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Northern Triangle Migrants Have New Challenge: The Trump Administration

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If they manage to enter US territory after an extremely perilous journey through Mexico, migrants from the Northern Triangle of Central America are now faced with a new risk: Anti-immigration stalwart Donald Trump as the new tenant at the White House. But the magnitude of the violence in their home countries—El Salvador, Guatemala, and Honduras—is such that it is not likely that their numbers will decrease in the immediate future ([NotiCen, March 5, 2015](#), [Jan. 7, 2016](#), [May 26, 2016](#)).

Although there is not much clarity regarding Trump's government plan for the next four years, he repeatedly warned while campaigning that his administration would be cracking down on undocumented immigrants. He portrayed Mexican immigrants as criminals and promised to build a wall on the 3,200-km border between the US and Mexico ([SourceMex, Aug. 24, 2016](#), [Nov. 16, 2016](#), [Jan. 18, 2017](#)).

While the administration of his immediate predecessor, Barack Obama, deported approximately 2.5 million undocumented immigrants in the past eight years ([SourceMex, Jan. 22, 2014](#)), the outlook for the Trump government is even worse. The new president had spoken of deporting 11 million, but he has lowered his initial estimate to 3 million.

Violence drives migration

Migrants leaving the Northern Triangle say they are driven out by violence derived mainly from organized crime, including drug trafficking, score settling, and territorial gang wars, and also by lack of opportunities in their home countries and persecution based on sexual orientation. The region's population is estimated at just under 30 million, while the homicide rate in El Salvador stands at 81.7 homicides per 100,000 residents, followed by Honduras with 58 homicides per 100,000 residents, and Guatemala with 27.3 homicides per 100,000 residents ([NotiCen, July 30, 2015](#), [Jan. 7, 2016](#)), [March 24, 2016](#)).

Media campaigns by US immigration and security authorities to deter migrants from leaving the Triangle countries have proved useless. The campaigns detail the risks along the way and warn that irregular migrants caught by US authorities will be deported. But the fear of criminal violence and of children and teenagers being recruited by gangs is more powerful than the official warnings. An added factor is the extreme poverty that the majority of families in the area face, plus the lack of opportunities, especially for the young ([NotiCen, Sept. 1, 2016](#)).

In a January 2017 report, the website El Orden Mundial (The World Order, EOM) noted, "In general, the main reason behind the illegal migration of minors to the United States is the unfavorable economic situation, determined by scarce labor opportunities and low-quality education, health, and nutrition services," along with lack of security and the violence that rules in the Central American Northern Triangle. Thus, the migrants' plight at home is far worse than whatever risk they are bound to find as they follow the trail to the US.

In a report issued in February 2016, the online research site American Immigration Council pointed out that “though the US media campaigns may have convinced—or reminded—Hondurans, and perhaps their Salvadoran and Guatemalan counterparts, that migration to the United States is dangerous and unlikely to be successful, this knowledge did not seem to play a role in the decision calculus of those considering migration ... Rather, we have strong evidence from the surveys in Honduras and El Salvador in particular that one’s direct experience with crime emerges as a critical predictor of one’s emigration intentions ... [and] what these findings suggest is that crime victims are unlikely to be deterred by the administration’s efforts.”

According to the council, the US Department of Homeland Security (DHS) “identified crime and violence, particularly in El Salvador and Honduras, as important factors in the flow of unaccompanied minors leaving these countries for the United States in 2014.”

A drop in the number of child migrants

Citing US Customs and Border Protection statistics on unaccompanied migrant children detained by US authorities, EOM says the numbers have dropped from a peak of 69,000 in 2014 to approximately 40,000 in 2015 and just under 33,000 in 2016 ([NotiCen, Aug. 14, 2014](#), and [Aug. 28, 2014](#)).

The council, for its part, quoted DHS as concluding that “Salvadoran and Honduran children ... come from extremely violent regions where they probably perceive the risk of traveling alone to the United States preferable to remaining at home.”

But migrants in general who manage to enter US territory, “upon arrival ... are still subject to the ‘send a message’ policies and practices that are designed to deter others rather than identify and ensure the protection of those fleeing war-like levels of violence,” added the council.

Flow could intensify

Regardless of the adverse odds migrants are up against, the three-country flow is unlikely to lessen, and it could actually intensify, if the critical economic and social situation prevails, as is foreseen.

Gustavo Gatica, a political analyst from Guatemala who is a researcher with Costa Rica’s Centro de Investigación en Cultura y Desarrollo (Research Center for Culture and Development), predicts continued migration. “We’ll continue to see an increase in migration, even [with people] knowing the cost of the journey—I’m referring to risks, to people’s physical integrity and life and means,” he told the Latin America Data Base (LADB). “People will continue to leave ... So, as long as those [economic and social] conditions remain present, I don’t see a scenario in which migration will tend to drop.”

Gatica says that Northern Triangle migration to the US with Trump in power is “dominated by a double fear: the fear, for example, of violence, of uncertainty, of economic and labor instability,” in the home country, and fear of deportation, once they arrive in the US.

But there is a “prevailing perverse attitude in the region because of what migration means for these countries,” he said, referring to the remittances migrants send from the US, which outpace foreign direct investment in the three nations. In 2016, remittances to Guatemala were close to US \$7.2 billion, to El Salvador just above US\$4.6 billion, and to Honduras just over US\$4 billion, he said. Meanwhile, foreign investment last year for El Salvador was worth US\$750 million, while in Honduras it reached a little over US\$1.2 billion and in Guatemala it totaled US\$1.7 billion, he added.

“In the case of El Salvador, remittances are six times more than what it receives in foreign direct investment,” Gatica said.

Gatica sees various possible scenarios regarding migration from the Northern Triangle.

Noting that Trump has said one aim of his trade policy would be to revive the North American economy, Gatica said, “A part of a possible scenario ... is a contraction of foreign investment flows” to Central America in general and to the Northern Triangle in particular. “Thus, if remittances were already important, it’s probable they become much more important,” under Trump’s administration.

But Trump’s attempt to bolster the US economy could become “eventually positive news, inasmuch as it creates more jobs ... requiring labor,” he said. Another, more desirable, scenario would be one “in which none of the raids and massive deportations take place, because, from a pragmatic perspective, it seems to me that there would be some pressure, from some sectors in the United States, for labor that is useful for that economy not to be deported,” he added.

In Gatica’s view, a revived US economy with more anti-immigrant controls by the Trump administration could have a negative effect on would-be migrants because coyotes—as human traffickers are known—charging much more and following more perilous trails.

“That would place us, I believe, in a scenario quite similar to that of Europe, where we frequently hear of vessels capsizing with hundreds of Africans,” he pointed out.

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