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Tens of Thousands of Undocumented Hondurans Caught and Deported in 2013 Trying to Make the American Dream Come True

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Migrating to the US in search of finding the opportunity they lack in their country to overcome their dire socioeconomic situation is nothing new to Hondurans. Neither is the risk of being caught along the lengthy, perilous way and sent back.

Some 74,000 undocumented Hondurans were deported last year, marking an abrupt end—however calculated the risk—to their quest for labor opportunities and improved income to support their families back home.

In this Central American nation of 8.6 million people, almost 2 million barely survive on less than US$1 per day and 66.5% live in poverty, while 46% suffer extreme poverty, as official figures by the Instituto Nacional de Estadística (INE) show.

But data for 2012 by the UN’s Economic Commission for Latin America and the Caribbean (ECLAC), headquartered in Santiago, Chile, indicates the situation is even worse. In its report Panorama Social de América Latina for 2012, ECLAC placed poverty in Honduras at 67.4%, the highest in Central America, almost 10 points above Nicaragua (58.3%) and more than 12 points over Guatemala (54.8%), which ranked second and third.

Poverty at root of migration

Quoted by the local daily newspaper La Prensa, Honduran economist Carlos Urbizo recently said, "Deep changes are needed in the country to improve the situation, since most of the population is immersed in poverty."

"The struggle isn't against poverty. It’s against a political and economic system that causes poverty. The existing anti-democratic system, the anti-capitalist system we have, because it’s mercantilistic, doesn’t allow this situation to improve," Urbizo pointed out. "If we don’t change the political and economic system, we’ll be like this for the next 192 years. We must start now to solve this problem. Twenty years ago it was easier than now, but it’s easier now than it will be in twenty years."

"This government hasn’t done anything, it’s over, and none of the [leaders] about to take over look like they are going to really tackle the problems of democracy, equal opportunities, justice, security, and confidence for investment," added Urbizo. "There is an immediate problem to be solved in the country, and it is lack of security."

The expert thus referred to the start on Jan. 27 of rightist President-elect Juan Orlando Hernández’s four-year term (NotiCen, Dec. 5, 2013). "Much is said about poverty in urban areas, but when one learns about levels in the country’s rural areas, one feels like crying. It ranks 70%, 80%, or even more. Poverty is deplorable in those areas," Urbizo stated.
"Poverty is lack of income or too low an income. The question is not how to reduce poverty but how to increase people’s income. It’s increased though investment in human capital, which means providing technical, academic ... education," said Urbizo. "Investment must be promoted, and this is possible by creating a climate of liberty, justice, security, and confidence, but that doesn’t exist in Honduras."

La Prensa quoted INE to show that more than 2 million people with a job in Honduras earn less than the minimum wage—an average of 7,419 lempiras (some US$370 a month).

**Migrants face dangerous journey**

The situation explains the need that hundreds of thousands of Hondurans have felt to seek, in the US, a way to improve their dire socioeconomic circumstances. The despair leads most of the undocumented migrants—the majority of the human flow going northward—to embark on a perilous journey whose risks involve a life-threatening, clandestine train ride through Mexico and being caught by Mexican or US border patrols.

Women, the minority group, face an even more somber scenario, with the added danger posed by sexual abuse lurking along the lengthy trail to the usually elusive American dream.

Last year, in just one of many cases, five of 11 Honduran migrants who lost their lives in yet another train incident in México were returned on Sept. 5 to their shocked, grieving relatives; the other six had been sent back the previous day.

The bodies of the victims of a train derailment on Aug. 25, in the southeastern Mexican state of Tabasco, bordering Guatemala, were flown back to the northwestern city of San Pedro Sula, Honduras’ industrial textile maquila center, some 250 km northwest of Tegucigalpa, the nation’s capital. The Mexican Policía Federal plane landed at San Pedro’s Ramón Villeda Morales International Airport—named after an Honduran president—where devastated relatives of the five men, aged 16 to 29, waited.

Relatives, quoted on Sept. 6 by the Tegucigalpa morning daily El Heraldo, said La Bestia (The Beast) —the northbound Mexican train usually boarded along the tracks by hundreds of mainly Central American migrants—took the men’s lives precisely as they were on their way to improve them and the lives of their families (SourceMex, Dec. 11, 2013).

"We heard on the news that he died on that train. His father had taught him how to weld, but Jorge said he wanted to go to help his mother and build her a house, but La Bestia stole his life," said Diana Bustamante, a relative of Jorge Bustamante.

"I cried when my son told me he was going to go. I begged him not to go, but the poor thing wanted to give his sisters and me the best. He looked after us, because I’m sick and my daughters are little," said Wilson Miranda’s mother Reynelda Franco.

Silvano Bautista said his brother Carlos Ovidio "did all kinds of work, and so he thought that he’d do better in the US. It was the second time he was going. When we knew he died it was very difficult to believe, but it’s the sad reality."

Carla Beatriz Aceituno, a relative of José Ernesto Flores, pointed out that "no one should die like that, but in Honduras there are no opportunities and that’s why people risk their lives on the trip to the north."
Those who make it face capture and return

For all undocumented migrants following that route, the possibility of being caught by Mexican Instituto Nacional de Migración (INM) personnel or police officers, or, once in the US, by either the Border Patrol or lamigra—as Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE) officials are commonly known among Hispanic immigrants—is immense.

From January to mid-December last year, almost 74,000 Hondurans were caught and flown back, according to estimates by the Centro de Atención al Migrante Retornado (CAMR), a joint initiative by the Catholic Church, the Honduran government, and the International Organization for Migration (IOM).

The Dirección General de Migración y Extranjería (DGME) said that, from Jan. 1 through Dec. 4, just over 36,000 Hondurans were deported by land.

Figures for 2012 were above 52,000 people deported—some 31,000 by air, the rest by land—and they showed a dramatic increase from the approximately 22,000 flown back and the just more than 17,000 sent back by land in 2011.

Last year, 82.48% of Hondurans deported were men, mostly in the 18-31 age group, women represented 12.22%, and children made up the rest—boys almost 4% and girls just above 1%.

The CAMR said, in the case of adults, the causes for making the complex decision to leave the country include poverty, scarce job offers, lack of land for growing crops, low salaries, violence, and natural disasters. As far as children are concerned, the causes vary from contributing to the family’s economy through child labor and fleeing from family violence to reuniting with migrant relatives.

Going to the US in search of opportunity is not new to Latin Americans in general and Hondurans in particular, and the actual results have not always been as imagined.

In the 1970s and 1980s a phenomenon began that was new to three Central American nations in particular—El Salvador, Guatemala, and Honduras, Central America’s Northern Triangle: maras. Mainly in and around the western US city of Los Angeles, an area of settlement for undocumented immigrants especially from those three countries, gangs made up of Salvadoran, Guatemalan, and Honduran youths surfaced. Two of those territorial groups became particularly violent—the Mara Salvatrucha (MS) and Mara 18 (M18).

Undocumented immigrants from those three nations were caught by la migra and sent back home, and mareros belonging to those two gangs also began to be forcibly returned. Thus the MS and the M18, keeping their name, found their way to Honduras, as well as to El Salvador and Guatemala, where, along with other maras, they are now counted by thousands, and have become a major internal security issue (NotiCen, May 7, 2009).