

From violence to more violence in Central America

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Many Central American migrants flee their home country as a result of violence and threats from the criminal gangs. A large number of them also encounter the same type of violence that they are fleeing when on the migratory routes through Mexico.

In recent years, urban violence has worsened the living conditions of people in El Salvador, Honduras and Guatemala. Very often, men, women and children leave not in search of a better life but simply in order to survive. Territorial conflict between the gangs is continual. The violence, fear and mistrust sown by the gangs eventually erode the social fabric and the little commercial initiative that remains in these places. For many, migration is the only option.

In some regions of these countries, gang rule is absolute and young people are extremely vulnerable to forced recruitment into the gangs. Adolescents are continually intimidated and subjected to violence, pressurised into joining the gangs or working for them as drug pushers or in other roles. A recurrent theme in out-migration is the large number of children forced to leave their countries, exposing them to the dangerous conditions of the journey. Some families prefer to see their sons and daughters exiled rather than risk them being killed or forced into a life of crime.

But the violence continues along the migration route. The route from Central America to the United States represents enormous financial interests, principally for the people traffickers, most of whom either pay or work directly with organised crime networks. Similarly, the trafficking networks are constantly in search of women and children to feed their lucrative sideline in sexual exploitation. The people who follow the migratory route are very vulnerable for these reasons and because of their lack of documentation that would allow them safe passage through Mexico. Once they enter Mexican territory, they encounter a systematic cycle of abuse. From drivers on

public transport who charge them higher prices, and common crime, through corrupt police officers demanding a bribe to let them go on their way, assaults from gang members posing as migrants, to violence from organised criminal groups in the form of extortion, rape, torture and abduction. Along the way, each remaining cent is squeezed from them at every opportunity, and they may even lose their lives.

This violence is little different from the violence they face in their own countries. In most cases, the violence is deliberately intense and bloody in order to terrorise the survivors. Individuals are kidnapped and forced to provide telephone numbers for their relatives in the US; the gangs then call the relatives to demand thousands of dollars for the life of their loved one. Although the Mexican government does not provide official figures on how many migrants are abducted within its territory, the National Commission on Human Rights cites numbers of cases as being in the thousands each year.¹

Violence is normalised to such a degree that travellers fully expect to experience some form of it on their journey and there is now a degree of resignation to the fact. Perhaps the clearest example of this is seen in those women who start taking contraceptive pills before setting out on the journey as they are aware there is a high risk of sexual attack along the way.² Those who considered to have 'done well' on the way may only have been assaulted or robbed, and been hungry and cold.

As is often the case, the information available and the complaints registered represent only a small fraction of the reality. Anonymity and invisibility are the greatest problems

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in migration through Mexico as they increase the vulnerability of individuals travelling the route. Fear of deportation is largely behind the failure to report crimes; in order to get to their destination, most migrants will continue on their journey as soon as possible, leaving the experiences behind them, shrouded in silence.

Looking for remedies

Several human rights organisations and other civil society associations have presented strong and clear denunciations of these abuses. There have been marches by migrants through Mexico demanding respect for their rights. Long processions of Central American mothers have demonstrated in Mexico City, calling to know the whereabouts of sons and daughters who have disappeared. Although some display of solidarity can be found, most of the Mexican population remains unaware of what is really happening.

Against a backdrop of generalised violence in Mexico, the state machinery has proved incapable of finding an effective solution. In fact, it has shown itself scarcely capable of recognising the internal displacement of its own population as an outcome of violence caused by conflict with organised crime and drug trafficking and it has failed to recognise and measure the proportions of human rights abuses and violations towards migrants. Indeed, in a show of double standards, the Mexican state angrily demands good treatment for its nationals crossing the northern border into the US, while it shows little political will to counter the abuses typically experienced by Central Americans on the southern border and on their journey through Mexico.

In July 2014, the Mexican Interior Minister announced a strategy to protect migrants by banning them from travelling across Mexico on goods trains (the main mode of transport for many migrants), the stated aim being to protect them from the risk of accidents en route. However, this strategy does not resolve the issue of people trafficking or the human rights violations against migrants

living in Mexico. In any case, a strategy of this kind can be counterproductive if measures are not also implemented to protect the safety of migrants then resorting to other modes of transport. The migratory dynamic is a living and changing entity and the migratory flow always finds new ways around any difficulties and obstacles set in its path. This strategy runs the risk of forcing migrants to disperse within Mexican territory, pushing their experiences during migration further into invisibility.

There is no simple or straightforward solution. While civil society organisations have certainly made a noise about the migration issue, greater organisation and communication are needed for an organised and effective political movement capable of pushing the state into genuine action on the issue of the abuse of migrants in Mexico. The right to remain is being denied to human beings fleeing the violence, the decision to leave has been forced upon them, and the violence they experience on the route through Mexico further victimises each individual and increases their suffering.

While violence and poverty persist in the home country, ever higher walls and tougher prohibitions will do little to discourage people from emigrating. Human beings cannot be told to give up hope of a better life. Any solution aiming to truly resolve the issue requires analysis of all of the factors and dynamics involved in the migration process. Limited efforts give limited results.

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The opinions expressed are ideas of the author; these opinions are not necessarily the opinions of Médicos Sin Fronteras.

1. Comisión Nacional de Derechos Humanos (2011) *Special Report on the Kidnapping of Migrants in Mexico (Informe Especial sobre secuestro de migrantes en México)*.
2. Amnesty International (2010) *Invisible Victims: Migrants on the Move in Mexico (Victimas Invisibles: migrantes en movimiento en México)*.