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George Rodríguez

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Costa Rica and Panama work to solve immigration crisis at their border

by George Rodríguez

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Just as Europe is the finish line for thousands fleeing war-torn Syria and poverty-stricken African nations, the US is the destination for many migrants in desperate search of the safety and well-being they cannot find at home.

Although in lesser numbers, irregular migrants incessantly follow the Central American trail in search of el sueño americano, the American dream. They come from places as far as Africa and Asia and as close as the Caribbean. Many are escaping the region known as Northern Triangle of Central America, which comprises El Salvador, Guatemala, Honduras (NotiCen, Jan.7, 2016, and Sept. 1, 2016). The route includes Mexico, with its 3,155-km land border with the US, a boundary where US President-elect Donald Trump has threatened to build a wall to stop aliens from entering the country.

The present migrant crisis in Central America dates from November 2015, when authorities in Costa Rica dismantled, at the country’s border with Panama, an international network of human traffickers known as coyotes who were taking hundreds of Cuban nationals to the US. The action broke a link in the criminal organization’s chain, and left increasing numbers of Cubans stranded at the southern Costa Rican border city of Paso Canoas, a bustling commercial town that stretches on both sides of the 330-km border with Panama (NotiCen, Dec. 10, 2015, and Dec. 17, 2015).

The situation turned for the worse when many migrants were able to reach the northwestern town of Peñas Blancas, on Costa Rica’s border with Nicaragua, only to find the Nicaraguan government had decided to close its side of the border to irregular migrants headed for the US. That measure is still in force.

In a complex, regional diplomatic effort, the Costa Rican government managed early last year to have 7,800 stranded Cubans airlifted or taken on buses to the Guatemala-Mexico border and then to the Mexico-US border, where they could walk into US territory (NotiCen, July 7, 2016).

Costa Rican President Luis Guillermo Solís and his Foreign Affairs Minister Manuel González repeatedly underlined that the evacuation plan was a one-time effort aimed at safely getting those specific Cubans to their destination. Time and again, they said Costa Rica did not have the resources to put together such operations on a continuous basis, and called on Cubans to stop using Central America as a route to the US.

But migrants from Africa and Asia, as well as Haitian nationals, felt encouraged by the operation, and soon their numbers increased, triggering a new humanitarian crisis at both Costa Rican borders. The migrants are crossing from Panama into Costa Rica at an average of 100 per day, according to official data. Just as the Cubans did, they are finding their journey interrupted in Nicaragua.
Humanitarian help

According to official estimates, about 1,500 irregular migrants—mostly families—are stranded in Costa Rica’s borders, in areas where the Solís administration has set up camps and is offering basic humanitarian attention, including food, clothing, medical assistance, and lodging.

The migrants are registered at the southern border by Costa Rican authorities and issued temporary 25-day stay permits renewable for another 25 days. The permits allow them to move freely within Costa Rica, which gives many of them a chance to find ways to continue their difficult northward trip.

According to local media, some manage to have coyotes take them by boat to Honduras, Nicaragua’s immediate neighbor to the north, thus avoiding Nicaraguan territory, where they risk being caught by Nicaragua’s Army and sent back south to Costa Rica.

Estimates are that 16,000 migrants have crossed Costa Rican territory since November 2015.

The Solís administration has said from the start that it cannot by itself solve the humanitarian crisis, and that the present situation requires the type of collective solution used during the Cuban migrant crisis. But since relations between Costa Rica and Nicaragua are undergoing one of their recurring periods of tension, a collective solution has been elusive.

Meeting at the border

But Solís and his Panamanian counterpart, President Juan Carlos Varela came up with some agreements at a meeting on Oct. 7 at the Panamanian town of Boquete, 500 km west of Panama City, in the western province of Chiriquí, bordering Costa Rica.

Solís and Varela headed government teams that included top security and immigration officials, and presided over the talks aimed at prioritizing and coordinating joint actions regarding irregular migrant flows as well as the fight against international organized crime activities, especially drug trafficking.

In a press release issued after the meeting, the presidents acknowledged the need to increase inter-agency coordination “in order to face the main threats regarding irregular migrant flows and common citizen safety threats at a local level, in the border area and the regional area, such as trafficking in drugs, weapons, and human beings, as well as other forms of transnational crime.”

Both leaders stated their governments’ commitment to continue working together and agreed to “carry out joint efforts before third countries” regarding the migrant situation.

The efforts should lead to identifying countries “willing to receive migrant groups, in order to coordinate their voluntary relocation under safe conditions that guarantee their human rights,” the press release added. They should lead as well to “call on possible countries with a reception capacity, aimed at finding a definitive solution to the extraordinary migrant situation of massive transit.”

The presidents also agreed to “promote the creation of a voluntary contribution fund at a regional level in order to support countries” in developing humanitarian actions regarding those flows, to “promote a greater exchange of information to facilitate these migrants’ identification,” and to “keep...
up actions to control the flows of irregular migrants, such as deportation and voluntary return, according to national and international norms,” according to the press release.

The agreements reached included the creation of a high-level group, made up of security, immigration, and foreign affairs officials, to “address joint action in response to the north-bound flow of Haitian citizens.”

Also, Panama suggested and Costa Rica expressed interest in “the official appointment of a Costa Rican liaison officer at Panama’s Centro Interagencial de Seguridad (Inter-Agency Security Center) responsible for facilitating the exchange of intelligence information for coordinating operational efforts against drug trafficking and organized crime,” according to the press release.

In a joint press conference immediately following the meeting, Solís and said that they have made “preliminary contact” with other Central American governments. They refrained from identifying the countries so as not to put “unnecessary pressure” on them, Solís said.

‘We can’t just close borders’

“We want to seek regional equity,” Varela said. “We can’t just close borders.” He added that Panama and Costa Rica are setting an example regarding “a dignified and humanitarian treatment of migrants, but above all in the search of a definitive solution.”

In this regard, Solís warned, “This isn’t a phenomenon that is going to disappear any time soon, but it’s one that’s here to stay, and it isn’t exclusive.”

In a coinciding view, researcher Gustavo Gatica, of the Centro de Investigación en Cultura y Desarrollo (Culture and Development Research Center, CICDE) of the Universidad Estatal a Distancia (State Distance-Learning University), told LADB that multilateral agreements are vital in this case.

“I believe that, in the face of situations such as this, in the face of events that are of a pretty big magnitude, instead of small patches, there is need for multilateral, long-term answers that address what’s happening,” Gatica said. “It’s necessary to effectively think of lasting solutions, and lasting solutions only come from multilateral agreements, regional agreements, and, even more than that … global agreements regarding relations between countries and the need large groups of persons have of moving.”

The region’s top coordinating body is the Sistema de la Integración Centroamericana (Central American Integration System, SICA), whose modernization is strongly promoted by Costa Rica.

The lack of a collective agreement to solve the migrant crisis in the isthmus shows “on the one hand, the limitations some multilateral coordination spaces have in the region, in Central America” Gatica said.

“There’s effectively a need for multilateral spaces, but of another caliber, of another nature, to take up not only immigration issues but others of a greater impact,” Gatica said, including economic and security issues.