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Mexico, U.S., Central American Countries Attempt to Address Surge in Numbers of Minors Crossing into U.S.

by Carlos Navarro

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A lot of attention is being focused on the suddenly heavy migration of unaccompanied children and youth from Central America to the US, primarily through the Mexican border with Texas. US authorities caught more than 52,000 unaccompanied children and youth trying to cross the border into the US between January and May of this year. That number was expected to rise to as high as 90,000 by the end of 2014, according to White House estimates.

While the situation has created a humanitarian crisis along the US-Mexico border, the influx of young people—originating mostly from Honduras, Guatemala, and El Salvador—has also caused problems for government agencies and private humanitarian groups in Mexico.

The crisis has prompted bilateral consultations between Mexican Interior Secretary Miguel Ángel Osorio Chong and his Guatemalan counterparts. Osorio Chong was also present at a regional summit in Guatemala City on June 20 with Presidents Otto Pérez Molina of Guatemala and Salvador Sánchez Cerén of El Salvador, US Vice President Joe Biden, and Honduran Government Coordinator Jorge Ramón Hernández Alcerro. The Honduran president, who was represented at the summit by Hernández Alcerro, spoke with Biden by telephone ahead of the meeting in Guatemala.

The leaders discussed ways to find some solutions to the problem, including US and Mexican economic assistance for the Central American countries, coordination of efforts protect the migrant children and youth, and investigation and prosecution of human-trafficking organizations. At the summit, Biden announced that US President Barack Obama’s administration had pledged US$9.6 million to help the Central American countries receive and assimilate the returned children.

A chief mode of transportation for many of these children, the freight train known as La Bestia, was temporarily unavailable because of a legal dispute between the railroad owners and the government of Veracruz state (SourceMex, May 21, 2014). The owners of the railroad decided to allow Central American migrants to resume riding the rails after a 20-day moratorium despite the pending legal dispute with Veracruz.

**Surging numbers**

The number of Central American children and youth caught attempting to cross into the US in the first five months of the year has more than doubled the total for the same period a year ago, when the number was slightly less than 25,000. It was just below 14,000 in 2012. While 60,000 to 90,000 children and youth are expected to cross by the end of this year, the number could rise to about 140,000 by the end of 2015, the Obama administration estimated.

A large number of the children and youth attempt to cross the border in Texas. Most of the young people who are apprehended are shipped to military bases in California, Oklahoma, and Texas.
In the past, a high percentage of the children and youth had come from Mexico, but White House officials say most of the young immigrants who have been caught trying to cross the border this year have come from Guatemala, Honduras, and El Salvador.

Mexico’s immigration agency, the Instituto Nacional de Migración (INM), said US authorities repatriate about 40,000 children and youth to Mexico every year, and almost half had crossed the border on their own. INM said its statistics are only for Mexican returnees and do not include numbers for citizens of Guatemala and other Central American countries.

Another interesting trend is that an increasing percentage of the minors crossing into the US are girls under the age of 13. Still, the majority of those attempting to cross are youth between 13 and 17. "The youngest ones are accompanied by relatives, although I have seen three 8-year-olds who were traveling alone with a coyote or a guide," said Elizabeth Kennedy, a doctoral candidate at San Diego State University, who conducted a study about the patterns and motivations of minors attempting to cross into the US.

Observers say the motivations to cross into the US are varied. Most of the children and youth come from poor families—and sometimes one or both parents have been killed or have emigrated to the US.

And while poverty is an important factor behind the decision to leave their home countries, observers point to many other reasons for the surge in numbers. In many cases, the parents or relatives in the US have paid an immigrant smuggler to bring their children to the US.

"While this trend is related to the lack of economic opportunities, the coyotes [immigrant smugglers] make false promises to the parents who are already in the US, telling them that they can easily obtain immigrant status," Alma Carolina Viggiano—who works with outreach programs in remote communities in Mexico for the Secretaría de Educación Pública (SEP)—wrote in a guest column in the daily newspaper Zócalo Saltillo.

Analysts say the children and youth are also fleeing the extreme violence and gang activity that has afflicted Central America (NotiCen, Feb. 2, 2012, Dec. 20, 2012, and Feb. 6, 2014).

Kennedy’s study found that the increasing threat of violence was a primary concern for most émigrés, even though nine of every 10 minors acknowledged having relatives in the US. "The reality is that violence—homicide, rape, kidnapping, extortion, disappearance—is at a near all-time high," said Kennedy, who has spent time in El Salvador as a Fulbright fellow. "And it has a disproportionate impact on young people."

"More often than not, their neighborhood has become so dangerous or they have been so seriously threatened, that to stay is to wait for their own death or great harm to their family. Their neighborhoods are full of gangs. Their schools are full of gangs. They do not want to join for moral and political reasons and thus see no future," explained Kennedy.

Kennedy said the number of Central American minors who embark on the trip to the US via Mexico has increased consistently since 2011. "The violence has surged in El Salvador," said the researcher. "In May, there were 401 homicides, which is an average of 12 per day. In Honduras, the average is 15 per day, in a country of 8 million inhabitants."
**Some look for work in Mexico**

Mexico has had to wrestle with its own problems with Central American minors who cross the border seeking work in Chiapas. Some immigrant-rights advocates say the flow is "almost unstoppable," and the fact that many of the minors are willing to accept almost any job in the relatively poor state of Chiapas is an indication that the situation is worse back home. These children find jobs in the city or in agriculture, laboring under sweatshop conditions. In the city of Tuxtla Gutiérrez, for example, these children are found on city streets selling chewing gum, candy, or fruit, shining shoes, and cleaning windshields. "The [Chiapas state] capital is like a magnet for minors," said Blanca Ruth Esponda Espinosa, who worked as an adviser for the International Labor Organization (ILO),

Mexican authorities do not have a count of how many Central American children are working in Chiapas and neighboring states, but nongovernmental organizations estimate the number is close to 115,000.

Esponda Espinosa is among those urging the Mexican government to take a more proactive stance in dealing with the minors, who should not have to work under slave conditions in Mexico. By failing to address the problem, she said, the Secretaría del Trabajo y Previsión Social (STPS) is reneging on its obligations under ILO Convention 138, which, in Article 1, states that every country that has signed on to the document must "pursue a national policy designed to ensure the effective abolition of child labor and to raise progressively the minimum age for admission to employment or work to a level consistent with the fullest physical and mental development of young persons."

Mexican authorities are taking the same steps as their counterparts in the US: deporting the children back to their country of origin. "The buses arrive every day, originating in the state of Chiapas in Mexico, headed for Honduras," said La Prensa, a daily newspaper in Tegucigalpa.

So far this year, more than 5,000 children have been returned to Honduras from Mexico via the community of Corinto, which is on the Honduran border with Guatemala, said the newspaper, citing statistics from the Honduran government’s Dirección Nacional de Servicios Especiales de Investigación (DNSEI).

**Biden meets with Mexican, Central American leaders**

The leaders of the five nations attending the summit in Guatemala on June 20 pledged to continue working together to address the problem. "We recognize that this situation is not sustainable and is unacceptable," said US Vice President Biden. "We have a shared responsibility to take significant steps to address this problem."

The Central American leaders, in turn, offered their point of view on the situation during discussions with Biden, suggesting that comprehensive immigration reform could help solve the problem. "I proposed to the vice president the possibility of considering temporary work programs, which would allow [Guatemalans] to go for a time and return," said Pérez Molina.

"As long as [US] immigration reform is not approved, the exodus of children to the United States will continue," said Honduran representative Hernández Alcerro. Biden also discussed the issue in a telephone conversation with Honduran President Juan Orlando Hernández, who was in Brazil to watch his country play in the World Cup.
While Biden offered a conciliatory stance at the summit, the Obama administration has put out the word warning young people not to make the trip. "The [administration] message that is coming out now is, 'Don't come,'" a US official who asked not to be identified told Reuters. "'And if you think you're coming and once you're here you won't be returned, that's not the case. You're not going to be able to stay.' And that's the message that we're hoping will dissuade these young people."

Many of the young people are expected to request asylum because of the violent conditions that led them to cross into the US, but most will be sent back home. "They don't have legal status to remain in the US. ... It doesn't matter whether they are minors or adults, they will be deported," said Lisa Kubiske, US ambassador to Tegucigalpa.

Despite Biden’s promises at the summit, the US policies toward the region came under criticism. While leaders of the Central American countries were more diplomatic during the meeting, other critics were more blunt. "The US government, which has shown very little interest about the situation along Mexico’s southern border [with Central America], has endorsed the plan drafted by the Peña Nieto government to create three security corridors on the border with Guatemala," said the online news site Otramérica de Sur a Norte. "The US is mostly interested in finding ways to stem the flow of drugs through Mexico’s southern border, as 80% of the cocaine sold in the north in 2013 came via Guatemala—and mostly by land. The US also wants to address the migration question further south than its own border with Mexico."

Officials in the Obama government confirmed that the US is working closely with the Pérez Molina and Peña Nieto administrations to help them tighten security along their common border. Additionally, law-enforcement authorities in the US and Central American governments are now putting a priority on prosecuting the child-smuggling operations that increasingly are "marketing" their services to parents of unaccompanied minors.

Some critics pointed out that the US policies toward Central America during the past several decades might also be contributing to the problem. "The US has to remember that Central America is not Afghanistan or Iraq or other places around the world where chaos is promoted," said Honduran author Roberto Quesada, who has written on immigration-related issues. His published works include the novels Big Banana and Nunca entres por Miami.

"If you continue to promote and support anti-democratic measures, such as electoral fraud, impunity, then open up spaces [in your country for us], because Central Americans will move en masse to the US," said Quesada, who resides in New York City.

In Mexico, some analysts suggested before the summit that Osorio Chong offer some concessions to the Central American countries, including decriminalizing the act of entering to the country without a permit. "The interior secretary should bring to the table: eliminating the requirement for citizens of Central American countries to obtain visas to travel through Mexico and offering to remove checkpoints along the highways in the southeast," columnist Carlos Puig wrote in the daily newspaper Milenio. "Those two steps would go a long way toward improving conditions for Central American migrants."

Osorio Chong did not make those two offers but said the five countries agreed to form high-level groups to deal with the situation. "This is a problem that transcends borders, but one that must be addressed in each of the affected countries," the Mexican interior secretary said in an interview with the television network Televisa.
The return of La Bestia

Central American migrants seeking to make their way to the US-Mexico border had a means of transportation restored when Ferrosur and Kansas City Southern de México, owners of the cargo train known as La Bestia, decided once again to allow stowaways on the rail line. The decision came despite the lack of resolution to a lawsuit that the Veracruz state government had filed against the railroad. Authorities accused the train conductors of making unscheduled stops in isolated areas to allow criminal gangs to board the train and assault the migrants.

Rubén Figueroa, an advocate with Movimiento Migrante Mesoamericano, said the 20-day period in which the prohibition on stowaways was in place caused hardships for Central American migrants, who became stranded in Tenosique, Chiapas, and other communities. And even though railroad officials were enforcing the ban on stowaways, Central Americans continued coming into Mexico during the period, said Figueroa.

With the return of La Bestia as a transportation option for Central American migrants, a longtime problem has resurfaced. Alejandro Vila, in charge of migrant affairs for the Chiapas attorney general’s office (Fiscal Especial de Atención a Migrantes de la Procuraduría de Justicia de Chiapas), said Central American gangs—known as maras—have decided to expand their activities along the rail route with the decision of the railroad to again allow stowaways to ride atop rail cars. Vila and officials in Oaxaca state confirmed that members of the Barrio 18 and MS 13 gangs, working in concert with the Zetas drug cartel, have begun charging Central American migrants the equivalent of US$100 for the right to ride on La Bestia.

"Our analysis shows that everything has been linked to the return of [La Bestia]," said Vila. "The groups of maras are planning to establish themselves in a way that they can gain control of the rail line, which has been traditionally the place where they exercised their power over the years."

The Guatemalan government also issued a warning via its consulate in Tuxtla Gutiérrez, Chiapas state, alerting its citizens to remain vigilant at the train station in Ciudad Arriaga, in Chiapas state, a stopping point for La Bestia. The warning said members of the maras and the Zetas are using the stop at the Arriaga station to rob immigrants of their money and steal their belongings.

Because of the danger, some Central American migrants are choosing not to ride on La Bestia. "These migrants have opted to walk," said immigrant-rights advocate Rev. Alejandro Solalinde. "None of them wants to jump on the train because members of criminal organizations are waiting for them."

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