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EDITORIAL

Japanese Latinos: the forgotten internees

The U.S. owes long-overdue redress to the Japanese Latinos it kidnapped during World War II.

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FROM 1941 TO 1945, the United States government kidnapped 2,264 ethnic Japanese people from 13 Latin American countries on the grounds that they posed a threat to national security. The Japanese Latinos were imprisoned in U.S. internment camps, and about 800 were eventually sent to Japan in exchange for U.S. prisoners of war in Japan. Some were never heard from again. After the war, more than 900 were forcibly deported to Japan, and about 100 returned to Latin America. Most of the remainder stayed in the U.S.

For more than 60 years, the victims of these crimes have been seeking redress from the U.S. government. Because they were not U.S. citizens at the time of their internment, the Japanese Latinos were not included in reparations made to Japanese Americans in 1988. Instead, 10 years later, after a class-action lawsuit, the government offered them \$5,000 apiece (instead of the \$20,000 awarded to interned Japanese Americans) and a letter of regret. About 800 accepted the settlement. Others refused it or never learned of it.

Rep. Xavier Becerra (D-Los Angeles) and Rep. Dan Lungren (R-Gold River) have cosponsored a bill that, instead of calling for monetary reparations, seeks the creation of a commission. Its purpose would be to "further study ... the events surrounding the deportation and incarceration of Japanese Latin Americans."

A commission? Why study events everyone agrees took place? In this case, however, a commission may be precisely what's needed. Hearings can help publicize a little-known injustice, bringing pressure to seek a remedy. The case of the Japanese Latinos has never entered the national consciousness; even some formerly interned Japanese Americans remain unaware of this program.

Japanese Latinos were not the only victims of the wartime kidnapping policy. About 200 Italians and 6,000 German Latinos met the same fate, according to documents in the National Archives. At least 81 of the Germans were Jews who had escaped the Nazi regime, yet after being kidnapped by the U.S. and brought here, some were later returned to Germany. Bills that would establish a commission for kidnapped Europeans were introduced in Congress last month.

The victims deserve recognition and recompense. But they aren't the only ones who would benefit. The pursuit of historical truth enriches all Americans. When we confront the frailties and failings of our past, we become more likely to recognize them in the present and less likely to repeat our mistakes in the future.