



NEW MIGRATION DYNAMICS IN NORTHERN CENTRAL AMERICA, MEXICO AND THE UNITED STATES

Central American exodus caravans, COVID-19,
and serious human rights violations



Franciscans International
A voice at the United Nations

This publication has been researched and written by Rosario Martínez, consultant on migration, in collaboration with the Franciscan General Office for Justice, Peace and Integrity of Creation (JPIC) in Guatemala, and under the supervision of Ulises Quero, Program Coordinator for the Americas at Franciscans International (FI).

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In particular, the FI team is very grateful to: Ramón Márquez and Marya Farah, FI's representative at the United Nations in New York, for their support in research and for their textual contributions; Sandra Epal-Ratjen, FI's International Advocacy Director and Deputy Executive Director, and Cédric Chatelanat for their constant supervision of the project; and to Thomas Kleinveld, Communications Officer at FI, for coordinating the review and editing process, translations, and design. The graphic design was produced by Nuñez - Aguirre.

Last, but not least, thank you to the Franciscan Network for Migrants in Central America, Mexico and the United States, for their vital contribution to this publication, through the feedback provided and interviews held with their members and other partners within the global network. Our sincere thanks go to all of our partners that work towards the protection of human rights in relation to human mobility, as well as all those who respond to the most urgent needs of migrants, refugees, asylum seekers, the displaced, and victims of human trafficking.

This document, including some direct quotations, has been translated from Spanish with attention to keeping the original meaning of testimonies and written texts.

FI retains sole responsibility for the content of this publication.

With the support of



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Abbreviations and Acronyms

ACA	Asylum Cooperation Agreements
CAC	Classic Air Charter
CCPDH	Central American Council of Human Rights Ombudsmen
CDC	Center for Disease Control and Prevention
CEG	Center of Studies of Guatemala
EAP	Economically Active Population
ECLAC	Economic Commission for Latin America and the Caribbean
FI	Franciscans International
FTAA	Free Trade Area of the Americas
GDP	Gross Domestic Product
IACHR	Inter-American Commission on Human Rights
IADB	Inter-American Development Bank
ICE	Immigration and Customs Enforcement
IGM	Guatemalan Institute for Migration
INM	National Institute of Migration (Mexico)
IOM	International Organization for Migration
MMP	Migration Protection Protocols
NCA	Northern Central America
RFM	Franciscan Network on Migration for Central America, Mexico and USA
UN	United Nations
PIB	Producto Interno Bruto
UNDP	United Nations Development Program
UNHCR	United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees



Courtesy of La 72

01

Introduction

The following diagnosis provides a general overview of new trends in migration patterns identified in Northern Central America (NCA), and aims to expand the debate on possible ways to deal with the phenomenon. We believe it is necessary to identify the changes that have taken place in the migration dynamic, beginning with the caravans of 2018 and 2019, highlighting both the structural problems in the sub-region as well as the violence and impoverishment in previously productive rural areas that drive migration.

We also consider it essential to report on the issues faced by individuals and organizations that support migrant populations both in their countries of origin and those in transit, in order to be able to analyze possible opportunities and challenges in the future. Focusing on actors who support migrants allows us to move beyond simply describing the problem and instead to consider the best ways for regional coordination.

When we first began the diagnosis, the initial impacts of COVID-19 measures and State responses to migratory flows were already clear. This allowed us to include a section dedicated to considering new dynamics that emerged from the pandemic.

This document was created through two closely interlinked phases: first, a review of the most up-to-date information in articles, books and specialized documents, and second, interviews with members of the Franciscan Network for Migrants of Central America and Mexico, as well as with other key actors from these countries. These interviews were conducted between June and September 2020 and this document reflects policies and information collected until October 2020.

Courtesy of Red Franciscana para Migrantes





Courtesy of Luis Ramírez

02

Central America's migration exodus

2.1

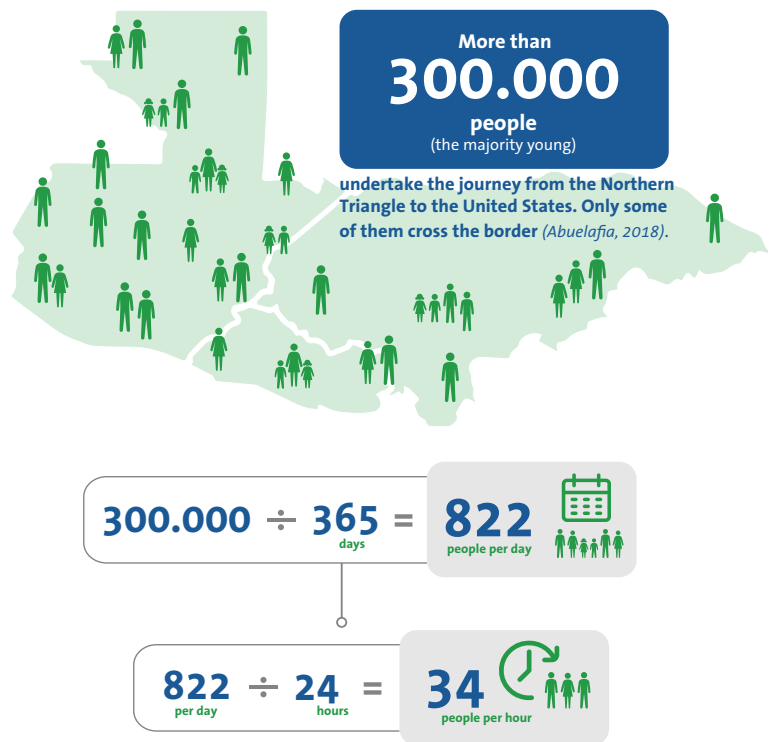
The context of migration before the Central American exodus caravans

Human mobility is one of the most visible consequences of the globalized world, the product of a neoliberal model in which the poorest seem to have no place.

The review of multiple studies relating to international migration in NCA¹ reveals that migratory processes have traditionally been the product of socio-political and economic dynamics that can be traced back to the structural problems of each country, which in the 1960s gave rise to armed conflicts, particularly in El Salvador and Guatemala. These conflicts, however, also affected neighboring Honduras, which became the center of operations for the *contras*.² Honduras was also part of a “good neighbor policy” with the United States, established there in the 1980s; this changed as a result of the coup d’état in 2009 and the geopolitical interests of the US.

In 2018, it was estimated that more than 300,000 people annually - the majority of whom were young - embarked on the journey to the United States from countries in NCA.³ This represents 821 people per day and 34 individuals every hour.

Human mobility is one of the major global challenges of today, as the Economic Commission for Latin America and the Caribbean (ECLAC) proposes when it asks itself



Source:

<https://publications.iadb.org/publications/spanish/document/-La-pol%C3%ADtica-migratoria-de-los-EUU-y-su-impacto-en-el-Tri%C3%A1ngulo-Norte-de-Centroam%C3%A9rica.pdf>

how migration should be managed. Public debates include on the one hand discussions on the drivers of migration, and issues regarding national security, controls and “border closures;” and on the other hand human safety, and freedom of movement, including for individuals who voluntarily make decisions based on the right to migrate.

¹ This includes Guatemala, Honduras and El Salvador.

² Original available at: Ediciones Böll. (2018). *Políticas de Estado, desplazamiento forzado y migración*. San Salvador: Ediciones Böll.

³ Original available at: Abuelafia, E. D.-A. (2019). *Tras el paso de los migrantes, Perspectivas y experiencias de la migración de El Salvador, Guatemala y Honduras en Estados Unidos*. El Salvador: IADB-USAID.

The 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development considers migration an instrument with great equalizing potential, whether within or between countries, and relevant to the achievement of all of the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs).⁴ The implementation of planned and consensual migration policies could contribute to proper migration management. The Global Compact on Migration, undersigned by 160 countries, including Guatemala, El Salvador, and Honduras, and facilitated by Mexico and Switzerland, initially indicated that migrants contribute to sustainable development.⁵ As the discussions advanced and the host/destination countries felt pressured, the approach to migration management that was finally adopted was based on “safe, orderly and regular” migration.

This Compact seeks to find a balance between access to and control over labor markets, and between the costs and benefits of migration, recognizing only regular migrants as rights-holders. Despite having been considered an opportunity to improve migration governance and to tackle the challenges associated with current migration,⁶ its impact has been limited, with migration reaching levels generally only seen in areas of conflict or war, as a result of structural inequalities and the specific conditions of growing violence in the Americas.

Each year NCA statistics include data on the thousands of deportees who return to their countries by air or by land, and who, upon return, face the same adverse conditions that forced them to leave in the first place.

This situation often leaves them no choice but to migrate once again. As government bodies take returnees to the nearest bus terminal with the expectation that they will return home, returnees likely come face to face with other migrants who are leaving in the opposite direction, full of hope. Many Central Americans, particularly from Honduras and El Salvador, move in caravans⁷ or by paying migrant smugglers (known as *coyotes* or *polleros*) to take them to the United States. Before the COVID-19 pandemic, the estimated cost of using a smuggler was between \$8,000-\$10,000 USD. This, for some, is a life-long investment.

This trip is also a path full of both hope and trauma. Support is needed at every step, but more importantly the root causes of this mobility need to be addressed. International financial institutions and other sectors have promoted the idea that greater economic growth will bring a better quality of life for a country’s population. However, such growth does not always reach most of the population because of economic, social and political inequality and inequity. Economic growth on its own is insufficient to stop mass migration.

In accordance with data from the Inter-American Development Bank (IADB) and based on the information from the Bilateral Migration Matrix 2017, it was estimated that nine per cent of citizens of NCA reside in the United States.⁸ These numbers were taken one year after the expedited deportation policies implemented by the Trump administration began in 2016.

⁴. Incluir a los migrantes es imprescindible para lograr el desarrollo sostenible, UN News. 27 February 2019 <https://news.un.org/es/story/2019/02/1451942>

⁵. Global Compact For Safe, Orderly And Regular Migration, Draft Rev 1, 26 March 2018, para. 11, https://refugeemigrants.un.org/sites/default/files/180326_draft_rev1_final.pdf

⁶. Global Compact for Safe, Orderly and Regular Migration, https://www.un.org/en/ga/search/view_doc.asp?symbol=A/RES/73/195

⁷. See main text in Section 2.2 on terminological usage of exodus and caravan.

⁸. Estudio del BID: Un 9 por ciento de población del Triángulo Norte vive en EE.UU., La Tribuna, 18 December 2019, <https://www.latribuna.hn/2019/12/18/estudio-del-bid-un-9-por-ciento-de-poblacion-del-triangulo-norte-vive-en-ee-uu/>

It is important to note what factors have contributed to an increased flow of primarily irregular migration towards the United States. Various academics report that circular migration⁹ has reduced, with migrants choosing to settle in one country as a result of: a) family reunification; b) the strengthening of support networks in the destination country; and c) better job prospects in the United States (prior to the pandemic), which allows migrants to make future plans outside their country of origin. These factors are in addition to drivers related to security issues (including various forms of violence), as well as those arising from climate change.

Boys and girls under 12 years old in most cases migrate because their parents have decided to. However, adolescents of 13 years and above tend to make the decision themselves, in consultation with and with the support of their families.¹⁰ The Atlas of Migration, developed by the Economic Commission for Latin America, found migration of unaccompanied girls increased 72% in 2017 in comparison with 2016, with an average age of between 14-15 years.¹¹ Even though age may be explanation enough to understand the seriousness of these cases, it fails to shed light on the profiles of these boys, girls and adolescents who decide to risk their lives on the migration journey in search for a future that the State has denied them from birth.

Besides the situation of migrant minors, we must also identify an overall profile for current migrants. According to ECLAC, half of recent migrants are under the age of 24, and 25% of total migrants are children and young people under the age of 20. 85% of recent migrants have not completed secondary education, and 82% have family members in the United States.¹²

This profile is supported by the report *“Tras el paso de los migrantes, Perspectivas y experiencias de la migración de El Salvador, Guatemala y Honduras en Estados Unidos”*, based on a survey of recent migrants in the main metropolitan areas in the United States:

- “Most migrants from the three countries are young, single and predominantly indigenous populations.
- NCA migrants over the last decade have low educational levels in comparison with other migrants, but also tend to have higher levels of education than on average in their country of origin.
- Migration separates families: half of the children of migrants are in their country of origin.
- The majority of NCA migrants are irregular and hope to stay in the United States permanently.”¹³

⁹ According to Cortés (2009), the term circular migration is used to refer to migrants who move to another place temporarily, repeatedly or in a cycle, with no intention for permanent or long-term residence.

¹⁰ This information was provided by individuals who choose to remain anonymous for security reasons.

¹¹ Atlas of Migration in Northern Central America, ECLAC, December 2018, p.31, https://repositorio.cepal.org/bitstream/handle/11362/44288/1/S1801071_en.pdf

¹² Ibid at p.27.

¹³ Original available at: Abuelafia, E. D.-A. (2019). *Tras el paso de los migrantes, Perspectivas y experiencias de la migración de El Salvador, Guatemala y Honduras en Estados Unidos*. El Salvador: IADB-USAID.

The migrant exodus caravans of Central America in 2018-2019

The caravans, also known as “exodus en masse, is a new form of human migration, partially organized by those displaced by violence and misery in countries which exist in a permanent state of emergency.”¹⁴ While the term ‘caravan’ has been used for its connotations of size, it has recently acquired a political element that serves to obscure the structural causes that lead to this flight. For this reason, the Franciscan Network for Migrants (RFM) prefers to use the term ‘exodus’ to emphasize the notion of flight, which is a product of the inequality, inequity and extreme poverty that these individuals experience in their countries of origin. This is exacerbated by violence and the impacts of climate change. However, in this section, the term ‘caravan’ or ‘exodus’ will be used according to the source and the terms used therein, sometimes being applied interchangeably.

According to the International Organization for Migration (IOM) “migrant caravans or caravan migration is a method of migration that has two main characteristics: 1) It’s done by land and 2) it’s done in large groups.”¹⁵

The IOM has gone on to note that these caravans have emerged through calls published on social networks, which invite migrants to mobilize as a group to reach the United States, usually passing through Mexico. Those that participate in the caravans believe that caravan migration means:

- “Greater protection for migrants, since they are less exposed to the crimes and abuse usually encountered en route”
- “Greater assistance from governmental and non-governmental entities”
- “Lower associated costs ... since there is a lesser need to hire a coyote or migrant smuggler to cross borders.”¹⁶

¹⁴ Original available at: Varela, A. (2019). Mexico, from “Vertical Border” to “Bottleneck”. Immigrants, Deportees, Returned Migrants, Internally Displaced Persons and Asylum Seekers Stuck within the Mexican Vertical Border. *Iberoforum, Revista de Ciencias Sociales de la Universidad Iberoamericana*, p.49-76.

¹⁵ Migrant Caravans, IOM, 2018, <https://rosanjose.iom.int/site/en/migrant-caravans>

¹⁶ Ibid.

Both prior to and with the start of caravans, migrants worked on developing skills to learn to overcome the obstacles they face as they moved towards the destination country, usually the United States. Until the emergence of the

Central American exodus caravans, the main migration routes known through Mexico were the Pacific Ocean route and the Gulf of Mexico route.¹⁷

Figure 1. Traditional migration routes



¹⁷ An analysis of these traditional routes and the alternative routes identified since the caravans began and during the pandemic will be discussed in section 4.1.

In his paper on caravan geopolitics, Leopoldo Santos Ramírez reports how caravans represent “a new method for migrant populations to move on a large scale.”¹⁸

The first mass exodus migrant caravan was recorded on 12 October 2018. It was primarily comprised of Honduran and Salvadoran citizens, with an estimated 4,000 people.

Amarela Varela says: “The so-called ‘Caravana por la Vida’ [Caravan for life] left San Pedro Sula, Honduras, in October 2018. The pioneers were two hundred people (family units) who started to walk to flee structural violence and misery. When the caravan crossed the border into Guatemala, images of this mass migration and ‘coming out of the shadows’ captured the attention of the international media, as hundreds of those fleeing hunger and the mara gangs [criminal groups] became thousands. This is how this method of seeking another life came to be recognized as an exodus of the displaced, a virtual refugee camp in movement, crossing various countries, between them the largest ‘vertical border’ in the world: Mexico.”¹⁹

A remarkable characteristic of this mass movement was that it not only included full nuclear family units, but in some cases, also extended family. These individuals were called to participate through social media, mainly WhatsApp and Facebook. Migrants entered Mexico on 19 October at the Tecún Umán border in Guatemala.

International institutions expressed their concern on various occasions. The Inter-American Commission on Human Rights (IACHR) called on States in the region to adopt measures to protect the caravan.²⁰ Independent experts from the United Nations (UN) also sent letters to the governments of Guatemala, Honduras, Mexico, and the United States expressing their concern, highlighting that the human rights of migrants and other people on the move, such as refugees and asylum seekers, should be fully respected by the involved countries.²¹

Central American exodus caravans, beginning in 2018 and continuing throughout 2019, had some shared characteristics that can be identified from the experiences of Franciscans who supported them and from the information collected:

¹⁸ Original available at: Ramírez, L. S. (2020). Geopolítica de las Caravanas Centroamericanas. Tegucigalpa, Honduras: Facultad Latinoamericana de Ciencias Sociales -FLACSO-, Universidad Nacional Autónoma de Honduras.

¹⁹ Original available at: Varela, A. (2019). Mexico, from “Vertical Border” to “Bottleneck”: Immigrants, Deportees, Returned Migrants, Internally Displaced Persons and Asylum Seekers Stuck within the Mexican Vertical Border. Iberoforum, Revista de Ciencias Sociales de la Universidad Iberoamericana, 49-76.

²⁰ IACHR expresses concern over the situation of the “Migrant Caravan” from Honduras and calls on the States of the region to adopt measures for their protection, OAS-IACHR., 23 October 2018, https://www.oas.org/en/iachr/media_center/PReleases/2018/225.asp

²¹ Migrant caravans: States have duty to protect human rights, UN OHCHR, 28 November 2018, <https://www.ohchr.org/EN/NewsEvents/Pages/DisplayNews.aspx?NewsID=23941&LangID=E>

- a The caravans coming out of Honduras are a testament to the social and political crisis Hondurans endure and the pressure they face because of systematic violence and a lack of opportunities. Those originating from El Salvador reveal the violence of the mara gangs, as well as a dismantlement of the country's employment and economic framework.
- b Social media have played a decisive role in spreading the word on and organizing migrant caravans. They have also made evident the lack of information from public authorities, the limited control different border agencies have, and the scarce or non-existent support provided by States during transit. Finally, they also demonstrated that any leadership was the result of self-organization of the caravans' members.
- c Heterogeneity was a characteristic of mass flows of migrants. Interviews highlighted the diversity of the caravans, noting that they even included individuals and families with university education, or whose basic needs were fulfilled, but who were fleeing violence. For these people, caravans provided security and self-protection, without which they would not dare to migrate.
- d Multiple actors intersect in the convening of caravans and in the routes they take. For example, caravans form at strategic geopolitical moments such as the mid-term elections in the United States in 2018. This led to president Juan Orlando Hernández from Honduras expressing in the media while caravans were in transit that political groups "interested in destabilizing the country" had manipulated migrants to start a journey to the United States.



Courtesy of Jose Maria Cárdenas



Courtesy of Luis Ramírez

Some academics propose that these caravans constitute a new migration paradigm, while others maintain that they are forcibly displaced as a result of violence and poverty, in the same way as in countries besieged by war or famine.

The first exodus caravans were especially novel due to their size; people on the move were willing to leave aside anonymity and continue on their journey in full daylight. This took States by surprise - they were not prepared to attend to such large numbers of people fleeing violence or contexts of poverty in their countries. They also took coyote smuggling networks, who used to move hundreds of people in smaller groups across borders daily, by surprise.

In the middle of 2019, States had already learned some lessons and agreed upon strategies that would allow them to disperse the caravans. At migrant detention centers, mechanisms and messages were put in place to dissuade migrants, alluding to the risks during transit. In Guatemala, for example, military and police check points were set up on the road leading to Petén, as an

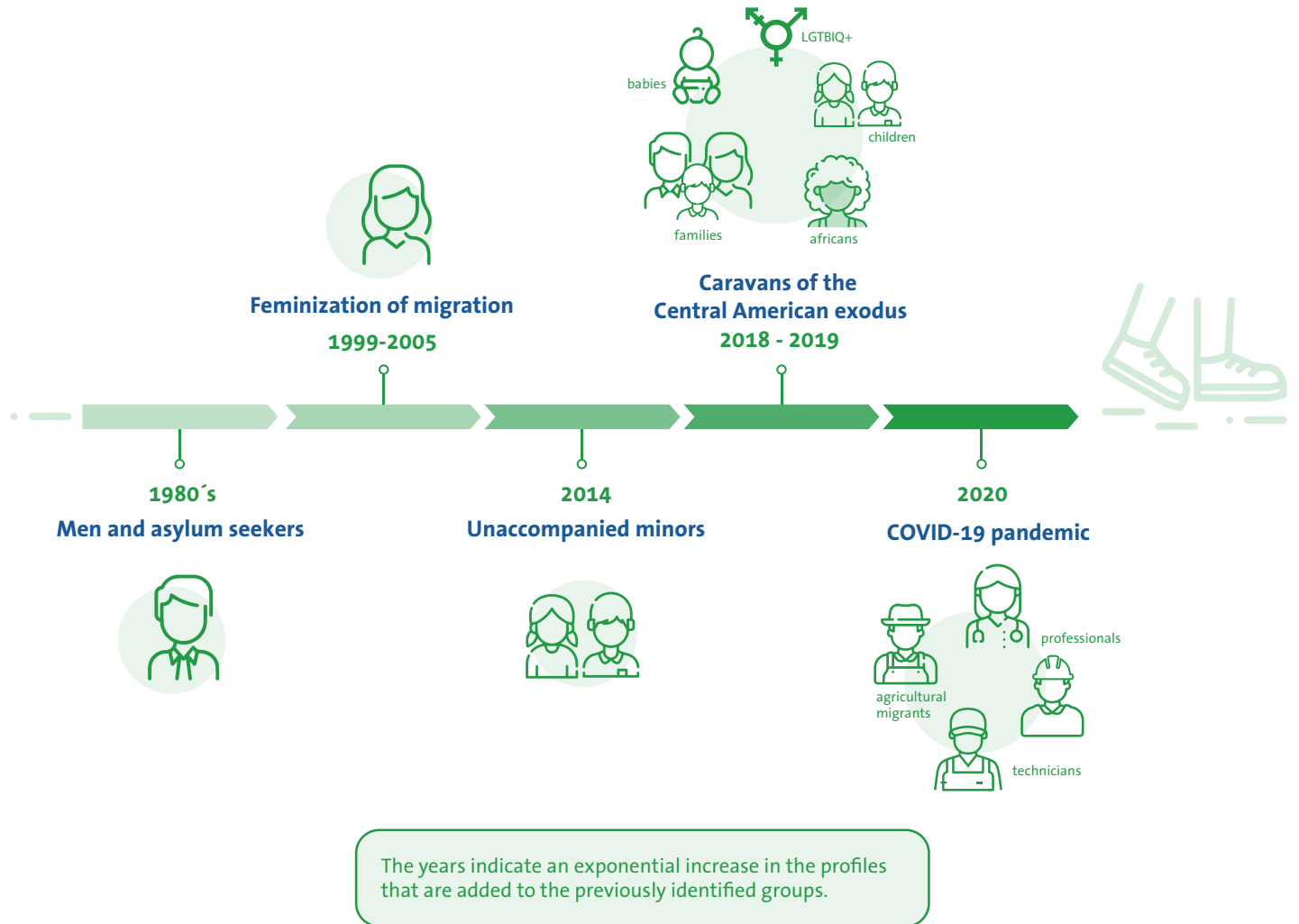
attempt to identify people on the move. Once they arrived at the border they were returned to their countries. Similarly, Mexico installed strong migration control units to send all those not carrying migration permits or the necessary documents back to their countries.

It is important to mention that during the caravan that left Honduras at the end of September 2020, in yet another attempt to reach the United States en masse in the midst of the pandemic, the Guatemalan and Mexican authorities took swift action to stop their progress. In Guatemala, a State of Prevention was called in six departments to prevent the “illegal” entrance of the migrant caravan²² and in Mexico they announced that migrants entering the country without taking the “proper sanitary measures in relation to SARS-CoV-2” would be detained.²³ Both countries applied deterrence measures to prevent this new caravan from progressing. It is estimated that more than 2,000 Hondurans made the decision to return voluntarily, faced with the impossibility of moving through Guatemalan territory.

²² Caravana de Migrantes: más de 2 mil hondureños han retornado a su país, pero decenas siguen su camino hacia EE.UU., Prensa Libre, 3 October 2020, <https://www.prensalibre.com/guatemala/migrantes/caravana-de-migrantes-mas-de-2-mil-hondurenos-han-retornado-a-su-pais-pero-decenas-siguen-su-camino-hacia-ee-uu/>

²³ Advierte INM sanción a personas extranjeras que ingresen al país sin medidas sanitarias derivadas del SARS-CoV-2, El Reflector.News, 1 October 2020, <https://elreflector.news/advierte-inm-sancion-a-personas-extranjeras-que-ingresen-al-pais-sin-medidas-sanitarias-derivadas-del-sars-cov-2/>

Migrant Profile



When Hazel Contreras, coordinator of *Alianza Américas*, a transnational advocacy organization from El Salvador, was consulted about the forms of mobilization, she argued:

“Changes in response to the caravans are primarily related to borders. We saw militarization, and the use of state resources to sabotage the right of these people to migrate. In the United States we saw a whole swathe of restrictions relating to the possibility to enter the country and request asylum. We also saw all the ways they were received, including the “Remain in Mexico” program that made people return to Mexico arbitrarily to wait for their asylum claims to be processed. We saw an increase in the detentions of entire families and this resulted in the separation of these families. Of course, we knew of the Zero Tolerance program in 2018 and 2019, which was fiercely criticized by all human rights organizations, how the United States Government separated families, and the conditions in which they were being held. We saw how they further dehumanized the migration processes in the region, we also saw how it led to the US Asylum Cooperation Agreements with the three countries of origin: Honduras, Guatemala and El Salvador.”²⁴

Caravans were and will continue to be a vehicle by which the most vulnerable people in NCA embark on a migration journey. Clearly, their effectiveness has reduced as transit and destination countries have taken measures to halt their progress. This includes deterrence mechanisms such as appealing to violence or expressions of hate such as xenophobia and aporophobia which have profound long-term psychosocial effects. They also include legal actions, such as prosecution of the promoters or leaders of the caravans, as well as the criminalization of organizations that support migrants. Organizations consulted during this diagnosis have been subjected to such prosecutions.

²⁴ Contreras, H. (2020). Diagnosis of the migration situation in Northern Central America and Mexico. (R. Martínez, Interviewer)



Courtesy of Quixote Center

03

COVID-19 pandemic
and the paradigm of
(im)mobility



The COVID-19 pandemic has also resulted in a profound transformation in human mobility, including both the traditional dimension of migration (movement) as well as related control mechanisms such as migration management policies, asylum systems, and the confinement of populations due to the pandemic, resulting in immobility.²⁵

The World Bank, in its analysis on the impacts of COVID-19 in Guatemala, writes:

“Approximately one million people are expected to fall into poverty, raising the country’s poverty rate by as much as 6 percentage points, depending on the depth and duration of the crisis as well as the speed of the economic recovery.”²⁶

From the “right to migrate” and “regular, orderly and safe migration,” discourse shifted to the hashtag #Stayathome. This message indicated that this was not a voluntary decision, but legitimized and institutionalized as self-isolation that precluded migration.

The order, in theory, applied to everyone, but not everyone could comply. For example, many migrants who were stuck in transit countries faced border closures, and the closure of hostels and/or migrant shelters, many of which were run by the Franciscans. Overnight a context that required a drastic rethinking of human mobility as we had known it emerged, and which brought with it new challenges. As the interview with Dr. Gloria M. Garcia, a researcher from Mexico, reveals:

[...] many operations were performed to contain specifically the population that was moving over land, via road transportation, they stopped them because of their appearance, the way they talked, and they were deported there and then. That is why so many people are stuck at the borders [...] here the issue now isn’t so much people in transit, but people who are stuck at the borders, who just kept running further until the border [...] had overflowed.²⁷

²⁵ Original available at: ECOSUR/FLACSO Guatemala, 2020

²⁶ The World Bank in Guatemala, Accessed on 25 October 2020, <https://www.worldbank.org/en/country/guatemala/overview>

²⁷ García, G. (2020). Diagnosis of the migration situation in Northern Central America and Mexico. (R. Martínez, Interviewer)

The context of the pandemic has underscored already pressing questions related to migrants, such as: What happens to the migrants who no longer have or who do not have a home? What about those who were in the process of requesting asylum or refugee status? Or those who were in transit looking to improve their living conditions? What happens to the stateless? These individuals were unable to choose to stay at home; many of them were fleeing this space called home and others simply no longer have a notion of home at all.²⁸

These are just some of the many questions that are worth answering in the short-term for those who work to provide support to migrants. The semi-structured interviews with key actors and the RFM consulted for this project gave some answers to such questions. However, it is important to analyze the different responses that State authorities had already been incorporating over the last three years, which came in addition to their already established anti-migration policies.

Courtesy of La 72



²⁸ Ibid.

USA anti-migration policies

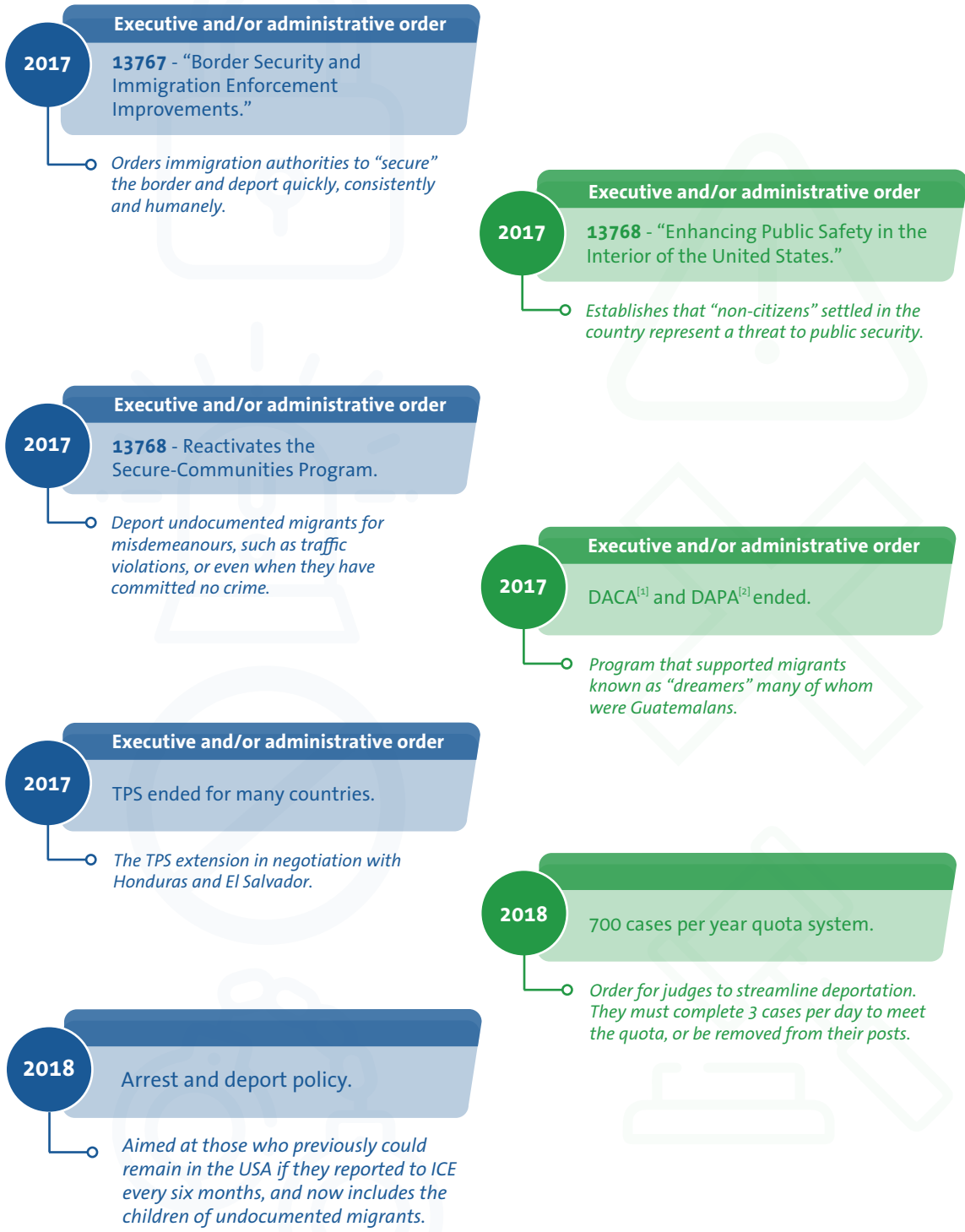


Table 11: Summary of executive and/or administrative orders based on data from Sara Pierce, Migration Policy Institute (2019)

[1] Deferred Action for Children Arrivals

[2] Deferred Action for Parents of Americans and Lawful Permanent Residents

The United States response: anti-migration and security policies

To provide some context, the United States has taken various approaches to migration over the years, depending on the administration at the time. However, since 2014, one of the strategies used has been deterrence through detention.²⁹

During the administration of President Donald Trump, the primary characteristic of migration policies was that of the 'zero tolerance' border policy against so-called 'irregular' migration. This policy allowed for parents crossing the border to be detained, "authorizing the separation of accompanying minors from them. This measure was severely criticized, however, to date many families are still separated." In August 2018, the New York Times noted, "With its zero-tolerance barbarism, the Trump administration managed to do an impressive amount of damage in a very

short time. In the six weeks the policy was in effect, more than 2,600 children were taken from their parents [...] Medical professionals warn of long-term emotional and psychological damage, including anxiety disorders, depression, trust issues, memory problems and developmental delays."³¹

According to the United States Department of Homeland Security, through August of the 2019 fiscal year, 72% of all migrants held at the southwest border were from Guatemala, El Salvador, and Honduras;³² 50,000 Guatemalans were deported from October 2018 - until the start of August 2019.³³

²⁹ Harmful Returns: The Compounded Vulnerabilities of Returned Guatemalans in the Time of Covid-19, Refugees International, June 2020, <https://static1.squarespace.com/static/506c8ea1e4b01d9450dd53f5/t/5ef129079723f5314904dce4/1592862990897/Yael+Rachel+-+Guatemala+-+Jun.+2020.pdf>

³⁰ Ibid.

³¹ The Continuing Tragedy of the Separated Children, New York Times, 30 August 2018, <https://www.nytimes.com/2018/08/30/opinion/family-separation-trump-zero-tolerance.html>

³² The 2019 fiscal year began in October 2018. Fact Sheet: DHS Agreement with Guatemala, Honduras, and El Salvador, U.S. Department of Homeland Security, https://www.dhs.gov/sites/default/files/publications/19_1003_opa_fact-sheet-agreements-northern-central-america-countries.pdf

³³ ICE Air: Shackled deportees, air freshener and cheers. America's one-way trip out. Washington Post, 10 August 2019, https://www.washingtonpost.com/national/ice-air-shackled-deportees-air-freshener-and-cheers-americas-one-way-trip-out/2019/08/10/bc5d2d36-babe-11e9-aeb2-a101a1fb27a7_story.html

The United States government developed an Asylum Cooperation Agreement (ACA) with Guatemala, signed on July 2019, which entered into effect on 15 November 2019.³⁴ Prior to signing the agreement, US President Trump threatened to impose tariffs and other retaliatory measures if Guatemala did not comply.³⁵

The ACA is also known as the “safe third country agreement.” Under the agreement, the United States can deport non-Guatemalan asylum seekers to Guatemala, without allowing them to move forward with their asylum claim in the United States. Various organizations have noted that this policy would cause asylum seekers to completely abandon their request once deported and that Guatemala did not have the capacity to provide the protection that deportees needed.³⁶ Furthermore, immediately prior to the COVID-19 pandemic spreading across the United States, during the period from November 2019 to January 2020, the majority of those deported to Guatemala under the said agreement were women and children originating from El Salvador and Honduras.³⁷ In total, from January to March 2020, around 20,833 individuals were deported from

the United States each month.³⁸ The UN Office of the High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) expressed its concern not only regarding the ACA between the United States and Guatemala, but also those signed with El Salvador and Honduras, underscoring that these agreements conflict with international law.³⁹

On 16 March 2020, three days after the declaration of a national emergency due to COVID-19, deportation of non-Guatemalans to Guatemala under the ACA was suspended during the pandemic.⁴⁰

In the context of the pandemic, on 20 March 2020, the Center for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) issued an order to suspend the entry of individuals “traveling from Canada or Mexico regardless of their country of origin” who would be “introduced into a congregate setting” in a Port of Entry or Border Patrol station due to insufficient or improper documentation.⁴¹ Exceptions on entry could be made, including for humanitarian reasons.⁴² The order justifies said measures for reasons of public health related to the coronavirus.

³⁴ Agreement between the Government of the United States of America and the Government of the Republic of Guatemala on Cooperation Regarding the Examination of Protection Claims, signed on 26 July 2019, <https://www.state.gov/wp-content/uploads/2020/01/19-1115-Migration-and-Refugees-Guatemala-ACA.pdf>

³⁵ Trump threatens Guatemala after it backs away from ‘safe third country’ asylum deal, Washington Post, 23 July 2019, https://www.washingtonpost.com/politics/trump-threatens-guatemala-over-delay-in-safe-third-country-asylum-deal/2019/07/23/cc22417e-ad45-11e9-bc5c-e73b603e7f38_story.html

³⁶ U.S. Abusive Transfers of Asylum Seekers to Guatemala, Refugees International, 19 May 2020, <https://www.refugeesinternational.org/reports/2020/5/18/agreement-denies-hondurans-salvadorans-effective-protection>

³⁷ Women and children make up majority of asylum-seekers sent to Guatemala under Trump deal, CBS News, 4 February 2020, <https://www.cbsnews.com/news/woman-and-children-make-up-majority-of-asylum-seekers-sent-to-guatemala-under-trump-deal/>

³⁸ Exporting Covid-19: ICE Air Conducted Deportation Flights to 11 LAC Countries, CEPR, Flight Data Shows, 27 April 2020, <https://www.cepr.net/exporting-covid-19-ice-air-conducted-deportation-flights-to-11-lac-countries-flight-data-shows/>

³⁹ Statement on new U.S. asylum policy, UNHCR, 19 November 2019, <https://www.unhcr.org/5dd426824?fbclid=IwAR2kbGZrz3E7zCpf9jj2-08GFHfqAlq1xWr6UPFr5jE03Wga7nyYzeABDPM>

⁴⁰ U.S. Abusive Transfers of Asylum Seekers to Guatemala, Refugees International, 19 May 2020, <https://www.refugeesinternational.org/reports/2020/5/18/agreement-denies-hondurans-salvadorans-effective-protection>

⁴¹ Notice of Order Under Sections 362 and 365 of the Public Health Service Act Suspending Introduction of Certain Persons From Countries Where a Communicable Disease Exists, <https://www.govinfo.gov/content/pkg/FR-2020-03-26/pdf/2020-06327.pdf>

⁴² Leaked Border Patrol Memo Tells Agents to Send Migrants Back Immediately — Ignoring Asylum Law, ProPublica, 2 April 2020, <https://www.propublica.org/article/leaked-border-patrol-memo-tells-agents-to-send-migrants-back-immediately-ignoring-asylum-law>



Mexico anti-migration policies

Southern Plan and Southern Border Plan - 2014

Remain in Mexico - 2019

Deployment of the National Guard

Mass arrests of migrants

Attacks and criminalization against human rights defenders

United States authorities issued another memorandum on 10 April 2020, which allowed for the imposition of visa sanctions on countries that refuse to accept or “unreasonably delay” the acceptance of the deportees “who are citizens, subjects, nationals, or residents of that country after having been asked to accept those aliens.”⁴³

These provisions accelerated the return of people on the move to their countries of origin, exposing migrants to increased vulnerability and risk, particularly in the context of a global pandemic. Guarantees of economic, social and political reintegration and compliance with biosecurity measures are real challenges for origin country governments.

As a response, in April 2020, Guatemala also declared that it would no longer accept flights of deportees as numerous deportees had tested positive for the virus upon arrival. The United States agreed to test individuals before putting them on the planes, and in response Guatemala

accepted that flights resume.⁴⁴ Despite the United States’ promise, flights continue to arrive with infected people.⁴⁵

The continued deportation measures have caused great concern, primarily due to the risk of ‘exporting’ COVID-19 to other countries, and even spreading the disease within United States territory given the frequency of internal flights involving migrants. One report indicated that a detainee was transferred nine times within the United States over a 10-day period.⁴⁶

The Immigration and Customs Enforcement Air Operations, known as ICE Air, which is based in Mesa, Arizona, is central to these deportations. It has additional offices in: Miami, Florida; Alexandria, Louisiana; and San Antonio and Brownsville, Texas.⁴⁷ The ICE AIR webpage indicates that they can “conduct removal missions to Central American countries such as Guatemala, El Salvador and Honduras, the Caribbean and South America, and conduct special high-risk

⁴³ Memorandum on Visa Sanctions, U.S. Presidential Memoranda, 10 April 2020.

⁴⁴ Guatemala says it will receive 3 US deportation flights, AP News, 4 May 2020, <https://apnews.com/article/a653b3265c18551e1f7d73ae6a33198f>

⁴⁵ Ibid.

⁴⁶ In a 10-day Span, ICE Flew this Detainee Across the Country- Nine Times, ProPublica, 27 March 2020, <https://www.propublica.org/article/coronavirus-ice-flights-detainee-sirous-asgari>

⁴⁷ ICE Air, <https://www.ice.gov/features/ICE-Air>



Courtesy of La 72

charter missions to Europe, Asia, and Africa or to anywhere in the world.”⁴⁸ It was reported that ICE has contracts with Classic Air Charter (CAC) to deport migrants, valued at \$646,000,000.⁴⁹ In turn, CAC subcontracts with American companies such as Swift Air, World Atlantic Airlines,⁵⁰ and Omni Air.⁵¹

Importantly, the number of documented cases of COVID-19 in ICE detention centers went from

allegedly no confirmed cases in mid-March to “1,145 detainees in 51 facilities” with COVID-19 by May 19.⁵² By August 2020, the number increased to 4,038 cases across 81 facilities.⁵³ There have been reports of mistreatment of deportees on ICE flights, including beating and kicking, and that individuals have been deported even when they have pending legal cases that would have permitted their stay in the United States.⁵⁴

⁴⁸ Ibid.

⁴⁹ Video Explainer on ICE Air Deportation Flights, Center for Human Rights, University of Washington, 4 March 2020, <https://jsis.washington.edu/humanrights/2020/03/04/video-explainer-on-ice-air-deportation-flights/>

⁵⁰ Hidden in Plain Sight: ICE Air and the Machinery of Mass Deportation, Center for Human Rights, University of Washington, 23 April 2019, <https://jsis.washington.edu/humanrights/2019/04/23/ice-air/>

⁵¹ The sole airline willing to operate “high-risk” deportation flights is price-gouging ICE, Quartz, 5 December 2019, <https://qz.com/1761804/sole-airline-willing-to-deport-high-risk-immigrants-is-price-gouging-ice/>

⁵² Immigrant Detention and Covid-19: How a Pandemic Exploited and Spread through the US Immigrant Detention System, Center for Migration Studies, August 2020, p.3, <https://cmsny.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/08/CMS-Detention-COVID-Report-08-12-2020.pdf>

⁵³ Ibid.

⁵⁴ Hidden in Plain Sight: ICE Air and the Machinery of Mass Deportation, Center for Human Rights, University of Washington, 23 April 2019, https://jsis.washington.edu/humanrights/2019/04/23/ice-air/#_ftn1

DHS Document Reveals Allegations of Abuse on ICE Air Deportation Flights, 16 August 2019, <https://jsis.washington.edu/humanrights/2019/08/16/ice-air-deportation-flight-complaints/>

The Mexican response: detentions and militarization of borders

In May 2018 information was released in various media that indicated, “the United States and Mexico governments are in advanced negotiations to establish a mechanism to serve the United States in processing and selecting people who need international protection. In this context, Mexico would assume the role of ‘safe third country.’”⁵⁵ This policy, which uses Mexico as a filter for asylum seekers, was announced on 24 January 2019, just as the new Mexican president Andrés Manuel López Obrador started his term in office. At the same time, the United States started to implement the Migrant Protection Protocols (MPP), also known as the “Remain in Mexico” policy, which permits individuals who entered or were seeking to enter “illegally or without proper documentation” to be returned “for the duration of their immigration proceedings.”⁵⁶ The program indirectly undermines the right to due process for migrants by limiting, among other things, access to a lawyer that represents them before the immigration courts, and ignores

procedure established by the United States Congress for asylum seekers in formal ports of entry. The Special Rapporteur on the human rights of migrants Felipe González Morales also expressed these concerns in 2019.⁵⁷

The Mexican government has systematically implemented significant changes in its migration policies, applying the rules in an increasingly strict manner, “militarizing the southern border with the deployment of the National Guard, issuing regulations that prohibit bus companies from selling tickets to undocumented migrants, and using force to prevent immigrant caravans from entering the country.”⁵⁸ Since 7 June 2019, the Mexican government began the deployment of 6,000 National Guard members to the southern border of Mexico with Guatemala, and the deployment of 15,000 additional members to the border with the United States, as denounced in a statement made by non-governmental organizations that support migrants in Mexico.⁵⁹

⁵⁵ Organizaciones de DH exigen suspender negociaciones con EU para convertir a México en filtro migratorio, 18 May 2018, Red TDT, <https://redtdt.org.mx/?p=10917>

⁵⁶ Migrant Protection Protocols, US Department of Homeland Security, 24 January 2019, <https://www.dhs.gov/news/2019/01/24/migrant-protection-protocols>

⁵⁷ Mandate of the Special Rapporteur on the human rights of migrants, 7 March 2019, Reference: OL USA 4/2019, <https://spcommreports.ohchr.org/TMResultsBase/DownloadPublicCommunicationFile?gld=24381>

⁵⁸ Harmful Returns: The Compounded Vulnerabilities of Returned Guatemalans in the Time of Covid-19, Refugees International, June 2020, <https://static1.squarespace.com/static/506c8ea1e4b01d9450dd53f5/t/5ef129079723f5314904dce4/1592862990897/Yael+Rachel++Guatemala++Jun.+2020.pdf>

⁵⁹ ONGs denuncian actos de la Guardia Nacional en el cumplimiento de operaciones migratorias en México, WOLA, 3 July 2019, <https://www.wola.org/es/2019/07/guardia-nacional-migracion-mexico/>

Northern Central America anti-migration policies

Plan of the Alliance for the Prosperity of the Northern Triangle (2015) *Securitization Pillar*

Asylum Cooperation Agreements (ACA) “Safe third country” 2019

Border security agreements - *Border Patrol* 2019

Ramón Márquez Vega, former coordinator of the *La 72 Hogar Refugio Para Personas Migrantes en México*, stated:

“There have been some very defining moments in the toughening of migration policies in recent years [...] from 2014 to now, [...] there were two moments in which the regional migration policies were toughened, and of course, the first was the implementation of the Fronteras Sur program on 7 July 2014 by President Peña Nieto and the second was the signing of the agreements between the United States and Mexico on June 2019, in which Mexico takes full responsibility for the toughening of its migration policy.”⁶⁰

There is widespread concern among organizations that accompany migrants that the National Institute of Migration (INM) in Mexico violates the human rights of people in transit and asylum seekers, due to the disproportionate use of

force they employ, in coordination with other authorities, during their migration operations conducted in the different municipalities along the North Migration Route. These measures did not stop during the COVID-19 pandemic.

One example is a death that occurred on 31 March 2020 in Tenosique, during the pandemic in Mexico. On this date, a Guatemalan man, who had requested refugee status, died at the Tenosique migrant detention center. The La 72 migrant shelter in their statement about this death blamed the INM and its director Francisco Garduño Yañez for not *“having responded to the root cause of the protests in the Tapachula and Villahermosa migrant detention centers over the previous week, which already foretold a possible tragedy.”*⁶¹ The son of the deceased would later state that *“he would have saved his father from dying, choked by the smoke in the Tenosique migrant detention center, but a security official, presumably a member of the National Guard, wouldn’t allow it.”*⁶² Prior to this, the National Commission for Human Rights had published a press release⁶³ in which it had asked the INM to take urgent measures relating to

⁶⁰ Márquez, R. (2020). Diagnosis of the migration situation in Northern Central America and Mexico. (R. Martínez, Interviewer)

⁶¹ Communication, La72 Hogar- Refugio Para Personas Migrantes, 1 April 2020, <https://la72.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/04/Comunicado-010420.pdf>

⁶² “Hubiera podido salvar a mi papá”, *Elcamino*, 2 April 2020, <https://enelcamino.piedepagina.mx/hubiera-podido-salvar-a-mi-papa-si-me-hubieran-dejado-entrar/?fbclid=IwAR0dkb1EYDCoqyuXR2ccWqk2v8crqIE0Ba40jTKXmm1zm2tjGFL-dqxA6CO>

⁶³ Exige CNDH acciones urgentes para evitar hacinamiento y contagio masivo de coronavirus en personas migrantes alojadas en estaciones del Instituto Nacional de Migración (INM), Comisión Nacional de los Derechos Humanos, 17 March 2020, https://www.cndh.org.mx/sites/default/files/documentos/2020-03/COM_2020_081.pdf

COVID-19 to avoid overcrowding in the migrant detention centers, as well as precautionary measures to protect migrants detained there. If the INM had responded to the calls from civil society,⁶⁴ as well as from the highest Mexican human rights body, to cease migration detentions and to free the people detained, the loss of yet another life could have been avoided.

Following strong pressure from organizations such as Doctors without Borders⁶⁵ and other groups and networks focused on migration in the region⁶⁶ there was a reduction of individuals in Mexican migrant detention centers and a reduction in new migrant detentions. However, these actions by the INM were never taken from a protection or public health perspective, but simply accepted as a way to avoid a bigger problem.

Meanwhile, La 72 continued to document INM practices that violated human rights, such as illegal deportations via El Ceibo, on the border between Tabasco and Guatemala, which violated fundamental principles in international law such as the principle of non-refoulement. The way that INM detains and deprives migrants of their freedom has grave consequences for their physical and mental health. Held in migrant detention centers and temporary shelters under the responsibility of the INM – with no chance of leaving – migrants are extremely vulnerable in the face of the alarming spread of COVID-19. According to one report:

The lack of habitable conditions and COVID-19 contagion prevention exploded into multiple protests, revolts and fires in migration detention centers that risked the lives and health of the people detained there. These events led to the death of Ronaldo Barrientos, in the Tenosique (Tabasco) migrant detention center, in March 2020. The police and military authorities guarding the location failed to provide first aid, and immediate and timely care to protect his health, life and integrity.⁶⁷

Both migrants in transit and those detained are at extreme risk, primarily due to the precarious conditions in migration centers that were widely documented before the health crisis. Many centers are dilapidated and have continued to deteriorate, leaving detainees unable to self-isolate, as recommended by the World Health Organization and by the Mexican State itself within the context of the COVID-19 pandemic.

⁶⁴ Por el cuidado de todas y todos, incluyendo las personas en contexto de movilidad ante la actual crisis humanitaria por el coronavirus COVID-19, 19 March 2020, http://caravanamigrante.iberomexico.org/uploads/monitoreos_pdf/f39f92737f46b7425d3ee7497996678c.pdf

⁶⁵ México: Demandamos el cierre de las estaciones migratorias y el acceso de migrantes a atención médica y protección frente a la COVID 19, Doctors Without Borders, 3 April 2020, https://www.msf.mx/article/mexico-demandamos-el-cierre-de-las-estaciones-migratorias-y-el-acceso-de-migrantes-a?fbclid=IwAR0gk-z9FOjU4GsSqBRpV4_AYMMaUDi461-gPXx4K2CA-LCEsVqMeyJLDJl

⁶⁶ Ante Los Riesgos Por El Covid-19: Exigimos La Libertad Inmediata de Todas Las Personas Migrantes, Refugiadas y Solicitantes de Asilo en Detencion Migratoria, 2 April 2020, http://caravanamigrante.iberomexico.org/uploads/monitoreos_pdf/7f58fb757c7d95e0a396f8649a74b71b.pdf

⁶⁷ Informe Sobre Los Efectos de la Pandemia de Covid-19 en las Personas Migrantes y Refugiadas, 2020 <http://www.cmdpdh.org/publicaciones-pdf/cmdpdh-informe-migracion-y-covid-19.pdf>

3.3

The Honduran and Guatemalan response: between the Asylum Cooperation Agreement and stigmatization

In 2019 the presidents of El Salvador and Honduras signed the Asylum Cooperation Agreements with their counterpart, the United States.⁶⁸ Honduras ratified the agreement on 1 May 2020, but steps leading to its implementation are still underway. Therefore, to date only Guatemala is implementing the agreement.

In the case of Honduras, they would be accepting asylum seekers from Guatemala, El Salvador, Nicaragua and Brazil. It is expected that, as in the case of Guatemala, the IOM would oversee those who want to voluntarily return to their countries of origin, with all the limitations that this process may entail. In the case of Guatemala, “the joint cooperation agreement was made with the USA through the correct implementation plan, which was to be applied to Salvadoran and Honduran nationals.”⁶⁹ The agreement between the United States and Guatemala means it becomes a “third safe country.” According to the statistics provided by the Guatemalan National Migration Institute (IGM), in July 2020, 467 people were recognized as refugees and 733 people requested refugee status in the country. While this is a little more than 1,000 people in total, a growing number of people see Guatemala as place for asylum. As

a result, there are various initiatives underway, including collaboration with the Labor Ministry to facilitate work access or permits to asylum seekers and to link them to specific companies that may promote employment.⁷⁰

According to IGM statistics, 52% of refugees in Guatemala are Salvadoran, 27% Nicaraguan, 10% Honduran and 7% Venezuelan, with the remaining 4% comprised of various nationalities, including Colombian and Mexican. As regards to asylum seekers, the proportions are similar: 26% are Salvadoran, 26% Nicaraguan, 30% Honduran, 8% Venezuelan and 10% other nationalities such as Cuban, Mexican and Colombian.⁷¹

Despite the recent ACA, and the opaqueness with which it was signed by Guatemala and the United States, Guatemala may represent a long-term residency option for migrants of different nationalities who mobilize in search of better conditions than they had in their countries of origin.

The situation of migrants was aggravated during the COVID-19 pandemic. The impacts included the closure of borders, the suspension of flights,

⁶⁸ Hoja Informativa: Acuerdos del DHS con Guatemala, Honduras y El Salvador, Departamento de Seguridad Nacional de EE.UU., https://www.dhs.gov/sites/default/files/publications/19_1007_fact-sheet-spanish-agreements-w-northern-region-central-am-countries.pdf

⁶⁹ “¿Dónde estamos?” solicitantes de asilo son enviados a Guatemala sin que lo sepan, Prensa Libre 13 January 2020, <https://www.prensalibre.com/guatemala/migrantes/donde-estamos-solicitantes-de-asilo-son-enviados-a-guatemala-sin-que-lo-sepan/>

⁷⁰ Cenalmor, R. (2020). Diagnosis of the migration situation in Northern Central America and Mexico. (R. Martínez, Interviewer)

⁷¹ Ibid. View also statistics for 2018: “ACNUR en Guatemala”, <https://www.acnur.org/5cacfd7a4.pdf>

including deportation flights, and other measures implemented by the Guatemalan government to curb the spread of the coronavirus. However, deportations were only suspended for two days, after which the Ministry of Foreign Affairs announced that deportations would restart and indicated that deportees would be moved to their place of origin to undergo home quarantine as a health precaution measure. At the same time, it was reported that the United States Border Patrol and ICE would implement additional health checks before embarking deportees.

However, on 14 April 2020, the Health Minister, Hugo Monroy, made a statement to the press in which he confirmed that 50-75% of the 41 people who arrived in Guatemala in March tested positive for the illness.⁷² This statement was backtracked the following day and President Giammattei assured the public that they were coordinating with the respective authorities in the United States to guarantee early detection and to avoid infected deportees from travelling to Guatemala. However, as mentioned previously, these checks never occurred.

Combined with the deportations, on 21 March 2020, the Guatemalan government issued its first curfew from 16:00 to 04:00 and suspended all non-essential activities, which basically brought the country to a complete standstill. As a result of this decision, migrant shelters had to suspend their activities and were forced to close.⁷³ Other organizations and accompaniment entities

located in the vicinity of the Guatemalan Air Forces headquarters, also ceased operations, and deported migrants faced a gradual increase in stigmatization and violence for being considered carriers of the virus. On 15 April 2020, during the national broadcast, President Giammattei reported that five Community Development Councils (COCODES)⁷⁴ in the city of Quetzaltenango tried to set on fire migrants who were deported through the Mexico southern border and who were instructed to quarantine in the city.⁷⁵ Days prior to this, images circulated in which community authorities had placed messages at the entrances of their communities that restricted access to deported migrants.

In one case, a deported migrant who had completed their quarantine was later accused of carrying the coronavirus and attacked by 500 locals from his place of origin.⁷⁶ These and other stories of different forms of discrimination, stigmatization and violence against deported migrants were shared around the globe. The rejection that deportees have experienced in their communities has been reinforced by the country's authorities, which often stigmatize the returnees. In an interview, the president referred to the "damned flight"⁷⁷ originating from Arizona, United States, which carried a high number of deported migrants infected with COVID-19. This kind of discourse has served to reinforce the stigmatization of returned migrants.

⁷² Ministro de Salud aseguró que retorno de migrantes provocó la mitad de casos de Covid-19, Publinews, 14 April 2020, <https://www.publinews.gt/noticias/2020/04/14/retorno-de-migrantes-con-covid-19.html>

⁷³ It should be mentioned that similar measures were imposed in Mexico, and migrant shelters had to close as a result of municipal decisions. However, in some States in Mexico they were allowed to continue.

⁷⁴ Community Development Councils have been set up in Guatemala as representative bodies for community participation in local governance.

⁷⁵ VIDEO. Giammattei aseguró que cinco cocodes "querían ir a quemar" a retornados, Publinews, 15 April 2020, <https://www.publinews.gt/noticias/2020/04/15/giammattei-cocodes-quemar-retornados-quetzaltenango.html>

⁷⁶ Pobladores atacan a deportado que regresó a su casa en Sololá, Soy502, 19 April 2020, <https://www.soy502.com/articulo/pobladores-atacan-deportado-regreso-casa-solola-101025>

⁷⁷ Presidente llama "vuelo maldito" a uno que vino de Arizona con retornados guatemaltecos, Emisoras Unidas, 27 April 2020, <https://emisorasunidas.com/2020/04/27/presidente-vuelo-maldito-arizona-migrantes-coronavirus/>

Despite the fact that civil society organizations, academia, migrant associations and indigenous communities have all taken action to counteract the constant expressions of discrimination against deportees, by means of awareness

campaigns on the radio, virtual chats, urgent actions, statements, and other efforts, deported migrants continue to be discriminated against and stigmatized.

Courtesy of Red Franciscana para Migrantes





Courtesy of Jose Maria Cárdenas

04

Challenges to accompanying migrants: alternative routes and human rights violations



Migration flows are mixed and comprise people in transit, including asylum seekers, refugees, and migrants, all of whom are exposed to the dangers presented by these new routes, which infringe on their rights; some have even been victims of human trafficking. According to the Central American Council of Human Rights Ombudsmen (CCPDH), Hondurans, Salvadorans, Guatemalans, Venezuelans, and Nicaraguans are the most common nationalities in this flow. Indeed, 91.6% of people are originally from El Salvador, Honduras, and Guatemala. On the north route, Hondurans are the primary group seeking asylum, followed by Salvadorans. Combined, the two countries make up 80% of these requests.⁷⁸

As part of this diagnosis of the migration situation in NCA and Mexico, various key actors were consulted in relation to the current situation of migration in Honduras, Guatemala, Mexico, El Salvador, and the United States. We considered the situation prior to the COVID-19 pandemic and the changes that arose from that, as well as changes expected in the future. The intention was to determine the specific particularities of different migrant groups, and principally to identify new migration dynamics that would open the way to what we call “alternative routes.” Our findings are presented below.

Courtesy of Red Franciscana para Migrantes



⁷⁸ Informe Final de las Rutas Migratorias Norte y Sur, January 2019, CNDH México. p. 34, <https://www.refworld.org/es/pdfid/5cdc69d24>.

Alternative routes

According to Amnesty International, there are two traditional routes. The first is the Pacific Ocean route, and the second is the so-called Gulf of Mexico route. The Pacific Ocean route passes through Puebla and Tlaxcala. Most undocumented migrants start in Tapachula, Chiapas; they continue through Arriaga and Ixtepec in Oaxaca, then go through Puebla. From Puebla state, some head towards the Gulf of Mexico but others go to Lecherías or Mexico City.

In the case of the Gulf route, the majority exit in Tenosique in Tabasco and continue to Veracruz; some get to Puebla, but others follow the path that skirts the Gulf of Mexico.

These two main routes can be subdivided into four routes that undocumented migrants follow in their journey towards the United States: those that lead to Tijuana and Nogales, those that arrive in Ciudad Juárez; and the Nuevo Laredo and the Gulf routes that end in Matamoros. Amnesty International Mexico highlights that the migration routes split into four from the middle of Mexican territory.

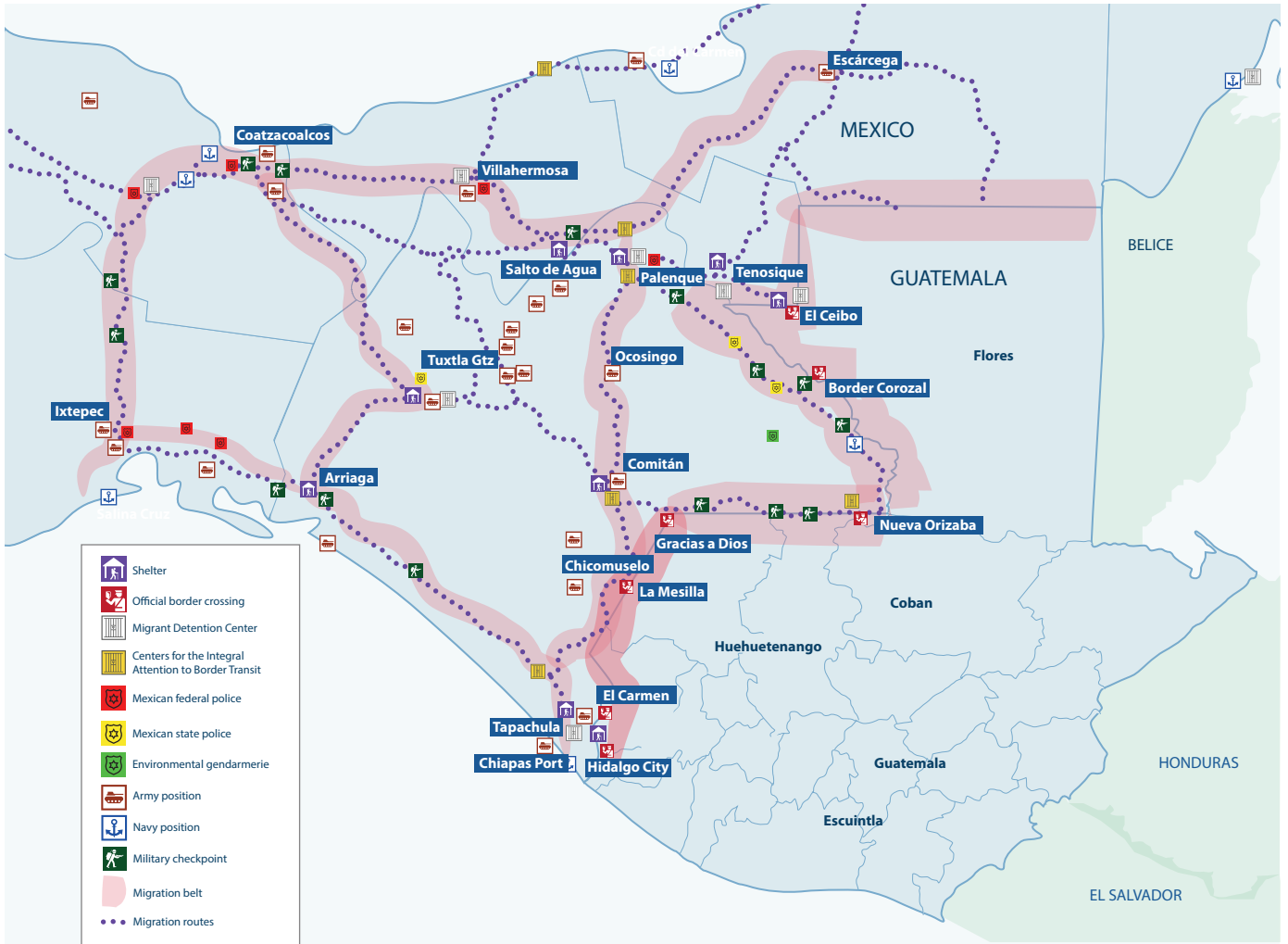
UNHCR had also identified two migration routes with some variations to those described above. The first, called the “North Route,” runs through Belize (state of Belmopán), Guatemala (Petén: Melchor de Mencos border, Las Flores, La Técnica border, Bethel), and Mexico (Corozal border, state of Tabasco: Tenosique and Villahermosa, state of Chiapas: Palenque, state of Veracruz: Acayucan and Coatzacoalcos). The second, called the “South Route” goes through Costa Rica (La Cruz – San José – Paso Canoas) and Panama (Chiriquí province and Panama capital).⁷⁹

According to Abuelafia “three of every five migrants arrive in the United States by land and/or crossing a river, and a little more than a quarter arrive by plane;”⁸⁰ the majority of them hired coyote services and in many cases the family paid the costs of the individual.

⁷⁹ Ibid.

⁸⁰ Original available at: Abuelafia, E. D.-A. (2019). *Tras el paso de los migrantes, Perspectivas y experiencias de la migración de El Salvador, Guatemala y Honduras en Estados Unidos*. El Salvador: IADB-USAID.

New Routes



Information taken from a map prepared by geocomunes.org and the Cross-Border Coordination Board for Migrations and Gender

The results of the Northern Triangle Migrants Survey reflect that:

29% of migrants entered the United States by plane, while 60% crossed the border by land and/or crossing a river. However, there are differences according to country. Salvadorans report having entered the country by plane, while a greater proportion of Hondurans and Guatemalans entered by land or river. This result explains in part why a greater proportion of Salvadoran migrants entered on a tourist visa (16%) or with legal residence (8%) in comparison to the other two countries.⁸¹

In relation to plane journeys, which is sometimes referred to as a form of VIP migrant smuggling, a member of RFM of Honduras commented:

[[...] some migrants] travel by plane to the United States and land there but they don't go through migration, in the process of going through migration there is always a door that leads out and they go out there and travel by plane, I don't know how much it costs to do that, to have such a level of organization a lot of important people must be involved.⁸²

People in transit face a hostile human rights situation and constant discrimination during their passage through Belize, Guatemala, and Mexico. They are subject to extortion, bribes, physical and verbal attacks, threats, intimidation, harassment and violence at the hands of some municipal, state and federal authorities. Most cases are associated with abuses by the National Police and immigration authorities, as well as harassment by criminal gangs and drug trafficking cartels.⁸³ Related to this, Dr. Gloria Marvic, a Mexican researcher who conducted a study on the San Juan Diego Migrant Shelter, explains:

"one of the overriding comments from the testimonies was that they would say, 'it is as if we had no rights, as if we weren't human, as if this act of crossing Mexico always existed, constantly denying us our rights'. So, this risky situation, of potentially being robbed, trafficked, kidnapped or afterwards even sold, submitted to forced working conditions or slavery, well this is denying them their existence and rights as humans."⁸⁴

⁸¹. Ibid.

⁸². RFM-Honduras. (2020). Diagnosis of the migration situation in Northern Central America and Mexico. (R. Martínez, Interviewer)

⁸³. Informe Final de las Rutas Migratorias Norte y Sur,, January 2019, CNDH México. p. 34, <https://www.refworld.org/es/pdfid/5cdc69d24.pdf>

⁸⁴. García, G. (2020). Diagnosis of the migration situation in Northern Central America and Mexico. (R. Martínez, Interviewer)

In regards to routes over land, when consulting with Karla Patricia, the coordinator of the *Equipo de Reflexión, Investigación y Comunicación* (ERIC) in Honduras, based in Yoro, Honduras, she stated:

[...] the traditional route has been the western one, because transportation was easier. People would meet with so-called coyotes or without them at the San Pedro Sula bus terminal and from there they would get a direct bus to the western border in Agua Caliente. From there the blind spots on the border are already well-known, people could enter Guatemala more easily. Being part of a network, these crossing points had already been identified throughout Central America, even to get to Mexico. These are the three normal routes that were known for migrant transit journeys to Mexico. When the caravans started, groups tried to leave via Corinto because in Corinto, the closest hostel is in Izabal, which is in Entre Ríos, closer to Honduras than to Guatemala. However, from there to Guatemala City there are no hostels, the existence of which was one of the characteristics of the routes people would take when migrating, in order to have this sort of support. However, this was new with the caravans. We don't know if migrants didn't know or if they thought it was closer.⁸⁵

And members of the RFM Guatemala argued that:

[...] recently we have seen that migrants now leave Honduras through Corinto, but instead of heading to Guatemala City, they go directly to the area of Cobán or Izabal, more than anything they leave on the Petén side.⁸⁶

Members of the RFM Honduras also talked about the subject of caravans and mentioned that:

"El Salvador does not form part of the new routes as such, but in any case, some new paths and villages around Santa Rosa that adjoin with Quiriguá in Guatemala could be identified as new alternatives."⁸⁷

Francisco Estrada, one of the interviewees for this diagnosis, describes the border bridge Rodolfo Robles as a new route, where the Mexican authorities set up a checkpoint. This checkpoint is placed precisely on the "Los Limones" crossroads, in the municipality of La Libertad, Mexico, and is one of the areas in which undocumented migration continues and is on the rise.⁸⁸

⁸⁵ Rivas, K. (2020). Diagnosis of the migration situation in Northern Central America and Mexico. (R. Martínez, Interviewer)

⁸⁶ RFM-Guatemala. (2020). Diagnosis of the migration situation in Northern Central America and Mexico. (R. Martínez, Interviewer)

⁸⁷ RFM-Honduras (2020). Diagnosis of the migration situation in Northern Central America and Mexico. (R. Martínez, Interviewer)

⁸⁸ Original available at: Estrada, F. (2019). Centroamericanos llegan a México por nuevas rutas. Forbes, <https://www.forbes.com.mx/centroamericanos-llegan-a-mexico-por-nuevas-rutas/>.

The routes traditionally followed the train lines. This has changed over time as the *Tren Maya* project - aiming to connect different cities from southern Mexico - has progressed, which has made some of the traditional migrant routes unviable. RFM Mexico members say the following on the matter:

[...] this change increases the time they used to take, and this makes the path much more difficult, and it exposes them to much greater risk because, firstly you have to walk much further, we have migrants arrive here who have been walking for two weeks, but apart from that, the criminal groups that attack them keep increasing, they profit from them, you know? So, they won't stop migration, with or without the train, migration will continue, but obviously it is much more difficult for them, the risk is much greater, with many difficulties.⁸⁹

The train known as *La Bestia* has stopped operating along various routes, according to information from Fonatur, in order to repair existing lines to open the way for the *Tren Maya*. The last day it operated in the south of Mexico was 3 August 2020. The *Tren Maya* has been and will continue to change the routes they follow.

Currently, migrants walk through Guatemala, until they arrive at the border known as El Ceibo. They then walk to Tenosique, continue on to Palenque, and finally from Palenque to Salta de Agua.⁹⁰

Although there are not per se new migration routes in Mexico, there are more obstacles that migrants face in their journey to the United States. For these reasons, migrants have developed new strategies to evade checkpoints, such as choosing longer and more dangerous routes or skirting traditional routes.

⁸⁹. RFM-México (2020). Diagnosis of the migration situation in Northern Central America and Mexico. (R. Martínez, Interviewer)

⁹⁰. Ibid.

4.2

Challenges to care: mass caravans and trickle migration

At a regional level, the Americas have been presented with new human mobility dynamics as a result of multiple factors. In Mexico and Central America forced displacement as a result of violence and insecurity, principally caused by the actions of mara gangs or groups and organized crime, are recorded. As mentioned previously, caravans are extraordinary migratory flows in search of international protection or an improvement in their quality of life.⁹¹

Members of the RFM Honduras also talked about the subject of caravans and mentioned that:

“these revealed the poverty that existed in the country. No one wants to go and leave their children, leave their husband, their wife, their family. No one wants to leave, but this laid bare the levels of corruption, the real economic situation that the poorest in the cities are facing, cities are where the atrocious levels of poverty are most apparent, revealing how the neoliberal model fails to provide a solution to the economic crisis.”⁹²

And members of the RFM Guatemala argued that:

“recently we have seen how migrants have changed not only their routes, but also the ways they meet. Now they don’t come together in large groups, but leave in a more isolated and individual way, many in groups of 5 to 10 people maximum.”⁹³

Gloria Marvic, who conducted her doctoral research near to the San Juan Diego Migrant Shelter, located in Cerrada de la Cruz, in the Chilpán neighborhood, Lechería, México, tells us that:

“one strategy that migrants used for many years was to atomize, by which I mean, go in groups, but small groups, because it is safer for them to blend into the population a bit. Many even said that their strategies included bringing their best clothes so they could blend in, so they wouldn’t stick out so much and weren’t detained so easily.

⁹¹ Informe Final de las Rutas Migratorias Norte y Sur,, January 2019, CNDH México. p. 34, <https://www.refworld.org/es/pdfid/5cdc69d24.pdf>

⁹² RFM-Honduras (2020). Diagnosis of the migration situation in Northern Central America and Mexico. (R. Martínez, Interviewer)

⁹³ RFM-Guatemala. Diagnosis of the migration situation in Northern Central America and Mexico. (R. Martínez, Interviewer)

In regards to moving in caravans, migrants say that it is like a double-edged sword because at the moment you make yourself visible to the world it can instigate this response from society to say, “look at all these people who are seeking refuge, they are seeking asylum, looking for work, better working conditions, fleeing poverty, violence,” but at the same time generate this prejudice of saying look we are here, we are all together, so it is an easy way to attack migrants in a targeted way. They explain that this was what happened with the operations, as some of those conducted at the borders attacked in a blanket way, the same tactics as used in demonstrations, including many repression strategies, that is, strategies traditionally used in demonstrations were applied at the border, although nothing had happened.”⁹⁴

As mentioned before, these caravans are relatively safe spaces for migrants. The coordinator of the non-governmental organization, Mesa Nacional para las Migraciones en Guatemala (MENAMIG), Julia Gonzáles Veras, explained:

“in regards to mobilization, the most relevant change observed is that of caravans, because something that at one time was known as “irregular, trickle migration,” has changed into exodus or caravans, which are people in groups that are visible, and their objective is not to pass by unnoticed, but they want the populations themselves to know, this gives them strength, being grouped together protects them from sectors of organized crime, to have support against violence and insecurity are what drives those in transit to move in caravans.”⁹⁵

She adds:

“this does not mean that this other trickle migration has stopped, migration has actually increased considerably. It is not that there has been a switch from trickle migration to mass migration, the two forms have combined together and we can see this sometimes in Guatemala, on the northern border of Guatemala or on the northern border of Mexico where people who were stuck having tried it on their own, then they join these caravans because this does give them some sort of guarantee and security.”⁹⁶

⁹⁴ García, G. (2020). Diagnosis of the migration situation in Northern Central America and Mexico. (R. Martínez, Interviewer)

⁹⁵ Gonzáles, J. (2020). Diagnosis of the migration situation in Northern Central America and Mexico. (R. Martínez, Interviewer)

⁹⁶ Ibid.

Along the same lines, the members of the RFM of El Salvador mentioned:

“from the beginning of these new mobilization dynamics, there were a lot of people that came to the shelter, to the point that it was overcrowded because it wasn’t possible to take in so many people. The situation was out of control because we had the duty to find them food. This serves to highlight that it has become a very complicated situation.”⁹⁷

We increasingly see migrants with mid-level and even university level education. The migrant shelters in Mexico report that, in the middle of the pandemic, the profile of migrants changed to migrants with higher levels of schooling and better economic status. However, aporophobia towards migrants has worsened, through expressions of xenophobia, racism, and discrimination under the guise of nationalism.

Despite having seen that mass mobilization is a safe way of migrating, members of the RFM Honduras expressed the following in relation to the infiltration of coyote smuggling networks into the caravans:

[...] the normal caravans exist, that is where people get together and walk, but there are also the caravans organized by the coyotes. When the coyotes organize a caravan, they won’t charge the usual \$11,000 USD per individual, they charge \$2,000 USD. Within the caravan there are multiple coyotes, not just one, they each take their own groups. These people who paid, are taken by the coyotes to the shelter, where they are given a bed, food and a shower, but people have paid for this, they paid the coyote for this and the shelter is giving this all away for free. When migrants go in smaller groups from Honduras, the \$11,000 dollars are paid by those living in the United States or who earn in USD.⁹⁸

The comment above not only shows how coyote smuggling networks have used the new dynamics to benefit from the situation, but also that they have been capable of infiltrating them to create new ways of developing trafficking networks and for their own profit.

⁹⁷ RFM-El Salvador. (2020). Diagnosis of the migration situation in Northern Central America and Mexico. (R. Martínez, Interviewer)

⁹⁸ Espinal, T. (2020). Diagnosis of the migration situation in Northern Central America and Mexico. (R. Martínez, Interviewer).

Harassment and criminalization of human rights defenders and migrant shelters

Framed within the broader context of stricter migration policies, a new period began which saw an increase in criminalization of not only migration and migrants, but also of the work of people who defend their rights. The increase coincides with the Central American exodus caravans and large migratory flows, political transitions in Mexico and the United States, and strong pressure from the Trump administration to halt migration. This situation has been particularly pronounced in Mexico, and in some cases, attacks have been made against RFM members. La 72 migrant shelter has documented multiple threats on many occasions.

In their “Statement on the VIII Anniversary of the massacre of the 72 migrants”⁹⁹ from 23 August 2018, La 72 anticipated the complex situation that would be experienced in the following months and asked the Mexican State to “cease its persecution and harassment of people and organizations who take in, protect and defend migrants. There are many people who have been victim to intimidation and repression at the hands of not only organized crime but also the State itself, using the criminal system, abuse of power or other mechanisms within its reach to intimidate and/or stop their work.”

In 2019, faced with increased insecurity of migrants and the local populations along the migration route that leads to Tabasco, the Mexican national network for civil human rights bodies “Todos los Derechos para Todas y Todos” (Red TDT)¹⁰⁰ convened a Civil Observation Mission with the purpose of documenting the grave security crisis that had already been denounced by La 72 on numerous occasions. In their preliminary conclusions, the RED TdT Civil Observation Mission predicted the actions the Mexican state would put into practice against La 72 in the coming months:

“in periods following moments of visibility such as this Observation Mission, human rights defenders of La 72 have been subjected to a climate of persecution and criminalization. For this reason, we hold the State government to account for any attack on or obstacle to their work in the defense of human rights.”¹⁰¹

⁹⁹ Comunicado VIII Aniversario de la Masacre de las y los 72 Migrantes, La 72 Hogar – Refugio para Personas Migrantes, 25 August 2018, <https://la72.org/comunicado-viii-aniversario-de-la-masacre-de-las-y-los-72-migrantes/>

¹⁰⁰ Red TDT anuncia Misión Civil de Observación a Tenosique, Tabasco, por grave crisis de inseguridad, Red TDT, 12 March 2019, <https://redtdt.org.mx/red-tdt-anuncia-mision-civil-de-observacion-a-tenosique-tabasco-por-grave-crisis-de-inseguridad/>

¹⁰¹ Ausencia del Estado, principal causante de la crisis de inseguridad en Tenosique: Misión Civil de Observación Red TDT, Red TDT, 17 March 2019, <https://redtdt.org.mx/?p=13078>

Tensions ran high in June and July 2019, with the La 72 team being harassed, defamed and threatened on multiple occasions, all related to their work defending the human rights of migrants within the context of the fortification and militarization of the Tabasco border. The sisters from the Franciscan Missionaries of Mary on the southern border were similarly harassed and threatened, including via intimidation and intrusion into the hostel by police officers and the State Prosecutor for Migration himself between 21 June and 3 July 2019.

Additionally, a defamation and smear campaign was launched against La 72 by the state government in Tabasco. The most direct attack was on 18 June 2019 with the publication of a statement by the Tabasco state Economic and Property Intelligence Unit (UIPE) which said that

“certain migrant civil society organizations are a facade for money laundering and corruption [...] be alert to the financial and economic transactions undertaken in the state of Tabasco that may be linked to human trafficking [...] and contribute to the detection of money laundering in migrant-specific hostels on Tabasco soil.”¹⁰²

As expressed by the organization RED TdT in a statement two days later, “it is unacceptable that, in the context of a policy for migration control and deterrence, and after the public attacks made by President Andrés Manuel López Obrador about alleged bad management of money in hostels, state public bodies in Tabasco seek to criminalize and vilify La 72.”¹⁰³

The Vice-Secretariat for Border, Migration and Human Rights Matters and the Government Secretariat of the State of Tabasco made statements that criminalized migrants.¹⁰⁴ The Tabasco State Ministry of the Interior also stated,

“unfortunately there are NGOs that take advantage of the situation, they artificially increase the indices of crime in Tenosique to make it look like a tinderbox, when in reality it is a relatively peaceful municipality.”¹⁰⁵

¹⁰². UIPE Twitter, 18 June 2019, <https://twitter.com/UIPETabasco/status/1141076100589731840>

¹⁰³. Agresiones contra La 72, muestra de la actual política represiva en materia migratoria, Red TDT, 20 June 2019, <https://redtdt.org.mx/?p=13588>

¹⁰⁴. On 23 May 2019, José Ramiro López Obrador, then vice-secretary of border matters in the state, accused migrants of presenting false accusations to the Prosecution Office to achieve migrant regularization for humanitarian purposes. See: Migrantes acusan ser víctimas de algún delito para obtener visa temporal: Subsecretario, XEVT, 23 May 2019, <https://www.xevt.com/verpagina.php?id=70895>

¹⁰⁵. Alerta SEGOTAB que migrantes presentan denuncias falsas, para poder quedarse en Tabasco, XEVT, 26 June 2019, <https://www.xevt.com/verpagina.php?id=72981>

On 20 June 2019, La 72 decided to publish a statement which attested to varied examples of harassment as described above and denounced the “military closure of the southern border of Tabasco” and massive migration detention and deportation operations that violate human rights and separate families.¹⁰⁶ However, the harassment continued. On 14 November 2019, eleven members of the National Guard searched various migrants on the path leaving La 72, and threatened to hand them over to the authorities, in violation of the National Migration Law.¹⁰⁷ After having been confronted and questioned by the La 72 team, the commander leading the operation apologized for the intervention, arguing that they were only performing safety checks in the area.

The acts described above do not represent isolated incidents; they came within an intense period of harassment, defamations, and attacks against hostels, migrant care centers, and human rights defenders. This is all well-documented in “Defenders beyond borders”¹⁰⁸ by Frontline Defenders, RED TdT, and the Iberoamericana University Migration Matters Program.

¹⁰⁶. Comunicado 200619 | Blindaje de la frontera tabasqueña, La72, 20 June 2019, <https://la72.org/comunicado-200619-blindaje-de-la-frontera-tabasquena/>

¹⁰⁷. It is worth mentioning that, according to Mexican legislation, only the Mexican National Migration Institute is competent to carry out such actions. Article 76 of the Federal Migration Law actually indicates that “migration check visits cannot be made in places where migrants are housed by civil society organizations or people who provide humanitarian support or protection to migrants.” See: Nueva Ley publicada en el Diario Oficial de la Federación el 25 de mayo de 2011, Última Reforma DOF 13-04-2020, http://www.diputados.gob.mx/LeyesBiblio/pdf/LMigra_130420.pdf

¹⁰⁸. https://www.frontlinedefenders.org/sites/default/files/frontline_defenders_mexico_english_v2.pdf

4.4

Other migration dynamics: new profiles and massive human rights violations

Criminal groups and authorities have caused serious protection risks, human rights violations, and abuse of migrants and/or people needing protection during transit. Among the risks identified are: extortion, threats, and undermining the right to personal integrity. Serious human rights violations have also been committed against asylum seekers and migrants in transit such as kidnappings, robberies, muggings, physical, psychological, and sexual attacks, and even murders by the authorities and criminal groups, including the mara and other gangs and drug trafficking cartels.

Members of RFM Mexico that are at the Digna border migrant shelter, located in the city of Piedras Negras, in the state of Coahila, Mexico, stated:

“even if there are various routes, depending on where people are going [...] there are places where it is more difficult for migrants as a result of crime, attacks, and kidnapping.”¹⁰⁹

Hazel Contreras, coordinator of Alianza Américas, El Salvador, adds:

“there is a total ignorance of the United States system of migration and of national human rights protection mechanisms. Therefore, when migrants come to our organization they quickly identify as migrants, unaware of their rights as migrants. So, when they arrive in the United States where they are received by our member organizations, they have no idea of how many rights violations they have suffered. They are usually families, many of which are families who didn't migrate recently, but a few years prior, and who now have US children, the risk of deportation is much more serious because the reasons the United States government employ to expel people of Latin American origin continues to grow.”¹¹⁰

¹⁰⁹. RFM-Mexico. (2020). Diagnosis of the migration situation in Northern Central America and Mexico. (R. Martínez, Interviewer)

¹¹⁰. Contreras, H. (2020). Diagnosis of the migration situation in Northern Central America and Mexico. (R. Martínez, Interviewer)

Contreras also said that her organization seeks to find ways to provide more personalized advice, including for agricultural workers. She noted that agricultural workers never stopped harvesting their crops during the pandemic and many have been exposed to coronavirus. These workers continue to be exploited and often live in inhumane conditions. Accordingly, Alianza Américas raises awareness about human rights within the agricultural laborer community and other sectors. While providing an overview of human rights, the organization may also work on the status of undocumented individuals.¹¹¹

Vinicio Sandoval, director of the El Salvador Monitoring Group, a non-governmental organization that supports migrants, says that the majority are people originating from El Salvador who used to work in the informal sector or other sectors of the labor market that are recognized as precarious (agriculture, domestic workers, construction, private security). He explained, “as regards to human rights, a few years ago migrants in general were young, but now because of the internal displacement spurred by violence, not only does the young person leave home, but the whole family leaves, because they are at risk.” He added, “the strengthening of the United States border instigated the opening of new routes [as mentioned previously], which were not very common before, some which have very dangerous drug trafficking links, which are very risky due to organized crime and human trafficking.”¹¹²

In relation to supporting awareness on the human rights of migrants, the RFM El Salvador members add:

“we are involved with the Archbishop of San Salvador human rights legal guardianship group and the Red Cross. There, we have received some workshops within the parish, to learn and see how to care for someone who has suffered or been a victim of human trafficking. In addition to the workshops, here at the parish, we have had two families who have gone through these difficult experiences, it hasn’t been easy as we are not used to this and it has been difficult to break through.”¹¹³

The role of coyote migrant smuggling networks from the country of origin and during transit was highlighted during the interviews. In some cases, migrants, who have been part of the circular migration, arrive at the southern border of the United States by their own means. However, “in 27% of cases they only hire them (smugglers) for their passage between Mexico and the United States. Migrants’ success in entering the United States depends in part on hiring these services,” according to data from the 2018 Survey on Migration on the Southern Border of Mexico.¹¹⁴

¹¹¹. Ibid.

¹¹². Sandoval, V. (2020). Diagnosis of the migration situation in Northern Central America and Mexico. (R. Martínez, Interviewer)

¹¹³. RFM-El Salvador (2020). Diagnosis of the migration situation in Northern Central America and Mexico. (R. Martínez, Interviewer)

¹¹⁴. Original available at: Abuelafia, E. D.-A. (2019). *Tras el paso de los migrantes, Perspectivas y experiencias de la migración de El Salvador, Guatemala y Honduras en Estados Unidos*. El Salvador: IADB-USAID.

Finally, in regards of new profiles, it is equally timely to raise awareness on the presence of migrants, primarily of African origin but also from other places. Even though their transit is increasingly visible, including during the COVID-19 pandemic, there are no measures which attend to this flow of migrants, who because of their profile, characteristics, and language, need specialized attention.

The media primarily show their presence in NCA, and it has been possible to identify family groups and other groups of up to 200 people. According to the digital magazine *Nómada*:

“Between January 2016 and March 2017, Guatemalan authorities documented the passage of 3,680 African migrants of 22 nationalities. 10 registered migrants recorded each day. 68% of these come from the Congo and the rest from Eritrea, Guinea, Somalia, Ghana and from other 17 countries who suffer internal conflicts and high levels of poverty.”¹¹⁵

The members of RFM Guatemala describe at least four African family groups originating from the Democratic Republic of the Congo who they have sheltered, having arrived from the border of Esquipulas to the capital city. The RFM also indicated that they are vulnerable due to not knowing the language and the routes to Mexico and the United States.

¹¹⁵. África en Guatemala: los migrantes invisibles, *Nómada* 7 May 2020, <https://nomada.gt/cotidianidad/africa-en-guatemala-los-migrantes-invisibles/>



Courtesy of La 72

05

Conclusions



This diagnosis has identified that migrants are heterogeneous in their age, sex, sexual orientation, ethnic grouping, and economic condition. The national and sub-regional contexts are an intrinsic part of this modality, but often makes invisible the structural causes that first induce migration.

Over the last 15 years, migration processes in Northern Central America have been described in detail in reports, studies and investigations by international institutions, the academic sector, and non-governmental organizations. They have started to report on the multiple influencing factors and their direct links to the structural problems that date back to the 1980s and that persist still today.

As a product of migration policies and Asylum Cooperation Agreements signed with the United States, migrants now identify other countries like Guatemala as a destination country, with an increasing numbers of migrants looking towards countries located in South America.

In interviews held to contribute to this diagnosis on migration in and from North Central America and Mexico, the organizations consulted indicated that, initially, during the COVID-19 pandemic, migrant flows reduced dramatically, but never came to a complete halt during the curfews and border closures. Despite being a significant added risk to migrants, the pandemic did not stop migration. Individuals preferred to migrate than stay where they had no hope of a better future.

Migrants who flee violent contexts, including gangs, organized crime, and extortion among other issues, or face persecution intermingle and blend with economic migrants, making it difficult to provide clear figures about the cause of migration.

Along the migration path, individuals face constant risks and violations of their human rights, both by state and non-state actors. For that reason, they have identified alternatives and sometimes bypass traditional routes to avoid being detained during their migration journey. At the same time, the increase in acts of criminalization, harassment and threats against human rights defenders and migrant shelters make it more challenging to assist migrants and asylum seekers.

Finally, the right to migrate, and also the right to not be forced to migrate and to choose his or her place of residence, must be recognized. For this reason the Governments of the North Central America countries, Mexico, and the United States should develop migration management strategies with a human rights perspective in close collaboration with local actors, human right defenders and those assisting migrants.

Courtesy of Red Franciscana para Migrantes





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