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Migration Conference Misses Key Issues

by LADB Staff

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Inforpress Centroamericana [The author is a staff writer for Inforpress Centroamericana, published in Guatemala]

The VII Regional Conference on Migration (RCM) convened in Antigua, Guatemala, on May 28-31. The agenda focused narrowly on terrorism, leaving those participants who had come to discuss questions of migrant's rights and other legal issues chagrined by meeting's end. The RCM organization sets the agenda based on input from the delegates.

The degree to which some members sought to derail the domination of the anti-terrorism agenda is reflected in a paragraph from the Declaration of the Regional Network of Civil Organizations (RNCOM), dated May 30. "Therefore, we would also like to make sure that the Agenda and RCM Action Plan keep the emphasis on the nature, characteristics, determinants, and consequences of the migratory processes. We urge the governments participating in this Conference to deal with the subject of migration from a wide and integrated perspective, without losing track by subordinating their priorities in favor of subjects of other public policies agendas, as is the case of national security, the fight against terrorism, combat against drug dealing, among others. An inherent risk of the inclusion of the topics on migration in this agenda could be the intensification of xenophobic, discriminatory, and racist attitudes and positions, besides the fact that it promotes the criminality of the migration phenomenon."

Nevertheless, the final report of the RCM, released June 29, concludes with a declaration against terrorism, promising to adopt "essential actions for the security of the region within a framework of full respect for the human rights of migrants, particularly in terms of distinguishing positive and beneficial migration flows from those individuals and groups who pursue terrorist and other criminal purposes...." The document further commits the RCM to "...promote, within the area of migration, measures contributing to the prevention of terrorist acts and the dismantling of organizations engaged in terrorist activities." (The concluding documents are available on the World Wide Web at: <http://www.rcmvs.org/7a.htm>)

Attending the conference were participants from the US, Mexico, El Salvador, Honduras, Nicaragua, Costa Rica, Panama, the Dominican Republic, Canada, Belize, and Guatemala. Observers included representatives from Argentina, Colombia, Ecuador, and Peru, as well as from the International Organization for Migration (IOM), the UN High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR), the Economic Commission for Latin America and the Caribbean (ECLAC), and the Inter-American Commission for Human Rights (IACHR). The conference's predominant focus was on border security, the main concern of US Immigration and Naturalization Service (INS) Commissioner James W. Ziglar. The INS's first strategic goal, according to its Web page, is to "...protect America [sic] against the threat of terrorism."

Prior to the conference, however, several representatives of other governments had announced their desire to discuss a wide range of themes related to migration. Central American countries acknowledge that they can do little to lessen the northward flow of migrants as long as migrants' countries of origin fail to reach greater levels of development.

Days before the RCM, then Guatemalan Interior Minister Eduardo Arevalo Lacs said richer nations share the responsibility with poorer nations to address development. "[Under-development], which is diverse and complex and stems from various causes, has several ways of expressing itself," said Arevalo Lacs. "It requires joint efforts among governments, migrant organizations in the exterior, and the cooperation of civil and international organizations."

Conference fails to analyze economic causes of migration

Guatemalan Vice Minister of Foreign Affairs Erick Ovalle said a principal theme of the conference was expected to be migrants' rights. "It seems we came to the wrong conference; they talked only about security and terrorism and failed to discuss migration as a global issue that needs to be resolved," said Margarita Hurtada of the Mesa Nacional para las Migraciones de Guatemala. Hurtada said progress on migration issues was scarce during the conference, despite participating civil-society groups' demands that agreements be met regarding migrants' rights.

"Central American countries need assistance in the management of immigrants imprisoned or retained at the US- Mexican border who are victims of human-trafficking networks," said Pablo Calderon of the IOM. Central American governments "have serious difficulties assuring a dignified, safe and orderly return of migrants within the framework of human rights."

In the first four months of this year, Guatemalan authorities have reported the deportation of 42,000 people from Mexico, 42% were Guatemalans, 44% Hondurans, and 13% Salvadorans. Calderon pointed to the lack of economic resources as one factor that limits countries' abilities to execute a repatriation process that protects the human rights of migrants, particularly intraregional migrants. The Guatemalan Migration Department has found problems in that Guatemalan legislation determines a maximum time period between the detention and expulsion of people originating from South America, Asia, and Africa. Often, the purchase of plane tickets, which are paid for by the US Embassy, becomes an obstacle because the embassy waits to gather a large group of persons before deporting them, explained a spokesperson.

The department spokesperson said that, along the routes used by migrants attempting to reach the US, the Policia Nacional Civil (PNC) carries out operations and interceptions without administrative requests from the migration authorities, leading to arbitrariness and adverse treatment. Data from Mexican consulates in the US show that nearly 2,000 migrants (an average of almost 300 people per year) have died since 1995 on both sides of the US-Mexican border trying to cross into the US.

Claudia Smith, director of the Rural Legal Assistance Foundation in Oceanside, California, said it is likely that the official count of migrant deaths will continue to climb despite increased border enforcement.

US Chamber of Commerce acknowledges need for migrant labor Persons who migrate for economic and labor reasons do so because difficult conditions in their own countries force them to search for better conditions elsewhere, explained Mauricio Montero, president of the Fundacion Pro Ayuda al Inmigrante in Costa Rica. When addressing the theme of migration, the region's realities are often ignored. Many analysts say neoliberal policies and measures, which support free movement of goods but restrict the movement of persons, compromise many people's ability to feed their families within their own countries and fail to guarantee food security. This pushes those people to migrate, said Montero.

Despite the difficulties, many people succeed in crossing the border into the US. These migrants have become key players in the revival of US labor movements, says an article in the Mexican newspaper La Jornada. "Hundreds of Mexican immigrant workers in a meat-packing plant in Omaha, Nebraska, recently voted for union affiliation, reversing two decades of defeat for US labor movements in the industry and hinting at a possible future: rescuing democracy and the basic rights of US citizens," said the article.

The US business sector has been obligated to recognize that the US economy could not function without immigrant labor. "If we were to send all undocumented immigrants back to their home countries, the US economy would collapse," said Thomas Donahue, president of the US Chamber of Commerce. Businesspeople across the US, in sectors ranging from hotels and restaurants to food processing, have risen to the defense of migrants and pushed for amnesty for undocumented immigrants. "They don't do it because they're Samaritans, but out of necessity," said the La Jornada article.

The US Chamber of Commerce calculated that private business will need more than 12 million workers in the service sector over the next decade, labor which is not currently found within the US.

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