



Humanitarian Protection in the Region: A State of Emergency

Interim Report and Recommendations

North and Central American
Task Force on Migration

July 2021

The **North and Central American Task Force** is a non-governmental forum of academics, civil society and business leaders, and former policymakers in dialogue with current government officials created to facilitate a broadly driven solution dialogue among the countries involved in the crisis of migration and forced displacement in the region. Initiated by the World Refugee & Migration Council with the Center for U.S.-Mexican Studies, El Colegio de México, the Migration Policy Institute and the Inter-American Dialogue, the task force will issue concrete recommendations for collective, regional action based on evidentiary research to promote responsibility sharing across North and Central America.

This is the Task Force's first report. Subsequent recommendations will focus on the following:

- Co-responsibility and cooperation for managing migration, focusing on enhancing regional approaches to migration in the region.
- Institutional frameworks and domestic political considerations, including rule of law, governance, corruption and accountability.
- Investment in long-term development to address violence and gangs, poverty and inequality, and the impacts of climate change.
- Strengthening regular pathways for migration as an alternative to irregular migration, including private sponsorship, family reunification and labor migration.
- Integration of refugees and migrants into receiving countries.

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Executive Summary

The North and Central American Task Force on Migration was established to provide bold ideas for a comprehensive approach to Central American migration within a broader regional context. While much of the Task Force's work will focus on deeper causes of migration, including economic and environmental drivers, the urgency of protection needs in the region, exacerbated by the COVID-19 pandemic and back-to-back hurricanes, has led us to consider humanitarian protection in the region as our first issue. We suggest a layered, point-to-point approach to providing protection in the region – working to increase the protection of people in their own communities, when they are displaced within their countries, when transiting through other countries and when they seek protection in neighboring countries.

While it is the responsibility of governments to protect their citizens, when they are unable or unwilling to do so, civil society plays a central role in protecting people at risk and providing needed assistance. The Task Force affirms that civil society is indispensable to addressing these issues and we urge governments to recognize their strengths as an expression of democratic governance.

In looking at humanitarian protection in the region, we focused on four dimensions, providing recommendations in each of these areas for governments, civil society and international actors.

- **Protection of women, children and other groups at greatest risk in Central America and Mexico.** Given the high levels of threats against women and children, we call for the development of a Central American women's consortium to take the lead in developing strategies and implementing programs to support women and children. We call on governments and civil society to take additional actions to protect women and children, including the immediate deployment of regional observer missions on child protection.
- **Greater attention to internal displacement.** While cross-border migrants receive considerable attention, internally displaced persons (IDPs) are almost invisible and we call on governments in the region to develop and implement policies to protect and support IDPs and on international actors to protect and support civil society organizations working with IDPs and other victims of violence.
- **Strengthening asylum laws and capacity throughout the region.** We call on all governments in the region to review and update their laws and regulations on asylum and to support those offices with necessary staffing and funding. We urge the US and Canadian governments to immediately make exceptions to existing COVID-related policies in order for asylum-seekers to enter their territories. Refugee-led and civil society organizations must be included in policy-making processes on asylum.
- **Protecting migrants in transit.** Given the danger of the journeys, we call on governments of all countries through which migrants transit to take every possible step to ensure their safety (including access to COVID-19 vaccines) and urge continued support of civil society efforts to protect migrants en route.

Protecting people in the region is one step that can and should be taken now. Addressing the longer-term issues of poverty, governance, gangs, environmental change, corruption are all essential to reducing the need for large numbers of people to leave their countries. These issues will be addressed by the Task Force in later actions. Until these deeper causes are addressed, it is likely that many Central Americans will continue to feel the need to leave their countries.

Introduction

The North and Central American Task Force on Migration was established to provide bold ideas for a comprehensive approach to Central American migration within a broader regional context. While much of the Task Force’s work will focus on deeper causes of migration, including economic and environmental drivers, the urgency of protection needs in the region, exacerbated by the COVID-19 pandemic and back-to-back hurricanes, has led us to consider humanitarian protection in the region as our first issue to address. We believe that a broad-based, collaborative regional approach is needed to mobilize the support needed to address these issues of life and death; the task is simply too great for any single country to handle on its own.

Many, perhaps most, of those leaving Central America for other countries are doing so because they do not feel safe and do not see a viable future for themselves. They are not protected by their governments, nor do they find sufficient economic opportunities to meet their needs. If people were able to find safety and sustenance in their own communities, fewer people would feel compelled to set out on dangerous journeys to distant countries. While the governments in the region have the primary responsibility to protect their people, we believe that all countries in the region must do their part to address the factors that lead people to migrate.

A commitment to regional responsibility sharing is the foundation on which this Task Force will work — both in seeking to address the long-term reasons that people migrate and responding to the immediate and urgent protection needs in the region.

Honduras, El Salvador, and to a lesser extent, Guatemala, have some of the highest homicide rates in the world, alongside even higher rates of extortion, gender-based violence, femicides, and considerable political conflict (World Bank

2018). This leads many to flee their homes in order to avoid persecution and violence by gangs, organized crime groups, political leaders, and public authorities. For adults under threat, displacement is a rational decision. It is a tried-and-true self-protection strategy. But displacement often has serious consequences for families and for children. Many children suffer from feelings of abandonment, whether because their parents migrated, their families are separated, or they are victims of abuse. There are multiple causes for migration; violence isn’t the only — or even the principal driver given the pressures of poverty, exclusion, inequality, environmental pressures and the desire for family reunification (Centro Fray Matías (Tapachula) y Voces Mesoamericanas 2019).

A Layered, “Point-to-Point” Approach to Protection

We suggest a layered, point-to-point approach to providing protection in the region — working to increase the protection of people in their own communities, when they are displaced within their countries, when transiting through other countries and when they seek protection in neighboring countries. Protecting people in the region is a way of addressing humanitarian needs and upholding human rights. It also addresses at least one of the causes that forces families to make the awful decision that abandoning their homes is their only way to find safety. A layered approach also means working at different levels: supporting grassroots initiatives and refugee-led organizations at the local level, pressing for meaningful change in national governments’ policies and strengthening broader regional initiatives to share responsibility for those who move in search of safety.

This report focuses on protecting people in the region. We emphasize this is a shared regional responsibility. Governments in the region have a

basic responsibility to protect their citizens; if they are unable or unwilling to do so, other governments, international and regional organizations and civil society organizations must step up. All states in the region – including Canada and the United States – are asked to do their part by making needed changes in their own policies as well as sharing personnel, money and technical expertise with others in the region. The Task Force will consider ways of strengthening regional responsibility for Central American migration in the coming months but, in this first report, we underscore that securing humanitarian protection of people in the region is a shared responsibility.

Throughout our deliberations on the issues, we are struck by the key role played by civil society, refugee-led organizations and faith-based organizations, particularly Catholic and evangelical organizations. Non-governmental organizations have the ability to reach communities, internally displaced persons and those at risk of displacement – often when governments cannot. Their efforts should be supported and their ability to act needs to be protected, especially as some governments in the region are imposing increasingly onerous restrictions on NGOs. Human rights defenders, social and community leaders, and their organizations are key to the design and implementation of effective and sustainable projects and public policies. The UN special rapporteur on the situation of human rights defenders has called Honduras one of the most dangerous countries for human rights defenders in Latin America (OHCHR 2016).

The Task Force affirms that civil society is indispensable to addressing these issues and we urge governments to recognize their strengths as an expression of democratic governance.

In particular, we highlight four issues where humanitarian protection needs to be strengthened in the region. While dozens of

recommendations could be made (and in many cases have been made by others), rather than presenting a comprehensive, exhaustive list, we highlight here a few bold, transformative recommendations in each of the following four areas.

- Protection of women, children and other groups at greatest risk in Central America and Mexico
- Greater Attention to Internal Displacement
- Strengthening asylum laws and capacity throughout the region
- Protecting Migrants in Transit

Protection of women, children and other groups at greatest risk in Central America and Mexico

Gender-based violence and violence against children and adolescents in Northern Central America has reached alarming levels. While globally 1 in 3 women have experienced violence, in El Salvador the number is 7 in 10 (Associated Press 2018). According to the Economic Commission for Latin America (CEPAL), Honduras and El Salvador had the highest rates of femicide in Latin America, due to high levels of domestic violence, structural inequalities and lack of rule of law (CEPAL 2021). This violence occurs in a context of desperate

My grandmother is the one who told me to leave. She said: "if you don't join, the gang will shoot you. If you do, the rival gang or the cops will shoot you. But if you leave, no one will shoot you."

– Kevin, Honduras, age 17. UNHCR, *Children on the Run*.

poverty, growing economic disparities, and environmental pressures.

Children and adolescents are at risk of abuse, abandonment, gang-induced violence and forced recruitment as well as the devastating consequences of poverty. Almost half of Guatemalan children suffer chronic malnutrition (UNICEF 2021). Children do not have access to

effective governmental programs to keep them safe. Evidence suggests that the desire to protect their children is one of the main reasons why families decide to leave their homes or to send their children to seek protection on their own (López Ricoy et al 2021). The healthy development of children and adolescents includes building a sense of belonging and self-identity within their families and cultural values.

Recommendations of the Task Force on increasing protection of women and children in the region:

1. We ask women's organizations and networks in Mexico and Central America to organize a regional network meeting within the next year with a view to developing a consortium of organizations to take the lead in identifying and implementing priority actions to protect women and children in the region. We ask international organizations such as Vital Voices and the Pan American Development Foundation to support the initiation and development of such a consortium and call on the Canadian Minister of International Development, and the Administrator of USAID, to prioritize supporting women-led organizations in these efforts.
2. We call on governments in the region to reduce the horrific levels of violence against women, by improving and expanding access to services for all women and girls, to enhance training of police officers and the development of a cadre specialized in sexual, political and domestic violence, to recruit more women into law enforcement, and to ensure that judicial systems are in place to punish perpetrators of violence against women.
3. Authorities who fail to comply with the provisions of existing human rights legislation or fail to fulfill their responsibilities should be subject to effective sanctions.
4. We urge support for civil society organizations to continue to assist women who experience violence, including training of social workers and psychologists who provide support to women and children. We encourage civil society organizations to monitor governmental progress in keeping women safe and to review their country's national laws and policies on gender, examine the extent to which they are implemented and identify changes needed.
5. In collaboration with regional organizations, we call for the immediate deployment of regional observer missions to examine child protection systems in each of the countries in northern Central America and Mexico with a view to recommending concrete actions for strengthening these systems at the national level and appropriate monitoring mechanisms.
6. Recognizing the potential value of a regional system of child protection, we call on UNICEF, together with child-centered NGOs (such as Save the Children) and UNHCR, to convene a meeting with stakeholders in the region to examine both governmental and community-led mechanisms for protecting displaced and migrant children, and explore ways of strengthening and expanding UNHCR's Regional Safe Spaces Network. Subsequent meetings could consider the development of a regional alert system for missing children and the establishment of a network to disseminate information and provide protection to children on the move.

Other groups are also at risk. LGBTQ individuals are often persecuted because of their sexual orientation (Human Rights Watch 2020). People with disabilities and elderly people face particular difficulties traveling in search of safety; in fact, they are often trapped and unable to find safety by leaving. And there are intersecting risks; for example, adolescent girls with disabilities are often the most vulnerable to sexual violence (Women's Refugee Commission 2014).

It is the fundamental responsibility of governments to protect their citizens and provide for their well-being. Although all of the governments in the region have taken some modest measures to protect women and children, these are insufficient. Political will to increase protection is severely lacking, which raises the question of how to develop incentives to encourage governments to exercise their responsibility to protect those at highest risk. Violence against women and children continues. It is not only driving migration but also causing immense and preventable human suffering. Although there are many actions that can and should be taken – and there are already long lists of recommendations of suggested actions (CEPAL 2020; Lídice 2019; Safeguarding Resources 2021) – too many programs to support women and children in Central America have been developed, funded and implemented by organizations outside the region (Iniciativa Causas Raíz 2021). These organizations generally tend to be unfamiliar with special local circumstances and conditions, operate at arm's length and consume scarce resources that could more effectively be deployed by local actors to realize economies of scale.

Networks of civil society organizations working with women and children, such as the Fondo Centroamericano de Mujeres, Voces Vitales-Centroamérica, Iniciativa Mesoamericana de Mujeres Defensoras de Derechos Humanos and the Mesa de Coordinación Transfronteriza Migraciones y Género need to be developed and strengthened at both the national and

regional levels. We are encouraged by UNHCR-initiated efforts to develop networks of safe spaces for displaced people and suggest that this initiative be broadened to include those at risk of displacement as well as those who have already been displaced (UNHCR 2018). We believe that women-led organizations in the region should be entrusted with the task of deciding on priorities and allocating funds to support activities to protect women and children. To do this, capacity needs to be built and long-term sustainable funding secured.

While these recommendations focus on protecting women and children within the region, other measures to protect women – such as including domestic violence as grounds for asylum in receiving countries and programs to move people at risk out of the region, perhaps building on the [Lamp Lifeboat Ladder](#) (2021) model – will be considered in subsequent reports.

Greater attention to internal displacement

While the migration of Central Americans to the United States has received considerable attention, those who are forced to leave their homes but remain within the borders of their countries are largely invisible, despite their large and growing numbers. These internally displaced persons (IDPs) often remain vulnerable; gangs track them down, they have difficulties finding housing and jobs, and they face stigma and suspicion. Many IDPs move multiple times in search of safety. When people cannot find safety in their own countries, they seek protection in other countries. In 2015, UNHCR reported that 69% of Central American women asylum-seekers in the United States had been internally displaced before traveling to that country (UNHCR 2016, 23). More recently, a 2020 survey by Médecins sans Frontières of Central Americans seeking medical care in their clinics found that 36.4% reported having been

displaced internally before setting out for other countries (Agren 2020). Ensuring that IDPs are protected and assisted at home – and that they are able to either return or settle safely elsewhere in the country – is fundamentally the responsibility of governments.

Because governments are reluctant to acknowledge internal displacement, statistics are often lacking. Our best estimates are that 114,000 were newly displaced by conflict and violence in El Salvador in 2020. While current data for new conflict-induced displacement for Honduras and Guatemala do not exist, the Internal Displacement Monitoring Centre (IDMC) estimated that the number of conflict-displaced in Honduras was 247,000 in January 2020 and that, in 2016, there were a cumulative number of 257,000 people displaced by conflict in the country (IDMC 2021; also see Millard and Lara-Florian 2018). In addition, IDMC estimates that there were 1,394,000 people displaced by disasters in Northern Central America and Mexico (IDMC 2021). The lack of data on internal displacement is itself a manifestation of both the difficulties in collecting such data

and the lack of political will to collect evidence on displacement.

In terms of public policies, El Salvador has recently passed a law on IDPs, legislation has been introduced in Mexico to protect IDPs (but hasn't yet passed the Senate) and Honduras has been considering a similar measure since 2014 (UNHCR 2020, Lizcano Rodriguez 2020; Organization of American States 2021). None of these measures has been put into practice. The Guatemalan government still has yet to acknowledge the existence of IDPs. Nor have national governments allocated sufficient funds to support victims, including IDPs, who face desperate conditions – even as their military budgets increase. A working group of the Comprehensive Regional Protection and Solutions Framework (MIRPS, from the full name in Spanish) has developed a comprehensive list of recommendations for governments to strengthen their policies on IDPs, from establishing data systems to implementing legislative frameworks to strengthening interinstitutional coordination and the capacity of local governments (MIRPS 2020). It is clear what governments need to do

Recommendations of the Task Force on protecting internally displaced persons in Central America and Mexico:

1. We call on all governments in the region to adopt and implement policies on internal displacement and to identify or establish government agencies with a clear mandate and sufficient funding to provide assistance, safe shelter and legal protection to those displaced within their countries.
2. We further call on all governments to enhance the technical capacity of their officials and to train community leaders to effectively plan for and respond to natural disasters and to seek solutions for those displaced by disasters.
3. We urge donor governments and regional and international organizations to provide designated resources – both funding and technical expertise – to support IDP participation in policy-making processes and to build capacities of local governments to address the needs and support solutions for IDPs.
4. We call on donor governments and regional organization to support and protect civil society organizations working with IDPs and other victims of violence – who often fill the vacuum resulting from lack of government action – and to support regional coordination of civil society action on IDPs.

to protect IDPs in their countries. The problem is a lack of the political will to do what is needed.

In all countries in the region, civil society organizations have taken the lead in pushing their governments to address the needs of IDPs. In effect, civil society organizations — including faith-based organizations — are trying to fill the gap by providing services that the governments cannot or will not provide. *And yet the space for civil society action is shrinking.*

The Instituto Centroamericano de Estudios Fiscales (ICEFI) conducted a study of El Salvador's national general budget for 2021 and identified a 13.4% budget cut to the Victims' Assistance Office of the Ministry of Justice, in comparison with the 2020 budget. In addition, 100% of the office's 2021 budget will be used to finance staff salaries (Cristosal 2021).

Given the fear that IDPs experience when fleeing gang violence, subsequent Task Force recommendations will consider additional measures which could be taken to protect IDPs, such as victim protection models and mechanisms for IDPs to seek temporary protection in other countries.

Strengthening asylum laws and capacity throughout the region

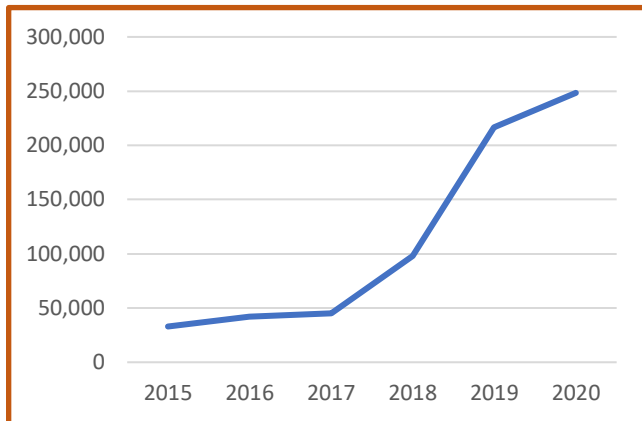
When people can't find protection in their communities — or in their countries as IDPs — they seek protection elsewhere. Within the region, Mexico and Costa Rica have ended up carrying much of the burden for asylum protection as hundreds of thousands of Central Americans have moved to their countries over the past few years.

Further afield, the US is experiencing a record number of asylum-seekers on its southern border in spite of the implementation of draconian measures to deter arrivals. Under the Trump administration, US asylum policy was fundamentally changed through a series of harsh measures, including family separations, the Remain in Mexico policy, metering, expedited procedures, changes in the roles of asylum officers and immigration courts, and many, many others.

While the Biden administration has taken steps to reverse some of these policies, much more remains to be done. Particularly concerning is the treatment of children arriving on the US border with frequent media reports of abuse and maltreatment (Andersson 2021). There is no shortage of policy briefs and recommendations on changes that are needed (see for example, AILA 2021; Frelich 2021; Migration Policy Institute 2021; Schacher 2021) and space precludes an in-depth examination of the many changes that are needed in US asylum policy.

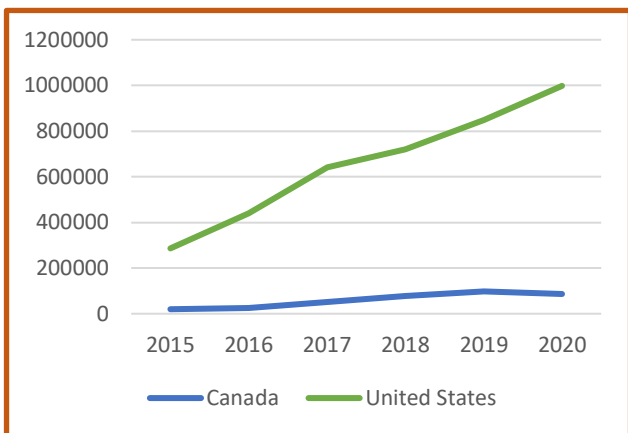
Unlike some European countries which have made exceptions to COVID travel restrictions to allow asylum-seekers to enter in search of protection, both the United States and Canada have used COVID restrictions to prevent asylum-seekers from entering their territories (Paperny 2021a; Human Rights Watch 2021) although the United States allows unaccompanied children to enter. While Canada has a generous refugee resettlement policy and has offered to "take some Central American migrants to help the US," Canada could do more (Paperny 2021b). With a comprehensive regional responsibility-sharing approach, all countries in the region are called to support — and challenge — each other to develop fair and effective asylum policies.

Figure 1. Number of Refugees and Asylum Seekers in Central American & Mexico



Source: UNHCR, UNHCR, *Figures at a Glance*, 2021.

Figure 2. Asylum Seekers in Canada and the United States 2015–2020



Source: UNHCR, Refugee Data Finder, <https://www.unhcr.org/refugee-statistics/>. Accessed 24 June 2021.

Mexico is on pace to receive over 100,000 asylum-seekers in 2021 – mostly Hondurans, Salvadorans, Venezuelans, Cubans and Haitians, but also from dozens of other countries. UNHCR has provided impressive support to strengthening asylum capacity in Central America and Mexico – by supporting

national asylum offices and by providing technical advice on asylum. Mexico has worked with UNHCR in an ambitious process of relocating asylum-seekers away from poor and overwhelmed border areas (UNHCR 2021). But much more needs to be done.

Table 1. Number of refugees and asylum-seekers in North and Central America, end 2020

	Refugees	Asylum-seekers
Mexico	45,446	83,815
Guatemala	450	793
El Salvador	52	56
Costa Rica	9,613	89,770
Belize	28	2,257
Honduras	86	110
Nicaragua	316	131
Panama	2,581	12,905
US	340,881	997,996
Canada	109,264	85,352

Source: UNHCR, *Figures at a Glance*, 2021 and Refugee Data Finder, accessed 26 June 2021.

Over the coming months, the Task Force will consider ways of strengthening regional collaboration which may include recommendations on asylum; for example, through support for MIRPS and by considering ways of implementing the 1984 Cartagena Declaration which offers broader grounds for refugee claims. The Task Force will also consider ways that the integration of refugees and migrants can be improved and how the often-poisonous narrative around asylum-seekers can be transformed to one that is more positive.

Recommendations of the Task Force on strengthening asylum in the region:

1. We call on all governments in the region to review their laws and regulations on asylum and, particularly when only executive action is necessary, update and revise them as soon as possible. For example, Mexico's asylum regulations were adopted in 2012 and changes are needed to streamline the asylum process, reduce backlogs and change requirements that no longer make sense. In the United States, the government should urgently accelerate its pace of changing restrictive policies implemented under the previous administration.
2. We also urge all governments to ensure that staff involved with border management, including security sector personnel, are well-trained on protection and asylum issues.
3. While recension of COVID restrictions to entry is desirable, at a minimum, we urge the US and Canadian governments to immediately make exceptions to existing COVID-related policies in order for asylum-seekers to enter their territories in search of protection.
4. We urge all governments in the region to refrain from detaining migrants and under no circumstances to detain children for immigration purposes.
5. We call on all national governments to give their asylum offices both the financial and the political support they need to respond to the growing number of requests for asylum. While international support is needed and commendable, responding to asylum is a national responsibility and sustainable capacity needs to be developed. In particular, we urge governments to ensure that asylum decisions are made in a timely manner and to address existing backlogs.
6. We urge all governments to ensure meaningful participation of civil society organizations, and particularly refugee-led organizations in policy-making processes. In some contexts, such mechanisms exist but are rarely used and we note that COVID movement restrictions should not impede such consultation.
7. We urge regional actors and donor governments to support innovative efforts in the region to find solutions for asylum-seekers and refugees, such as Mexico's internal relocation program and to enhance technical cooperation with each other, for example in sharing information on asylum claims and when visa applications are denied. This could encourage more confidence and trust in regional comprehensive approaches to asylum.

Protecting Migrants in Transit

Asylum-seekers and migrants – fleeing violence and poverty – too often encounter more violence on their journeys, much of which comes from criminals and gangs although government officials have also been implicated. Surveys by Médecins sans Frontières in 2020

found that 39.2% of Central American migrants reported being assaulted in Mexico with 27.3% reporting that they had been threatened or extorted (Agren 2020). And, as the study points out, the levels of attacks are likely to be undercounted as many migrants fear reporting attacks to authorities.

Sexual assaults, kidnappings, robberies, murder, extortion and trafficking have been reported in astonishing figures. For example, the

International Crisis Group reported that “the sex industry along the Mexico-Guatemala border is largely driven by supply of migrants, especially adolescents, some of whom are held in virtual debt bondage to traffickers” and that the number of such victims in Guatemala alone may be 50,000 (ICG 2016).

“Undocumented migrants make perfect victims. Fearful of authorities, they are unlikely to report even violent crimes, such as robbery and rape.”

– Mary Speck, International Crisis Group.

In addition to the violence perpetrated largely by criminal elements, migrants often find their entry into transit countries blocked by military force. Reports of migrants being prevented from entering or being pushed back by Mexican and Guatemalan armed forces are regularly reported in the media (Meyer and Isacson 2019; de Ros and Billy 2021) and it is likely that there are other cases which occur out of sight of journalists. These pushbacks are obviously in line with – and perhaps supported and funded by – the US government as part of its policies to deter arrivals on its southern border. The US example of turning 60,000 asylum-seekers back to wait in Mexico (although now in process of reversal) and preventing people from entering the country have reverberations far beyond the US-Mexico border. Human Rights First reports that some 400,000 migrants at or near the border have been expelled to Mexico, including many Central American families, during the first five months of the Biden administration. Nearly 3,300 of those have been assaulted, raped, kidnapped or trafficked (Hesson 2021). As the UN special rapporteur on the human rights of migrants recently reported, pushbacks of asylum-seekers are a violation of international law (UN special rapporteur 2021).

Given the dangers in transiting through Mexico, it is particularly troubling to think of the myriad threats to children making the journey on their own or with family members. UNICEF reports that the number of migrant children traveling through Mexico was nine times higher in the first three months of 2021 than the year before (UNICEF 2021).

These dangers have been greatly magnified by the COVID pandemic. In addition to the risks of violent attacks en route, the fact that migrants are making the journey during a pandemic creates additional hardships – particularly for the civil society organizations trying to provide shelter and safety to them (Associated Press in Tenosique 2021). Civil society groups providing assistance to transiting migrants, especially those affiliated with churches or religious organizations, typically operate on a shoestring. Now they are faced with more arrivals, more migrants who are traumatized by their experiences, the need to observe social distancing and virus-prevention measures, and to attend to those who are sick and have fallen seriously ill.

Although there are far fewer reports, there are also concerns about Canada’s policy of deporting asylum-seekers who arrive on its borders from the United States, particularly in light of a 2020 decision by a Canadian federal court that the US should no longer be considered as a safe third country. As of May 2021, according to a new lawsuit, the Canadian government had deported 387 asylum-seekers back to the US, as a public health measure, at least one of whom is reported to have been deported back to his country of origin (Paperny 2021a).

Protecting migrants in transit is an issue that dramatically highlights the need for a comprehensive regional approach to migration. This could include development of a networked series of “safe spaces” on migrant pathways which not only provide assistance but also information necessary to protect migrants. Coordinated regional efforts are needed to

Recommendations of the Task Force on protecting migrants in transit:

1. We call on governments of all countries through which migrants transit to take every possible step to ensure their safety through enhanced law enforcement and prosecutions of those charged with crimes against migrants. This will require not only increased resources but more training of officials and the development of closer relationships with civil society organizations providing assistance to migrants en route.
2. While we urge governments of countries of transit not to detain migrants and never to detain children, where such detention facilities exist, they should be safe and provide basic standards of care, including gender-specific assistance.
3. We call on donors and international organizations to support the efforts of civil society-run shelters and migrant assistance centers and to hold the governments of transit countries accountable for their treatment of migrants.
4. We call on the governments of the migrants' countries of origin to strengthen their consular services in Mexico and the United States.
5. We call on all governments to ensure that migrants are given access to COVID vaccines not only because of the greater risk they face as a mobile population, but also because of risks of transmission to local communities during their transit.

disrupt the activities of traffickers who operate freely across borders and prey on desperate people. The task force will further explore these ideas as well as the possibility of reducing the need for dangerous journeys through in-country processing and development of alternative regular migration pathways. There is much that needs to be done.

Conclusion

Protecting people in the region is one step that can and should be taken now. Addressing the longer-term issues of poverty, governance, gangs, environmental change, corruption are all essential to reducing the need for large

numbers of people to leave their countries. These issues will be addressed by the Task Force in later actions. Until these deeper causes are addressed, it is likely that many Central Americans will continue to feel the need to leave their countries. It is incumbent on all countries in the region to find safer ways for this to happen – for example by developing alternative migration pathways including resettlement directly from countries of origin and strengthening efforts to prevent 'missing migrants' (Global Migration Data Analysis Center 2020, UN Rapporteur 2021). These issues will also be addressed by the Task Force in the coming months.

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