



COMMENTARY / LATIN AMERICA & CARIBBEAN 25 OCTOBER 2017

Undocumented Migration from the Northern Triangle of Central America

The northward flow of undocumented migrants fleeing economic hardship and violence in the Northern Triangle of Central America exposes thousands of vulnerable people to mass victimisation. In this excerpt from the [Watch List 2017 – Third Update](#) early warning report for European policy makers, Crisis Group urges the European Union and its member states to continue to pursue an approach grounded in supporting community violence prevention, institutional reform and poverty alleviation in the countries of origin while supporting transiting countries in managing the flow.



This commentary is part of our [Watch List 2017 – Third Update](#).

Flows of undocumented migrants from Central America, through Mexico and toward the U.S. have given rise to a humanitarian emergency, albeit one that at present is largely treated by Washington as a national security menace and a justification for tougher border control. Originally driven by economic hardship, this northbound migration owes its intensity and longevity to multiple causes that make controlling or reducing it extremely hard. Mass victimisation of vulnerable migrants in transit has become the norm and could well be aggravated by Washington's growing anti-immigration agenda. In this context, the European Union (EU) should adapt its current strategies in Central America to promote a more comprehensive approach to the protection of migrants.

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The flow of migrants from the countries of the Northern Triangle of Central America (NTCA) – El Salvador, Guatemala and Honduras – to the U.S. has become as much a flight from life-endangering violence as a search for economic opportunity. Surveys of migrants and refugees carried out by Doctors Without Borders (MSF) in Mexico showed 39.2 per cent cite attacks or threats to themselves or their families, extortion or forced recruitment into gangs as the main reasons for their flight.

Once on their journey north, undocumented migrants must chart a perilous path between the dual threats of law enforcement and criminal groups. Crisis Group's 2016 report (*Easy Prey: Criminal Violence and Central American Migration*, 28 July 2016) describes how toughened law enforcement has diverted undocumented migration into more costly, circuitous and dangerous channels, where criminal gangs and corrupt officials benefit from policies that lead desperate people to pay increasing sums to avoid detention.

In the process, undocumented migrants are exposed to kidnappings, human trafficking, enforced disappearances, sexual violence, robbery and extortion. The most egregious cases include the 2010 and 2011 San Fernando massacres, in the northern Mexican state of Tamaulipas, in which 265 migrants, most of them Central American, were killed by the Zetas drug trafficking cartel. Stuck in a legal limbo, migrants are doubly victimised: fearful of authorities, they are highly unlikely to report the crimes they suffer or gain access to medical care should they need it.

MSF has **described** undocumented migrants' plight as "comparable to the conditions in conflict zones". Two thirds of migrants reported being victims of violence during their transit toward the U.S.; nearly one third of women surveyed said they had been sexually abused during the journey. Among the migrants exposed to these risks are some of the most vulnerable groups in Central American society. The UN High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) **reports** that asylum requests by unaccompanied NTCA minors in Mexico increased 416 per cent from 2013 to 2016.

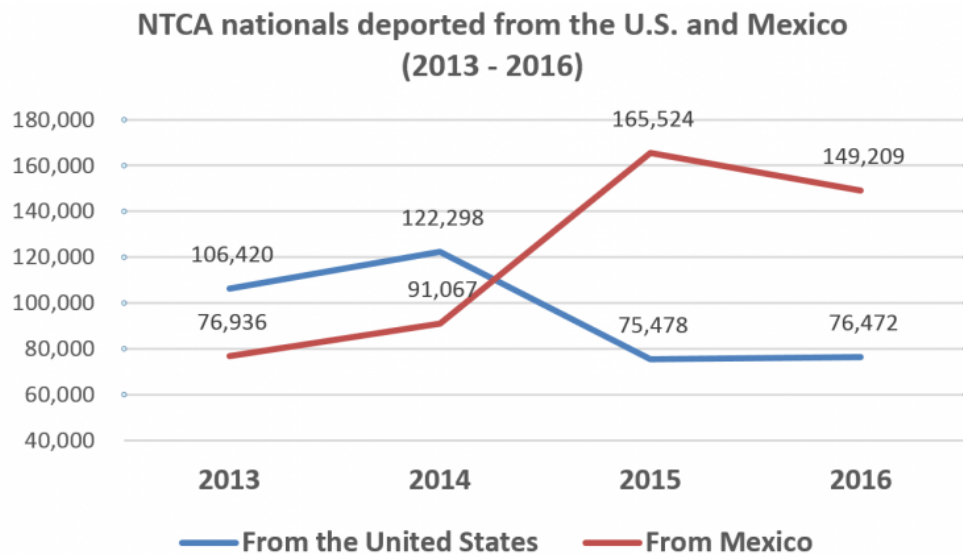
U.S. policies

Fear of undocumented migration to the U.S. increasingly dominates political debate in that country. Although former President Obama stepped up border controls and continued a vigorous deportation policy – returning over five million people in total – his administration also welcomed legal migrants, acknowledged the humanitarian crisis posed by unaccompanied children arriving from Central America, and extended support to refugees around the world. President Trump, by contrast, was elected in part on a platform of clamping down on immigration, and some of his most influential supporters have made clear that their continued backing depends on implementation of stringent restrictive measures.

Undocumented entry into the U.S. already had become more difficult. 100,000 undocumented migrants made it into the U.S in 2016, compared

to over 600,000 in 2006, according to a Department of Homeland Security (DHS) [report](#).

Deepening Mexican collaboration with U.S. efforts to staunch the flow of Central Americans accounts for much of this reduction, and is likely to persist as Mexico strives to mitigate bilateral frictions with the Trump administration. In response to the 2014 crisis presented by migrant children arriving at the U.S. border, Mexican authorities boosted checkpoints, detentions and deportations of Northern Triangle nationals on its southern border with Guatemala. Mexico now deports more Central Americans than the U.S. (see graph).



Sources: Mexican Secretariat of Government
http://politicamigratoria.gob.mx/es_mx/SEGOB/Boletines_Estadisticos and
 U.S. Immigration and Customs Enforcement agency (ICE)
<https://www.ice.gov/statistics>

None of this has lessened the Trump administration's determination to curb recent arrivals from Mexico and the Northern Triangle. The Temporary Protected Status (TPS) – which benefits some 200,000 migrants who came to the U.S. following hurricane Mitch in Honduras in 1998 and an earthquake in El Salvador in 2001 – is at risk of termination in 2018.

Likewise, on 5 September, President Trump rescinded the Deferred Action for Childhood Arrivals (DACA) program, created by the Obama administration to defer deportation and provide work permits to 800,000 undocumented migrants who entered the U.S. as minors. President Trump suggested that Congress should use the six-month wind-down period

before the DACA work permits expire to create a legislative framework for the program. But, under pressure from some of the administration's staunchest supporters, the White House has made clear that it will only support such legislation if Congress also enacts tough new immigration measures. How the legislative process will play out is not yet clear.

Although overall deportations by the Immigration and Customs Enforcement agency (ICE) are **reported** to have fallen slightly – they reached 211,068 as of 9 September 2017, three weeks before the end of the fiscal year, as compared to 240,255 in FY 2016 – arrests of undocumented migrants have risen by 43 per cent since Trump took office, as compared to the same period the year before. Most strikingly, the number of migrants without a criminal record being detained has increased threefold since 2016.

Mexican and Central American responses

An increase in deportations – driven by arrests of undocumented migrants and expiry of the TPS and DACA – would place further strains on troubled social conditions in the Northern Triangle. Although the region has relatively robust legal frameworks to protect refugees, with Mexico at the forefront of international refugee and migrant protection efforts, they frequently are unable to provide what they preach.

For instance, asylum in Mexico can be a prolonged process. Out of 8,788 **requests**, only 5,954 were resolved in 2016, 3,076 of which were granted. Asylum-seekers must file requests within 30 days of crossing the border, and are kept in detention if arrested before applying. Many give up because of the detention centers' cramped and insalubrious conditions, or because they have no right to work while their requests are being considered.

Overall, the NTCA countries are not adequately equipped to receive new deportees. El Salvador's preparations to receive them are almost entirely restricted to the monitoring of suspected gang activities. The National Assembly's security commission has **agreed** on measures to track returnees accused of being street-gang members: over 500 suspected gang members have been sent back so far in 2017 to El Salvador, where high rates of violent crime and reported cases of extrajudicial execution of gang members complicate prospects of a return to peaceful civilian life.

“Overall, the [Northern Triangle] countries are not adequately equipped to receive new deportees.”

Capacities to provide legal counsel, shelter, social reintegration or even transportation for returnees across the Northern Triangle are scant. Proposed legislation in Guatemala to strengthen the state's readiness to protect migrants has stalled because of that **country's political crisis**. In Honduras, the number of departing refugees and arriving deportees is the highest in the NTCA, but its government is concentrating on the president's re-election campaign and on **activating** its own protocols against deported gang members.

Recommendations to the European Union and its member states

The more U.S. concerns about security and the economic effects of mass migration continue to drive a restrictive immigration policy, the more important it will be – from both a humanitarian and regional stability perspective – for the U.S. and its partners to help generate economic opportunities, better governance and broader social protection south of the U.S. border. That was the logic behind the “Alliance for Prosperity”, which the Obama administration established jointly with the NTCA governments and pursuant to which some \$1.3 billion have been **allocated** to Central America in the 2017 and 2018 federal budgets. Today, that logic is at risk. A June 2017 high-level summit in Miami on prosperity and security in the NTCA, heralded a far stronger emphasis on security issues at the **expense** of recognition of the humanitarian emergency related to undocumented migration.

While the European Union (EU)'s role is limited due to the U.S.'s overwhelming influence in the region, it nonetheless could strengthen humanitarian responses and press for a more informed, integral approach to the protection of migrants, especially women and children. Migration forms a significant part of the EU's cooperation with Latin America. The 2015 EU-CELAC Action Plan as well as the 2014-2020 Multiannual Indicative Regional Programme for Latin America include migration management and the protection of migrant rights as action points. So far, the EU's initiatives in this field have focused on Latin America as a whole. However, the evolving migration dynamics in the NTCA call for a more targeted response. The EU should adapt its priorities in Central America and promote migration policies that focus on the protection and integration of migrants.

“ Technical assistance and capacity-building support for the under-resourced Central American consulates situated on the

migrant route through Mexico would help ensure better protection for those in transit. ”



The EU should support Mexican and Northern Triangle authorities in their efforts to strengthen oversight of security agencies and state institutions working on migrant issues. Technical assistance and capacity-building support for the under-resourced Central American consulates situated on the migrant route through Mexico would help ensure better protection for those in transit. The initiative Migration EU eXpertise (MIEUX), a peer-to-peer experts' facility that supports partner countries to better manage migration through tailor-made assistance, can be a useful platform and starting point for the exchange of expertise and best practices.

The EU could also boost technical support to expand refugee processing of NTCA nationals in neighbouring countries (mainly Belize and Costa Rica), particularly minors, and ensure regional governments and NGOs provide adequate shelter to those awaiting decisions. Financial and logistical support to neighbouring countries such as Panama and Costa Rica, as well as to other Latin American countries that agree to take a share of refugees, would help cushion the impact of increasingly forbidding U.S. immigration policies.

All in all, the EU should continue to pursue an approach to Central America grounded in supporting community violence prevention, institutional reform and poverty alleviation. Perhaps most urgently, it should assist the three Northern Triangle countries in developing new programs to help them reintegrate deportees, including through initiatives to help them access health care, training, employment and psychosocial support when necessary.