

Migrant ‘caravans’ in Mexico and the fight against smuggling

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The treatment of the migrant and asylum seeker caravans travelling through Mexico shows the negative consequences that the fight against people smuggling has had for those making these journeys and their defenders.

Several migrant and asylum seeker ‘caravans’ have arrived in Mexico since the end of 2018. These gatherings of groups of people travelling together are largely made up of people from Honduras, El Salvador and Guatemala who are aiming to reach the US. Different caravans have met with different fates on arrival in Mexico. Those arriving at the end of 2018 faced Mexican authorities who were initially reluctant to allow their free transit through the country, although did finally do so. Those arriving at the beginning of 2019 were given temporary documentation that allowed them to remain in the country or to move freely through it for a period of one year. However, subsequent caravans – including the one that originated in the southern Mexican city of Tapachula in October 2019 and the one that left Honduras in January 2020 – have been resolutely suppressed.

The way these caravans have been managed by the Mexican government raises key questions about the reasons for their formation and for State responses to them. Although this new form of mobility is largely an alternative to crossing borders and territories via the use of smugglers (known in Mexico as *coyotes*), the Mexican government maintained that among the caravan organisers were people smugglers whose activities presented a serious danger to individuals in the caravan. In Mexico, people smuggling carries a potential prison sentence of between eight and sixteen years, plus substantial fines. By linking the arrival of these caravans with the war that it is waging on people smuggling, the government sought to legitimise its control and containment of the caravans, while at the same time criminalising this type of mobility, those

who participated, and those activists who supported and accompanied the caravans.

Criminalising caravans and defenders

Throughout the first half of 2019, leading government representatives made several statements in which they implied that the caravans had been organised at least in part by people smugglers. These included a press release issued by the Ministry of Finance and Public Credit announcing that the bank accounts of several people had been frozen because of transactions that suggested they were involved in people smuggling operations; in a poorly founded argument it suggested that these same people were illegally promoting the caravans. This statement and others like it promoted the association of migrant and asylum seeker caravans with illegal acts.

Migrant human rights defenders were also criminalised. Several Mexican government representatives suggested that the activists supporting the caravans were involved in people smuggling, and particularly singled out the organisation Pueblos Sin Fronteras. In addition, two prominent defenders of the rights of migrants in Mexico were arrested on charges of people smuggling during Mexico-US negotiations over migrant mobility because of their activism and the role they had played as human rights defenders.

Caravans as an alternative to *coyotaje*

In contrast to the negative view that governments have of *coyotaje* services, migrants from low-wage regions use their services as a survival strategy. Data from a survey on migration in the southern border region of Mexico confirm that using *coyotes* has been a very widespread strategy among

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Honduran, Salvadoran and Guatemalan people who travel through Mexico to reach the US.¹ However, the data suggest that fewer Hondurans have enough money to employ *coyotaje* services compared with Guatemalans and Salvadorans. Hondurans cross the country alone, in small groups or in caravans, using a combination of different strategies that allow them to travel despite having few or no economic resources. This may include travelling on foot or using freight trains, relying on the solidarity network of shelters that exists along the migration routes, or doing casual work en route. As an alternative to using the services offered by *coyotes*, caravans provide a safer way of travel for migrants, offering – through sheer numbers – protection, information and assistance, regardless of people's financial resources.²

The criminalisation of migrants, asylum seekers and defenders can also be observed in many other countries including the US, Spain and Morocco, and we can draw out

the following lessons for all States. Firstly, do not use the discourse of the fight against people smuggling to legitimise migration control policies. Secondly, do not criminalise the mobility of migrants and refugees (in this case in the form of caravans) because of perceived connections with people smuggling. And finally, do not criminalise human rights defenders (either in discourse or practice); instead, enable them to carry out their humanitarian work without being harassed by any authority or criminal groups.

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2. Torre Cantalapiedra E and Mariscal Nava D M (2020) 'Batallando con fronteras: estrategias migratorias en tránsito de participantes en caravanas de migrantes', *Estudios Fronterizos*, Vol 21, 1–23 <https://doi.org/10.21670/ref.2005047>