Immigration on Mexico's Southern Border

Ana Luisa Izquierdo y de la Cueva*

Marco Polo Guzmán Hernández/Cuartoscuro

Central American migrants very frequently risk their lives.

Down through its history, Mexico's handling of migration along its southern border has been full of paradoxes and contrasts. Migration used to be a natural event that became part of ancient peoples' sacred chronicles; today it is viewed with suspicion and even considered a crime. This is why we have set out to understand the phenomenon to the fullest and approach it with a focus that embraces human rights and puts Latin American brotherhood front and center in national policy.

Because of its geographical location, Mexico has played the role of linking North and South America, Anglo-Saxon America and Latin America, the Protestant and Catholic traditions. The southern border is 1,138 kilometers long, slightly less than half the length of the northern border. It runs along the states of Chiapas, Tabasco, Campeche and Quintana Roo on the Mexican side, and Guatemala and Belize on the other side. It is Chiapas, however, that receives the brunt of migrant flows because 16 of its municipalities border on Guatemala, while Tabasco and Campeche have two border municipalities and Quintana Roo only one.

In addition to the fact that a central part of our history includes normal population movements, when Mexico became independent, it also developed a great willingness to offer refuge to those who for political or economic reasons needed to leave their home countries.

After all the countries on the continental Western Hemisphere became independent, Spain suppressed the indepen-

* Researcher at the IIFL-UNAM Center for Mayan Studies.
alidlc@servidor.unam.mx.

dence movements in the Caribbean, mainly Cuba and Puerto Rico. Metropolis pundits called these uprisings of the Afro-American population "Negroid conspiracies." Some of their leaders fled to Mexico seeking refuge. Francisco Zarco's suspicions alerted Mexican authorities to the danger of signing an extradition treaty with Spain, so that, instead, they could guarantee the immigrants complete safety.[1] Mexico was the port of entry for those expelled for ideological reasons. This was when the prohibition of extraditing people persecuted for their political beliefs was raised to the constitutional level (Article 15), a landmark in Mexican history.

On the other hand, different factors contributed to the fact that the first Mexican Congress issued rules for colonization in our country, which at that time, 1822, was twice the size it is now. Those factors include low population density, particularly of mestizo and *criollo* population in certain regions,[2] Certain theories of progress based on racist prejudices that fostered the idea that the national indigenous population was ignorant, indolent and lazy, while the inhabitants of other countries were supposedly more cultured, industrious and hard-working. (Later, José Vasconcelos's idea that racial intermingling was the way to development was added to this mix.) In 1863, legislation was adjusted to permit the entry of colonists with the mission of making agriculture flourish. They were given the same legal status as Mexican citizens, with the same rights and obligations.

When Mexico became independent, it also developed a great willingness to offer refuge to those who for political or economic reasons needed to leave their home countries.

Our country opened its doors to the Anglo-Saxon population to occupy Texas and Coahuila, giving them the right to land and tax breaks. In the second half of the nineteenth century, taking advantage of Mexican colonization policy, Germans —some from Guatemala— arrived in Chiapas's Socunusco area, right behind the first U.S. colonists.

Colonization was facilitated by the foundation of companies dedicated to land surveys, attracting colonists with the promise of financial success. In contrast with the northern border, where the Americans came to stay, in the South, their sojourn ended in the first years of the twentieth century. The German presence, by contrast, was longer lasting, although they did not mix with the local population and preserved their cultural identity as much as possible, thus contributing to marking the social differences among the indigenous, mestizos, *criollos* and the successful foreigners. Their economic activities were concentrated in coffee for export, sugarcane and cacao, as well as the production of rubber and *piloncillo*, a kind of concentrated brown sugar or crystallized molasses.

Another important wave of immigration was headed by Enomoto Takeshi in 1893, symbolic because these were the first Japanese to arrive in Latin America. A pioneering group called the Enomoto Colony was made up of 32 families who settled around Escuintla, Chiapas, in the Soconusco Pacific coast region. Evidently, their undertakings were successful: they started out growing coffee, but then branched out into the silk industry. They diversified and began to open shops and pharmacies; in the countryside, in addition to planting, they went into cattle raising. The Japanese were not as careful to maintain the purity of their identity as the Germans, and today we find people with Japanese last names —mainly in retail and wholesale— who are descendents of those first settlers.

Together with these three waves of immigration, part of Mexico's policy to achieve a certain idea of progress based on excluding the Mayan peoples was to attract cheap labor to the recently constituted large agricultural holdings. The German, U.S. and Japanese foreigners were the owners and also the administrators and overseers, but it was the indigenous people who actually tilled the land. Clinging to a prejudice that the indigenous were incapable of doing hard labor, the landowners did not allow them to develop and kept them in a very precarious subsistence economy. So, they encouraged the immigration of Chinese labor. The first objective was to build the Tehuantepec railway that would join the Gulf of Mexico to the Pacific: to do that, in the last decades of the nineteenth century, the Compañía Mexicana de Navegación del Pacífico (the Mexican-Pacific Navigation Company) hired 2,500 Chinese laborers.

Although the Chinese were not welcomed with open arms by the general population, they were favored by Porfirio Díaz's policy and they really knuckled down to the hard labor.[3] Once the railroad contracts were over, with a little money in their pockets, they went into the laundry and tailoring businesses, made shoes and clothing and grew vegetables for sale. After a time, they brought their families into the country, increasing Chinese immigration in the first two decades of the twentieth century. In those same years, they began to open other businesses like cafés, restaurants, small hotels, and

department stores; they became importers and were the first to offer sales on credit.

Another wave of cheap labor, Mayas from Guatemala, came into the country to work in agriculture; they came to work in the fields when coffee replaced the cacao and indigo crops. During their stay in Guatemala, German businessmen had gotten used to using indigenous labor, so they encouraged the entry of Mayas from Guatemala's Huehuetenango and San Marcos departments.

Extreme poverty, low productivity in their subsistence farming, high population density, lack of jobs and other calamities, together with low educational levels and the lack of industry in their own country made coming to Mexico attractive for migrants. They also enjoyed certain benefits and sometimes even earned higher wages than at home, even if they were lower than those of most Mexican workers. This kind of servitude is comparable with that of the peons tied to the land in the time of Porfirio Díaz.

These workers entered the country without documentation. This means that illegally recruiting labor, and what is called the "human meat market" established in collaboration with corrupt officials, is almost a century old. While there are still workers laboring under these conditions in our country, their numbers are beginning to dwindle because of the migratory accord now being negotiated. On the other hand, the requirements demanded of the seasonal indigenous laborers are paradoxical because their work has strengthened the regional and export economies by bringing in foreign currency; this means that coming to a fair agreement would be in line with Mexico's policy of offering refuge and contribute to fostering Latin American brotherhood.

On the other hand, there are also examples of Mexico's solidarity: the welcome offered to European Jews during the Nazi occupation and exiled Republicans during the Spanish Civil War, as well as the tolerance of Cuban émigrés.

However, not all peoples have been treated in the same way. A moment that could have reiterated Mexico's fraternal tradition was the policy of admitting political exiles in the 1970s, but the political instability and mass repression in Guatemala caused an exodus of its Mayan population over the border into Mexico. The first wave came through the harsh terrain of the Petén region to Campeche, and then through Chiapas. The first contingent of 500 Guatamalans was stopped two days later when they began to be deported back across the border to Guatemala. This was repeated at least three times, but they kept on coming. By 1983, an estimated 50,000 exiles were living in 77 Chiapas towns. Essentially, they were seeking safety and trying to get the attention of international bodies. But Mexico was not acting in accordance with the lessons it had learned from its own experience.

The international scandal created by the expulsion of these people alerted the United Nations High Commission for Refugees (UNHCR), and the Mexican Commission for Aid to Refugees (Comar), created to deal with the Salvadoran exodus, began to deal with the problem and debate it publicly, with the support of religious institutions. The first thing this achieved was to stop the mass deportations; second, to begin the regulation of migration; third, the respect for traditional forms of government and setting up job programs, although these were not completely exempt from human rights violations.

Keeping the refugees a few kilometers from the border was felt to be a danger, so the Guatemalans were shipped off to more remote spots, most often using force and violating their human rights. A year later, they were relocated in Campeche and Quintana Roo. Some kept up the hope of being repatriated, so enclaves remained in three of the four border states, with some of the refugees participating in work programs, others in official refugee camps supported by national and international aid, and others taking on waged work, although at a disadvantage *vis-à-vis* Mexican day laborers and subject to exploitation by bosses.

> Certain theories of progress based on racist prejudices fostered the idea that the national indigenous population was ignorant, indolent and lazy, while the inhabitants of other countries were more cultured, industrious and hard-working.

Once they had organized and designated representatives, they began to negotiate their return with their own government, but proposing that certain rights be recognized: the right to the land they lived on, mainly the land they had ancestral rights to; the right to live under their own forms of government; and the right to be accompanied by the international bodies that had protected them.

The first form of repatriation was individual and voluntary; the governments decided how, who, and how many would return to Guatemala. This process lasted from 1984 to 1998. The year the largest number went home was 1994 when the Zapatista movement began. The second way was the collective, organized return, which ended in 1999: in this case, the

refugees decided where, when, who, how many and how they would go, and arrangements were made jointly by non-governmental organizations and the governments of Mexico and Guatemala. Nevertheless, some opted to stay in Mexico and the government made 25,000 of them naturalized citizens in the late 1990s.

The southern border did not have control stations until the 1990s because a large part of the land that separates us from Guatemala and Belize was only sparsely populated by poor Maya indigenous people. But after it was recognized that Guatemalan soldiers were entering Mexico illegally to kidnap expatriates, Mexican authorities became aware of the need to build roads to insure surveillance and control of the border since it was, of course, a matter of national security. This surveillance became a priority when the Zapatista movement began to develop in those areas, focusing the eyes of the international community on the great poverty and social inequality prevalent in Mexico. We have also been pressured by the United States to reinforce surveillance of border movements since the September 11 terrorist attacks.

Mexican solidarity seems lost because our government has been overbearing and discriminatory, violating the human rights of Central Americans who come to our country, something we have condemned when it happens to undocumented Mexicans.

On the other hand, at the end of the 1970s, given the economic situation of Guatemala, Belize, Honduras, El Salvador and Nicaragua, Mexico had to deal with another wave of migrants: these countries' "economic exiles," a great many of whom are indigenous, mainly Mayas.

Most of these "economic exiles" go through our country on the way to the United States in search of the "American Dream." They are usually undocumented. A few of them come on their own, and others come in caravans led by human smugglers. Their journey is fraught with danger: they not only lack safe transportation —they often travel hanging from trains, meeting with mutilation and violent death— but they also fall ill and find themselves at the mercy of corrupt immigration officials, who extort money from them, and of thieves and muggers.

Ironically, the departure of the dispossessed from their countries benefits their governments because it prevents social unrest, decreases the pressure on an already weak job market, decreases the amount of public services that have to be provided and increases liquidity in the economy because of the millions of dollars in remittances they send back to their families.

There are legal barriers to overcome before Mexico can once again welcome those who have escaped from their native lands. As a federation, the central government is the only body with legal jurisdiction to manage the border area: even though the states and municipalities are sovereign, the Constitution prohibits them from signing the international treaties or agreements that would help solve certain immigration problems. A possible solution would be to look to international law, that is, in concert with the Central American governments, comply with and ensure compliance with the treaties that guarantee exiles' human rights.

Mexican solidarity seems to have been lost because our government has been overbearing and engaged in discriminatory, corrupt acts that violate the human rights of the Central Americans who come to our country, something we have condemned when it happens to the undocumented Mexicans who try to cross our northern border.

Migration must be considered a fundamental right of all the world's citizens. For that reason, migrants —even those who come to our land— must be considered trans-border minorities who enjoy an international system that protects their rights. VM

Further Reading

Aguayo, Sergio, *El éxodo centroamericano: consecuencias de un conflicto* (Mexico City: Conafe/Secretaría de Educación Pública, 1985).

Castillo, Manuel Ángel, *Migraciones de indígenas guatemaltecos a la frontera sur de México* (Guatemala City: Centro de Estudios Urbanos y Regionales-Universidad de San Carlos de Guatemala, 1993).

Castillo, Manuel Ángel, Mónica Toussaint Ribot and Mario Vázquez Olivera, *Espacios diversos, historia en comun. México, Guatemala y Belice: la construcción de una frontera* (Mexico City: Secretaría de Relaciones Exteriores, Dirección General del Acervo Histórico Diplomático, 2006).

Tovar González, María Elena, "Extranjeros en el Soconusco," *Revista de Humanidades: Tecnológico de Monterrey* no. 8, published by ITESM, 2000, pp. 29-43.

Notes

[1] Francisco Zarco (1829-1869) was a Mexican journalist and historian and a critic of conservative policy. He was minister of foreign relations in the government of Benito Juárez. [Editor's Note.]

[2] "*Criollo*" in Mexican Spanish refers to people of Spanish, non-indigenous, ancestry born in the Western Hemisphere. They were the highest level of the socio-economic-cultural totem pole, except for the Spaniards themselves. [Translator's Note.]

[3] President Porfirio Díaz was in power from 1876 to 1911. [Editor's Note.]