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George RodrÃguez

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Central American Kids Arriving at Mexico-US Border Seek Solution They Do Not Find

by George Rodríguez

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Tens of thousands of Central American children and teenagers trying to make their way into the US, where relatives live, are running away from violence—either on the streets or at home or both—in search of a solution to their dramatic situation.

But after a harrowing, danger-filled journey from their places of origin through Mexico (SourceMex, Dec. 11, 2013, and May 21, 2014), many of these kids see their hopes vanish when they are stopped and apprehended as they cross the border from Mexico into the US and sent back home.

They are mostly from the Northern Triangle of Central América—El Salvador, Guatemala, and Honduras—an area particularly hit from the 1960s through the 1990s by the turmoil of armed conflict and de facto régimes. During that time, hundreds of thousands of lives were lost—mostly civilian—hundreds of thousands of people were displaced, and thousands more were disappeared.

Those internal wars—waged, essentially in El Salvador and Guatemala between local armies and guerrillas within the framework of the Cold War—and the repression unleashed by the dictatorships in the three Central American nations also caused a massive flow of migrants who settled mostly in cities in California.

The specific armed conflicts—Guatemala (1960-1996) and El Salvador (1980-1992)—ended in 1987 with the signing in Guatemala by the Central American presidents of the Procedimiento para establecer la Paz Firme y Duradera en Centroamérica. The regional peace agreement also aimed at strengthening democracy in Central America as a means to promote integration.

That massive flow of mostly undocumented Central Americans resulted in a social and security phenomenon, which, decades later, is one element at the core of the present child migration: youth gangs known as maras.

These gangs—including the most outstanding, for their violence, Mara 18 (MS-18) and Mara Salvatrucha (MS-13)—first seen in cities in California, were made up of Guatemalan, Honduran, and Salvadoran youths.

Many of their members, undocumented migrants, were captured by US authorities and sent back to their countries of origin, where the "mara phenomenon" was not only replicated but multiplied, reaching hundreds of gangs and thousands of mareros whose violent nature wreaks massive fear among these countries’ populations (NotiCen, Aug. 14, 2014).

This is, precisely, one of the reasons for "the surge"—the massive rise since last year in the flow of children arriving in the US. Different estimates, mentioned by regional media, place the number of kids arriving at the Mexico-US border since last year at more than 50,000.

The Honduran morning daily newspaper La Prensa reported last month that, since Oct. 1, "close to 60,000 unaccompanied minors have been detained at the Texas border, of which 16,546 are Honduran, 14,086 Guatemalan, and 17,301 Salvadoran."

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**UNHCR report looks at causes of child migration**

The study "Children on the Run" by the UN High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) Washington-based Regional Office for the United States and the Caribbean says that the number of unaccompanied and separated children from the three Central American nations who have been apprehended rose from 4,059 in 2011 to 10,443 in 2012, and again more than doubled, to 21,537, last year.

Having interviewed a sample of 404 of the more than 50,000 Guatemalan, Honduran, and Salvadoran kid migrants, as well as children arriving from Mexico, the UNHCR says, in its 120-page report, that "the potential reasons why children from the region have been arriving to the US in such dramatically high numbers" have not been discussed to a full extent.

However, it points out that "criminal threats inflamed by drug trafficking, polarized political systems, weak law enforcement and social hardships—such as poverty and unemployment—contribute to the well-documented security crisis in the Central American region."

"The effects of violence influence every pillar and institution in the affected countries, and within this context, violation of human rights is accompanied by a lack of State protection. Protection mechanisms are weak, and there is substantial evidence that the State has been co-opted and corrupted by highly organized non-State criminal actors in many areas, creating ‘zones of impunity,’” says the UNHCR report. "Victims of criminal armed actors are likely to experience a high level of harm, deprivation of life and liberty, and the State cannot provide the required individual protection, particularly in the most affected areas."

As a result of the interviews, "the responses … were complex and multifaceted and in many cases included both protection-related and non-protection-related concerns. Significantly, protection-related reasons were very prominent, and this report focuses on those reasons," the report said. "No less than 58% of the 404 children interviewed were forcibly displaced because they suffered or faced harms that indicate a potential or actual need for international protection."

The UNHCR estimates that, regarding reasons children have for leaving their countries of origin, "in 2006 … the large majority of these children, all of whom were interviewed at the southern border of Mexico with Guatemala, left their homes to reunify with family members or for better opportunities, including access to education and work."

"In contrast, of the 404 children interviewed for the current study in 2013, over half (53%) of those who mentioned family reunification, school or better opportunities, deprivation, or other reasons also gave international protection-related reasons for leaving their countries, among them violence in society predominantly by armed criminal actors, and abuse in the home," the UNHCR said.

"At the very core of what could be called root causes for children leaving these four countries and coming to the US are issues of entrenched poverty and deep lack of meaningful opportunity for education and employment. This is compounded by, in the cases of El Salvador, Guatemala, and Honduras, the long-term effects of years of civil war and repression and the long-standing climate of violence engendered by this strife," the study states.

"By the lack of the consistent effective ability to stem the escalating violence, to prosecute and punish appropriately the perpetrators of this widespread criminal violence, and perhaps most
important from the perspective of UNHCR’s mandate, to provide meaningful and adequate protection and redress to members of these societies affected by this violence," the report adds. "Across the board, 58% of the children expressed that before leaving their countries of origin they had suffered, been threatened or feared serious harm of a nature that raises international protection concerns."

**President Obama meets with Central American presidents**

In the midst of the ongoing migrant crisis at the southern US border, US President Barack Obama met last month at the White House with counterparts Presidents Juan Orlando Hernández of Honduras, Otto Pérez Molina of Guatemala, and Salvador Sánchez Cerén of El Salvador to address the situation. The Central Americans’ hopes and expectations were high (SourceMex, June 25, 2014).

On July 19, five days before the crucial presidential meeting, Salvadoran Foreign Minister Hugo Martínez said, in statements in Managua, the Nicaraguan capital, on Honduras’ Channel 10, "We’ll be having this meeting, and we hope that after it there’s an increase in US cooperation programs with the Northern Triangle" regarding employment and security, so as to discourage undocumented migration.

"With President Obama we want to discuss structural measures implying investment in the communities the migrant population comes from, to create opportunities and to create more safety for our people," added Martínez, a former secretary-general of the Sistema de la Integración Centroamericana (SICA).

The same day, Honduras’ counterpart Mireya Agüero said in Tegucigalpa, the Honduran capital, "We need a clear policy [from the US] regarding the countries in the region."

Meanwhile, the White House issued a communiqué, quoted by La Prensa, confirming the presidential meeting and stating that the four leaders would discuss "how to reinforce our ongoing cooperation to stop the flow of undocumented migrants from Central America to Mexico and the United States."

In a statement after the meeting—reported by La Prensa—Obama said the issue demands shared responsibility, and he added that he spoke with his Central American colleagues about providing more resources to border installations tending to children and "increasing the budget for immigration courts whose aim is to promptly re-unite children."

Obama also said the US is a nation of immigrants, but it also is a state of law, and he explained that according to US legislation a specific number of refugees can be accepted according to very strict criteria that are not based on economic need, or residence in dangerous neighborhoods, or poverty. Refugee status is based on state persecution or a life-threatening situation, "and, maybe, under those circumstances, some boys or girls are able to request that status, but should that be the case, they have to request it in their countries of origin and not expose themselves to such a long journey to the United States," added Obama, according to the same account.

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