Section 241(b)(3)(B) of the INA.

B. Assessment

Once a USCIS officer assesses whether the alien, if returned to Mexico, would be more likely than not persecuted in Mexico on account of a protected ground (or has engaged in criminal, persecutory, or terrorist activity described in Section 241(b)(3)(B) of the INA), or would be more likely than not tortured in Mexico, the assessment shall be reviewed by a supervisory asylum officer, who may change or concur with the assessment's conclusion. DHS staff should inform the alien of the outcome of the final assessment. USCIS should then provide its assessment to CBP for purposes of exercising prosecutorial discretion in connection with one or more of the decisions as to whether to place the alien in expedited removal or to issue a Notice to Appear for the purpose of placement directly into Section 240 removal proceedings, and if the latter, whether to return the alien to Mexico pending the conclusion of Section 240 proceedings under Section 235(b)(2)(C) pursuant to the MPP, and, when appropriate, to U.S. Immigration and Customs Enforcement for purposes of making discretionary custody determinations for aliens who are subject to detention and may be taken into custody pending removal proceedings.

If an officer makes a positive MPP assessment (i.e., that an alien is more likely than not either to be persecuted in Mexico on account of a protected ground and has not engaged in criminal, persecutory, or terrorist activity described in Section 241(b)(3)(B) of the INA, or to be tortured in Mexico), USCIS is *not* granting withholding of removal or protection from removal under the CAT regulations. Nor shall there be further administrative review, reopening, or reconsideration of the assessment by USCIS. The purpose of the assessment is simply to assess whether the alien meets one of the eligibility criteria under the MPP, pursuant to Section 235(b)(2)(C).

⁷ Secretaría de Relaciones Exteriores, *Position of Mexico on the Decision of the U.S. Government to Invoke Section 235(b)(2)(C) of its Immigration and Nationality Act* (Dec. 20, 2018); see Jan. 25, 2019, Memorandum at 2-3.

⁸ See Jan. 25, 2019, Memorandum at 4.

Disclaimer

This memorandum is not intended to, and does not, create any right or benefit, substantive or procedural, enforceable at law or in equity by any party against the United States, its departments, agencies, or entities, its officers, employees, or agents, or any other person. Likewise, no limitations are placed by this guidance on the otherwise lawful enforcement or litigation prerogatives of DHS.

Contact Information

Questions relating to this memorandum must be directed through the appropriate channels to the Asylum Division Headquarters point of contact.