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Costa Rica Steps Up to Help Victims of Violence in Northern Triangle

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The Northern Triangle of Central America, one of the world’s most violent regions, is the starting point of a constant stream of migrants in search of the peace they cannot find in their home countries.

The massive exodus from El Salvador, Guatemala, and Honduras takes migrants on a trail filled with life-threatening risks such as abuse, corruption, and hostile natural environments. Most vulnerable, both at home and along the way, are women and children, a high number of whom travel unaccompanied (NotiCen, Jan. 7, 2016, May 12, 2016, and Aug. 4, 2016).

Most migrants attempt to reach the US, but other preferred destinations include Mexico, Belize, Costa Rica, Nicaragua, and Panama. The number of migrants applying for asylum in the countries of destination has skyrocketed over the past three years, according to the office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR).

UNHCR figures quoted in a press release issued April 5 show that, in 2015, Mexico saw 3,423 asylum seekers, mostly from El Salvador and Honduras, up 164% from 2013 and 65% from 2014. Costa Rican authorities received 2,203 asylum requests, an increase of 176% from 2013 and 16% above 2014, the majority Salvadoran nationals, according to UNHCR.

Historically a nation of immigrants, Costa Rica has an international image of respect for human rights and as a protector of those reaching its territory as a result of forced displacement for political or other reasons. In the 1970s and 1980s, at the peak of political persecution in South American nations then ruled by military dictatorships, Costa Rica became home to hundreds of exiles, mostly from Argentina, Chile, and Uruguay, many of whom stayed on after the dictatorships ended in their home countries.

Different components combine in the Northern Triangle to make up the critical situation, including the obvious poverty, lack of opportunities, violations of human rights, corruption, and violence.

The latest report about Central America by the Programa Estado de la Nación en Desarrollo Humano (State of the Nation in Human Development Program, PEN) issued in June by a group of presidents of Costa Rica’s universities (Consejo Nacional de Rectores, CONARE) highlighted violence resulting from critical social and economic national situations as a major concern throughout the area.
Erosion of democracy

Among its findings, the 453-page report (Quinto Informe Estado de la Región en Desarrollo Humano Sostenible 2016) pointed to “a worrisome deterioration of peaceful coexistence that erodes the region's fragile democratic stability.”

Violence and crime are “two phenomena that in the eyes of Central Americans themselves have turned into the region’s main problems, which however widespread, are mainly concentrated in the three countries of the … Northern Triangle” as well as “in certain sub-national spaces,” it said.

The report called the violence in Central America “alarming,” adding that “the 17,672 homicides that occurred in 2012 produced a rate of 40 cases per 100,000 population and turned the region into the most violent one in the world among those which are not at war.”

According to the report, 2011 had the highest homicidal violence so far in the 21st century, with a regional rate of 43.7 homicides per 100,000 population, but the general rate dropped during the 2012-2014 period, reaching its lowest level in 2014, with 32.5 homicides per 100,000 population.

However, at the end of the three-year period, and after having dropped its national figures from 45.2 in 2012 and 39.6 in 2013, El Salvador showed a notable upsurge of violence in 2015, to 61 homicides per 100,000 population, the study pointed out. Panama, Costa Rica, and Nicaragua showed rates of 15, 10, and nine in 2014, it added.

Regional approach needed

The UNHCR warned that “the crisis in Central America urgently requires a stepped-up protection response and a regional approach to sharing responsibility for this growing crisis.” It added that it was working closely with governments and civil society partners to improve screening capacity “to identify people forced to flee violence and persecution in the Northern Triangle.” UNHCR spokesperson Adrian Edwards was quoted as saying that the UN body sees the situation in Central America to be “a protection crisis.”

“Large-scale violence and persecution at the hands of armed criminal actors have now become, along with poverty and unemployment, primary drivers of refugee and migrant flows from the Northern Triangle,” Edwards said. “This reality can be seen, for example, in El Salvador, which has the highest rate of homicides of any country in the world.”

This summer, as regional efforts are stepped up leading to this month’s UN summit to address massive migrant and refugee displacements, two meetings took place in just over two weeks in Costa Rica.

The first of two gatherings, “a call to action,” was organized by UNHRC and the Organization of American States (OAS) and held on July 6-7 at a luxury hotel just outside San José. Speaking during the opening session, UN High Commissioner Filippo Grandi said, “Migration because of poverty and social exclusion coexists with an increasing phenomenon of forced displacement, mainly caused by violence from organized crime,” including maras (violent youth gangs) and drug trafficking structures.

“This forced displacement manifests itself both through population movements within the countries and through flows beyond borders,” he said, warning that “they are relatively new forms of displacement that require innovative answers.”
Grandi called for “a mechanism of regional shared responsibility that clearly identifies the answer and the solutions to be implemented by the countries of origin, the transit countries, and the countries of asylum or destination.” He also highlighted the need to “jointly find answers for protection and effective, practical, and new solutions,” stressing that “this is about a regional situation that demands a regional answer.”

The meeting produced agreement on a set of actions, among them, “enhancing regional cooperation and partnership through increased responsibility-sharing, including increased engagement by civil society organizations.” Also, “ensuring access to territory and asylum and enhancing arrangements for the reception of asylum-seekers and refugees,” as well as “strengthening opportunities for self-reliance and local integration of refugees,” among other means, “through investments of development funding.”

Participants also highlighted that “the protection needs of unaccompanied or separated children, women, lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, and intersex communities, indigenous people, and Afro-descendants, as well as individuals with disabilities, are most acute.”

**Protection mechanism**

Eighteen days later, also in San José, the Costa Rican government, UNHCR, and the International Organization for Migration (IOM) announced an agreement on a protection mechanism for Central American asylum seekers, mainly from the Northern Triangle, who are at risk in their home countries.

The mechanism includes an initial security screening in the countries of origin, thus making asylum-seekers eligible for humanitarian visas, and granting each person a six-month stay in Costa Rica while resettlement in a third country is processed, government and UNHCR authorities explained at a press conference on July 26 at the Casa Presidencial (Presidential House, the Costa Rican government’s headquarters).

During this process, each beneficiary will be briefed on the respective country of destination, and if needed, will take an English course, they told reporters.

“This agreement applies to citizens of countries in the region who consider themselves at risk and have requested refugee status in a third country that isn’t Costa Rica,” Minister of the Presidency Sergio Alfaro said then.

By supporting the mechanism, the government “reaffirms its commitment to human rights and to refuge as an international institution designed to protect life and the human condition of the persons who feel threatened, at a specific moment in their lives, in a certain country,” he added.

Carlos Maldonado, the UNHCR representative in Costa Rica, explained that the agreement “seeks to facilitate the process of resettlement in a third country for persons needing protection.”

In Costa Rica, “the persons will be undergoing a process … of cultural information of the country where they will be arriving, and also deepen their knowledge of English … so they can eventually look after themselves upon arrival to the country of resettlement, which will surely be an English-speaking country,” he added.

Maldonado later told LADB that he was mainly referring to the US, although not exclusively, because UNHCR and IOM work with “an important number of traditional countries of settlement,”
among them Canada and nations in Europe and Latin America, including Argentina, Brazil, Chile, and Uruguay.

“Costa Rica is a main, fundamental partner in the international protection of refugees,” he said, adding, “What this agreement does is, precisely, to confirm the solidarity of the Costa Rican state and then Costa Rican people, human solidarity regarding persons in need of protection, regarding refugees.”

-- End --