

# Mexico's Southern Border Security and Migratory Crisis<sup>1</sup>

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**B**orders are dynamic, but sometimes change accelerates or elements come together to make them more visible. This is what has happened along Mexico's southern border since the 1980s, when different events both inside and outside the region resulted in the coincidence of security-related discourses and actions with migratory-related discourses. To a certain extent, it became "normal" to associate the terms. But neither "migration" nor "security" has a single meaning, and therefore, the links between migratory flows and security policies have to be analyzed in concrete geographic and historical contexts, in relation to specific movements of the population and taking into account the different dimensions of security.

Generally speaking, when talking about the southern border, we include the states of Quintana Roo, Campeche, Tabasco, and Chiapas. The border is 1 149 kilometers long; 956 of them with Guatemala and 193 with Belize.<sup>2</sup> The Mexico-Belize border is marked almost in its entirety by rivers, while between Guatemala and Mexico, part of the border is a river and the rest is mainly mountains and jungle.

The final establishment of Mexico's southern border was not without its conflicts. In the case of the Guatemala border, the groups settled on both sides shared the same colonial heritage, as well as similar social, ethnic, and cultural characteristics. In the case of Belize, the presence of rebel Mayas and their relationship with the British authorities was the determining factor; the population movements stemming from the conflict had a visible effect on both sides, and, while there is a greater degree of ethnic and organizational differentiation, they also favored the forging of historic and family ties.<sup>3</sup>



Central American migrants in southern Mexico use religious symbolism to protest their own calvary.

Enrique Ordóñez/Cuartoscuro

There are actually only ten formal border crossings: seven in Chiapas, one in Tabasco, and two in Quintana Roo. The entire 200 kilometers of border with Campeche does not have a single crossing. Ten crossing points are insufficient for the length of the border, but the porosity is also increased by a dearth of infrastructure and personnel.

## CHANGES IN MIGRATORY DYNAMICS IN SOUTHERN MEXICO

In only two decades, the southern border went through rapid changes. Once the main internal conflicts in Central America ended with the signing of the peace accords in El Salvador

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and Guatemala in 1992 and 1996, respectively, paradoxically, migration increased. This was because economic problems spurred migration from Guatemala, El Salvador, and Honduras to the United States, although in some cases, the final destination was Mexico.

The presence of Central Americans on Mexico's southern border did not create serious problems, nor were there visible signs that the local population rejected them. The undocumented status of many workers did, however, engender abuses and exploitation by some employers; and although in general local inhabitants along the border did not feel threatened by the foreigners, concern and hostility from certain sectors did become noticeable in the early twenty-first century when the number of undocumented migrants passing through increased at the same time that security conditions for living along the border deteriorated for multiple reasons.

The table shows two aspects of immigration along the southern border: on the one hand documented border workers, almost all Guatemalan, and on the other hand, people from Guatemala, Honduras, El Salvador, Nicaragua, and Belize who entered the country without documents and were detained and returned by the authorities.<sup>4</sup>

In 2005, a higher number of deportations was reported, 56.4 percent more than in 2001. In that same period, the number of documented workers grew only 12 percent. This shows the changes in migratory flows. Later, there was a decrease in both processes: by 2010 the number of border workers declined 37 percent *vis-à-vis* 2005, while deportations fell 66 percent. There are several possible explanations for this significant drop: anything from more effective border controls to the repercussions of the contraction of the economy and therefore the decline in job offers in both the United States and Mexico. Despite the fact that migratory flows have decreased, security conditions for migrants in border areas have not improved.

#### SECURITY PROBLEMS ALONG THE SOUTHERN BORDER. ABSENCES AND IMBALANCES OF THE MEXICAN STATE

To increase its control over migratory flows, in 2001, Mexico launched operations for the Southern Plan, involving strengthening actions to intercept undocumented migrants from the Tehuantepec Isthmus to the southern border. The figures in the table show that this plan did not achieve any significant results. In 2007, the then-commissioner of the National Mi-

The Mexican cartels took advantage of the situation in Guatemala, where a culture of violence prevailed, demobilized troops and weak institutions abounded, and the country was rife with poverty and corruption.

gration Institute (INM) described undocumented migrants in Mexico as “a huge membrane, an increasingly thick plug” along our northern border. When asked if the reasons for greater control were due to pressure from the United States, she said, “The social or political reason [for stopping them from going through Mexican territory] is not because the “gringos” tell me whether I can or I can't. Forget that. They just aren't going to let them through there...and at the same time they do affect Mexico's development, the social fabric of the border states, which turns into a very, very grave problem for us.”<sup>5</sup>

Another point that had a big impact on changing the migratory scenario on the southern border was the U.S. policy of deporting Central American prisoners from the United States without any warning. Some calculations put the number of inmates deported between 2000 and 2004 to El Salvador, Honduras, and Guatemala at 20,000.<sup>6</sup> This strengthened the “Mara” gang members, favoring their transnationalization. The “Mara Salvatrucha” and the “Pandilla Barrio 18” (Neighborhood 18 Gang) lost no time in showing up in Chiapas border communities, the obligatory route for their return to the United States, as well as a land of opportunity for crime, taking advantage of migrants' vulnerability.

Emulating their Central American neighbors, Mexico mounted “anti-Mara” operations: in 2003, Steel I netted the arrest of 130 “Mareros”; in 2004, Steel II, 137; and from December 2005 to June 2006, Steel III, 600. Along these same lines, other operations were mounted: COSTA and Southern Border in 2004, and Community Shield, jointly with Guatemalan and Salvadoran authorities, in 2005.<sup>7</sup> “Mara” presence diminished in Mexico starting in 2005 for several reasons: Hurricane Stan destroyed the train tracks and forced the close of the Tapachula station; migratory routes changed; and pressure was exerted by the authorities. However, starting in 2008, they once again began surfacing in National Human Rights Commission (CNDH) reports and information from

AGRICULTURAL VISITOR IMMIGRATION FORMS (FMVA)  
AND BORDER WORKER IMMIGRATION FORMS (FMTF) ISSUED TO CENTRAL AMERICANS,  
AND DEPORTATIONS BY MEXICAN IMMIGRATION AUTHORITIES (2001 TO 2010)

Year	<i>FMVA and FMTF Issued *</i>	%	<i>Central Americans Deported by the INM**</i>	%	<i>Total</i>
2001	40 640	23.6	131 245	76.4	171 885
2002	38 693	26.7	106 247	73.3	144 940
2003	45 561	20.6	174 697	79.4	220 258
2004	42 895	17.3	204 434	82.7	247 329
2005	45 518	16.9	223 347	83.1	268 865
2006	40 244	18.3	179 345	81.7	219 569
2007	27 840	20.2	109 733	79.8	137 573
2008	23 322	21.8	83 616	78.2	106 938
2009	30 678	32.8	62 773	67.2	93 451
2010	28 544	31.0	63 342	69.0	91 886

\* Until 2007, the figures include the FMVA that Guatemalan citizens residing in the Guatemala-Mexico border area had a right to and that were issued. Starting in 2008, the FMVA was replaced by the FMTF, and in 2010 the FMTF was widened to include workers from Belize and residents of municipalities located in the interior of Guatemala.

\*\* These figures include the deportations of individuals from Guatemala, Honduras, El Salvador, Nicaragua, and Belize; starting in 2007, to make the data comparable with previous years, the figures include both the expulsion of Central Americans and those from Guatemala, Honduras, El Salvador, and Nicaragua who accepted the terms of the Agreements on Voluntary Repatriation.

**Source:** Developed by the author using data from the National Migration Institute, "Boletines estadísticos," Estadísticas migratorias, [www.inm.gob.mx/index.php/page/Estadisticas\\_Migratorias](http://www.inm.gob.mx/index.php/page/Estadisticas_Migratorias).

migrant shelters. Also, the social exclusion of young people and their lack of opportunities in the region have favored the growth of local gangs.

Undoubtedly, the most serious security problem along Mexico's southern border stems from drug trafficking. In 1998, federal authorities implemented Operation Sealing to improve the interception of drugs in transit to the United States. In the region, the program was given another shot in the arm in 2000 with personnel training and modern technology for detecting drugs. It got some results, but after 2003, it stopped operating despite the fact that the general situation had not improved.

It is well known that Central America, and particularly Guatemala, became a bridge for drug producers and traffickers'

activities after the relative success of U.S. and Colombian operations to combat the air and sea routes through the Caribbean in the 1990s. The Mexican cartels took advantage of the situation in Guatemala, only recently recovering from civil war, where a culture of violence prevailed, demobilized troops and weak institutions abounded, and the country was rife with poverty, and corruption. According to the Stratfor agency, the Zetas dominate the departments of Huehuetenango, Petén, and Quiché, while the Sinaloa Cartel controls the department of San Marcos and Guatemala's Pacific Coast region.<sup>8</sup> It should be emphasized that members of the elite Guatemalan special forces, known as the "Kaibiles," collaborated with the Zetas, particularly after military demobilization and cuts in the armed forces. Thus, the violence has

expanded since the incorporation of organizations with tough military training. In Belize, concern has increased about organized crime using the country as a platform for its operations. Recently, U.S. cooperation has stepped up through Operational Detachment Alpha (ODA), since, although previously a transit country, land and sea trafficking operations have been detected in its territory.<sup>9</sup>

#### REPERCUSSIONS OF BORDER INSECURITY ON MIGRATION

The abuses inflicted on migrants by municipal, state, and federal authorities mainly consist of theft and extortion. However, most ill-treatment comes from private parties, ranging from theft and cheating all the way to rape, kidnapping, or death. The presence of “Mareros” along the southern border has turned into a nightmare for migrants, particularly when some have decided to leave their countries precisely because they have been threatened by members of that very organization. Added to the “Maras” are now gangs made up of Mexicans, who take advantage of migrants’ defenselessness to rob and abuse them. Then there are also the “coyotes,” or human smugglers, unscrupulous individuals who, in addition to tricking them and not taking them to the agreed-upon destination, participate in thefts and rapes.

In 2010, kidnappings of migrants came under major public scrutiny nationally and internationally. In the first place, in February, the CNDH published an “Informe especial sobre secuestro a migrantes” (Special Report on Kidnapping of Migrants).<sup>10</sup> The report states that from September 2008 to February 2009, 198 kidnapping operations affected 9 758 individuals: almost 95 percent were victims of organized crime; in the other cases, people had been victimized with the participation of public officials. In March, the Inter-American Human Rights Commission (IAHR) held a public hearing in

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which civil society organizations presented the situation of migrants’ human rights based on the experience of Catholic-Church-run shelters. In April, Amnesty International published the report *Víctimas invisibles. Migrantes en movimiento en México* (Invisible Victims. Migrants on the Move in Mexico), an account of the dangers of the trip: kidnappings, threats, attacks, violence against women, disappearances, and death.<sup>11</sup> The document points to extortion and the excessive use of force as problems migrants face at Mexican border control points.

Between August and December of that same year, the situation did not improve. The kidnappings continued; in addition, the massacre of 72 migrants in Tamaulipas in August 2010 and the disappearance of between 40 and 50 migrants in Oaxaca in December clearly show the problem has worsened.<sup>12</sup> The Mexican government has taken important measures, but, as Amnesty International says, the abuses against undocumented migrants are just not a priority for many state and federal officials, particularly if there are no clear indications of direct participation by public officials. Although the main responsibility lies with criminal gangs, complicity or indifference by the authorities play transcendental roles. If it is not possible to guarantee the prevention, detection, investigation, sanction, and effective reparation in the cases of these abuses, a climate of impunity is created.

Human trafficking, the modern version of slavery, is perhaps the most serious crime associated with migration. The *Trafficking in Persons Report* the State Department must present to the U.S. Congress every year cites Belize and Guatemala on the next-to-the-last rung of a classification establishing four levels of agreement in the efforts to fight it.<sup>13</sup> The presence of organized crime along the southern border increases migrant vulnerability. The groups considered most vulnerable are women, children, indigenous, and the undocumented.<sup>14</sup> The sex trade predominates among the cases, but there have also been cases of children, particularly Guatemalan children, whose labor is being exploited in agricultural areas of Chiapas, in domestic servitude, forced begging, itinerant sales, and working in municipal garbage dumps.

#### INCONCLUSIVE EFFORTS TO ESTABLISH ORDER ALONG THE SOUTHERN BORDER

The emergence of actors operating outside the law who take advantage of both cross-border relations and the differences

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between Mexico and its neighbors is a factor of the first water for understanding the deterioration in security conditions.<sup>15</sup> The prolonged absence of the state along the southern border made living day to day outside the law something “normal.” The state has historically been weak in this area of the country, and the attempts to shore it up have merely been showy reactions to emerging problems or timid measures to get noticed because of the growing *de facto* powers made up of criminal networks, not really a political modernization strategy. Another option has been to “jump over the local,” to use William Zartmann’s expression, and adhere to the norms, symbols, or international treaties, in an attempt to recover authority. Mexico is a signatory of a significant number of international agreements about human rights, migration, and security, but its not being able to fulfill the commitments it has acquired has put it in a questionable position. The weakness of the Guatemalan state has contributed to making the situation worse. As a result, local groups become more important and begin specializing in providing services, products, and activities—inside or outside the law—even if they are displaced when bigger crime organizations take over.

#### FINAL THOUGHTS

Security on the southern border has not suffered a “sudden” deterioration. Its genesis and evolution can be traced historically: they are the product of complex interactions between internal and external factors, where the state’s actions and omissions have played a preponderant part. As the product of human agency, this deterioration is not a situation that will last forever, but the complexity it has taken on makes it necessary to rethink it from a comprehensive perspective including the economy, society, politics, and international relations. The challenge consists of seeking mechanisms to orient and redirect change in the border area toward forms of develop-

ment that counter the circumstances that have favored increased insecurity. The process will necessarily be long, and meanwhile, the state and Mexican society are obliged to recognize and guarantee the human rights and security of the migrants in transit in our country. Far from being the cause of insecurity, it is they who have become the preferred victims of organized crime, corruption, and impunity. ■■■

#### NOTES

<sup>1</sup> The original Spanish version of this article was published in Natalia Armijo Canto, ed., *Migración y seguridad: Nuevo desafío en México* (Mexico City: Colectivo de Análisis para la Seguridad con Democracia, 2011), pp. 35-51, <http://www.seguridadcondemocracia.org/mys/pda.pdf>.

<sup>2</sup> Instituto Nacional de Estadística, Geografía e Informática, *Referencias geográficas y extensión territorial de México*, [www.inegi.org.mx/inegi/spc/doc/INTERNET/1-GeografiaDeMexico/MAN\\_REFGEOG\\_EXTTERR\\_VS\\_ENERO\\_30\\_2088.pdf](http://www.inegi.org.mx/inegi/spc/doc/INTERNET/1-GeografiaDeMexico/MAN_REFGEOG_EXTTERR_VS_ENERO_30_2088.pdf).

<sup>3</sup> Luz del Carmen Vallarta, *Los payobispenses. Identidad, población y cultura en la frontera México-Belice* (Mexico City: Universidad de Quintana Roo, 2001).

<sup>4</sup> The deportations are only a rough indicator of undocumented immigration since it is not possible to count those who eluded detention.

<sup>5</sup> Fabiola Martínez, “Migrantes de CA afectan el tejido social de México: Cecilia Romero,” *La Jornada* (Mexico City), November 20, 2007.

<sup>6</sup> Ana Arana, “How Streets Gangs Took Central America,” *Foreign Affairs*, January-June 2005.

<sup>7</sup> Natalia Armijo Canto, Raúl Benítez Manaut, and Athanasios Hristoulas, “Las maras en el triángulo de seguridad Centroamérica-México-Estados Unidos,” Carlos Borrachina, comp., *Democracias en transición en Honduras y Nicaragua. Gobernabilidad, seguridad y defensa* (Mexico City: Universidad de Quintana Roo/Plaza y Valdés, 2010).

<sup>8</sup> Stratfor, “Mexican Cartels and Guatemalan Politics,” February 2011, [www.stratfor.com](http://www.stratfor.com).

<sup>9</sup> “U.S. Army’s Elite Train Belizean Forces in Effort to Build Partnership, Deter Illicit Trafficking,” *United States Southern Command Archives*, May 10, 2010, [www.army.mil/news/2010/05/04/38605-us-armys-elite-train-belizean-forces-in-effort-to-build-partnership-military-capacity-to-deter-trafficking/](http://www.army.mil/news/2010/05/04/38605-us-armys-elite-train-belizean-forces-in-effort-to-build-partnership-military-capacity-to-deter-trafficking/).

<sup>10</sup> CNDH, “Informe especial de secuestro a migrantes,” (Mexico City), February 2010, [www.cndh.org.mx/INFORMES/Especiales/infEspSecMigra.pdf](http://www.cndh.org.mx/INFORMES/Especiales/infEspSecMigra.pdf).

<sup>11</sup> See [www.amnesty.org/en/library/asset/AMR41/014/2010/en/1345cec1-2d36-4da6-b9c0-e607e408b203/amr410142010es.pdf](http://www.amnesty.org/en/library/asset/AMR41/014/2010/en/1345cec1-2d36-4da6-b9c0-e607e408b203/amr410142010es.pdf).

<sup>12</sup> In April 2011, when this article had already been turned in, the country was shaken by the discovery of clandestine graves in the states of Tamaulipas, Durango, and Sinaloa that held more than 200 bodies, presumably of migrants who had disappeared. [Editor’s Note.]

<sup>13</sup> U.S. State Department, *Trafficking in Persons Report 2009*, [www.unhcr.org/refworld/docid/4a4214a32d.html](http://www.unhcr.org/refworld/docid/4a4214a32d.html).

<sup>14</sup> CIDH, “La trata de personas, un reto para México y Centroamérica,” Report presented by Mexican and Central American civil society organizations at the 123rd session of the Inter-American Commission on Human Rights, Washington, D.C., 2005, [www.oas.org/atip/Regional por ciento 20 Reports/ Report por ciento20TIP por ciento20CIDH.pdf](http://www.oas.org/atip/Regional%20Reports/Report%20por%20ciento20CIDH.pdf).

<sup>15</sup> Rodolfo Casillas R., “Redes visibles e invisibles en el tráfico y la trata de personas en Chiapas,” Natalia Armijo Canto, ed., *Migración y seguridad... op. cit.*, pp. 53-71.