

# Criminal violence in Honduras as a driver of displacement

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**The impact of violence is felt daily in the Northern Triangle of Central America and is a major driver of displacement, yet its very nature obstructs identification of and access to those in need of protection. Honduras is now a case-study in the CRRF process, presenting an opportunity to learn from what is done, and not done, in one of the affected countries in this region.**

With homicide levels in the region on a par with some of the world's worst armed conflicts,<sup>1</sup> gangs and criminal groups represent the new face of organised violence in Latin America. For many people, having a close family member or friend who has experienced kidnapping, mugging, robbery, extortion, sexual violence or murder is commonplace, and in some countries the scale and severity of the violence are

broadly comparable with the insurgency-based conflicts of earlier decades.

Increasing efforts are being made by some States, international agencies and non-governmental actors to respond to the violations perpetrated by gangs and criminal groups, yet displaced people are still not getting the protection they need. A first step in dismantling barriers to accessing protection is to secure increased

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global recognition of violence and persecution as the primary drivers of forced displacement in the Northern Triangle of Central America (NTCA)<sup>2</sup>. The next step is for states to improve their ability to reach displaced communities and to identify those with specific protection needs.

An encouraging development in the push for increased recognition of the situation came in early 2017 when Honduras announced that it would be one of the case-study countries for the Comprehensive Refugee Response Framework (CRRF), a process led by UNHCR to provide inputs into the Global Compact on Refugees. A number of countries in the region then also announced their intention to be case-study countries, enabling collaboration for a regional response to displacement in the Northern Triangle. The participation of the NTCA region in the CRRF process provides the opportunity to address a context with different circumstances and needs from those of traditional refugee situations. With gang-related violence increasing as a driver of displacement globally, there are far-reaching implications for other regions in what is done, and not done, in Honduras.

**The Comprehensive Refugee Response Framework (CRRF)** is the name given to the first of two Annexes to the New York Declaration for Refugees and Migrants adopted in September 2016. The CRRF promotes a sustainable approach linking humanitarian action with development assistance in situations involving large-scale movements of refugees, and focuses on a number of actions and best practices in four areas: reception and admission measures; support for immediate and ongoing needs; support for host countries; and enhanced opportunities for durable solutions. A number of countries have agreed to be case-studies for the CRRF; the lessons drawn from these countries' experiences will inform the preparation of the Global Compact on Refugees in time for the UN General Assembly in 2018.<sup>3</sup>

### Accessing IDPs

Honduras is the only country in the NTCA which has publicly recognised the phenomenon of internal displacement, and is now working to adopt national legislation on preventing internal displacement and protecting and assisting IDPs, the first of

its kind in the region. However, across the region, States, international agencies and non-governmental organisations (NGOs) are only now starting to grasp the full extent of internal displacement in the region. Unlike more visible situations of displacement such as from the Syrian conflict, people fleeing criminal violence often try to remain unnoticed. Access to data is improving, with surveys having been conducted in Honduras and El Salvador but these only partially cover the situation. A study from 2014 found 174,000 IDPs in Honduras but it only covered 20 out of 290 municipalities.<sup>4</sup> Based on this study, the Internal Displacement Monitoring Centre projected that this figure had risen to 190,000 IDPs in 2016. The Norwegian Refugee Council (NRC) has undertaken its own surveys to find children who have dropped out of school in areas affected by extreme violence, and has consistently found that actual numbers of people affected are higher than government estimates.

Governments and NGOs often speak of the 'invisibility' of internal displacement in the Northern Triangle, especially as IDPs tend to lie low to avoid being followed by their persecutors and do not register with the authorities due to lack of trust. Those working directly with affected communities, such as NRC, know that this invisibility means that the communities are very difficult to access. States often have no control over zones affected by gang violence and are unable or unwilling to provide basic services for communities living there. For humanitarians, negotiating with gangs to secure access to vulnerable displaced people is uncharted territory. Some organisations, such as NRC, have managed to gain some access through careful negotiation but such access is dependent on many factors that could change instantaneously. In May 2017, NRC provided humanitarian assistance for 200 people who had been newly displaced from their homes in San Pedro Sula in Honduras due to a rise in gang warfare; more could have been done if the government and other humanitarian actors had had unhindered access to the affected population.<sup>5</sup>



The Villa Cristiana neighbourhood of Tegucigalpa, Honduras, is controlled by the Mara 13 armed group, which does not allow children to attend school in the adjacent neighbourhood.

### Identifying protection cases

In parallel to gaining better access to internally displaced people, States must also improve their methods of identifying protection needs. Governments of the NTCA continually claim that a mere 5-10% of all people leaving their countries do so for reasons related to violence,<sup>6</sup> and that the other 90-95% of people leave for economic reasons or to reunite with family. In the meantime, studies carried out by UN agencies and NGOs reveal dramatically different figures, with between 40 and 60% of children, adolescents and women surveyed leaving for reasons related to violence.<sup>7</sup>

It may be that generalised violence has become so normalised that many of the hundreds of thousands of people displaced across the region do not immediately identify violence as the primary cause of their displacement. The disparity in statistics, however, can be partially explained by the conditions in which protection cases are identified and data is gathered. NTCA government figures recording cross-border displacement come from interviews taken in deportee reception centres processing people who have been sent back from the

United States and Mexico. While in recent years the Honduran government has significantly improved the conditions of these reception centres, which now provide immediate assistance and child-friendly spaces, they remain inadequate locations for collecting complex and personal data on motivations for leaving the country. Interviews are often conducted in spaces that lack the necessary privacy for divulging sensitive information, for example, about abuse, violence or fears of persecution from gangs. Government employees (who in some cases are volunteers) conduct the interviews but often have insufficient training in identifying protection risks.

Decades of state violence and corruption have eroded trust in the system, and there is consequently little incentive to confide in state officials when needing to seek protection. Arguing that most people want to leave the reception centre as soon as possible, Honduran authorities rush deportees through registration, medical and psychological check-ups, and entrance interviews, and then give them a small meal – all in the space of an hour – before putting deportees on a bus to the closest urban area.

These circumstances are not conducive to people reporting the often complex and traumatic original reasons for leaving the country, to say nothing of the human rights abuses they may have suffered during their flight. In many cases, returnees also know that the capacity of the government to provide a real solution (such as referral pathways or resettlement opportunities) to their case is limited, and that even their capacity to follow up on individual cases is scarce. With few people granted international protection from gang violence, displaced people may see little value in requesting asylum upon arrival in destination countries. In addition, do they indicate economic reasons as their principal reason for making the journey north in order to demonstrate that they are willing to work and contribute? Similarly, do they declare family reunification as the reason for their journey in order to show that they have a support network in the country of destination?

In destination countries, many people are offered the choice of either signing their own deportation notices to be sent back home or facing a lengthy detention sentence while their case is processed. Both in destination country and upon return, it is often easier for individuals to report that they left the country seeking economic opportunities or family reunification, so that the authorities will leave them alone – and they can try the journey again.

### Seizing the CRRF process

Across the NTCA there is a fundamental lack of understanding around push and pull factors of displacement, and the role that violence plays in the journeys of many. Humanitarian organisations must recognise this gap in understanding of drivers and the accompanying failure to identify people in need of protection. They must also ask themselves whether the law, policies and programmes developed for protecting and assisting displaced persons in conflict contexts such as Syria or the Democratic Republic of Congo should be applied equally to these scenarios of criminal violence, or whether other solutions and approaches are needed.

The CRRF process in Honduras is an opportunity to address these issues and, ultimately, to protect people displaced internally and across borders. UNHCR and NGOs such as the Norwegian Refugee Council are currently gathering recommendations for action from States, displaced people, civil society organisations, faith groups and local communities. In October 2017, States from the NTCA and the wider region will meet in Honduras to define and pledge commitments to stronger collaboration and protection mechanisms and decide on a Comprehensive Regional Protection and Solutions Framework. This process must translate into sustainable engagement of humanitarian and development actors, greater responsibility sharing fostered by States through strengthened national protection structures, more funding for protection, and a dramatic increase in legal pathways for those in need. Actors across the NTCA must identify and acknowledge the role of violence in driving displacement, and seize the window of opportunity to act now and make a real difference for people in urgent need of protection.

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1. See Cantor DJ 'Gang violence as a cause of forced migration in the Northern Triangle of Central America' in Cantor DJ and Rodriguez Serna N (Eds) (2016) *The New Refugees, Crime and Displacement in Latin America*, pp27-45.

2. Also now referred to as Northern Central America.

3. [www.unhcr.org/uk/comprehensive-refugee-response-framework-crrf](http://www.unhcr.org/uk/comprehensive-refugee-response-framework-crrf) See also article by Manisha Thomas in this issue.

4. Study by the Honduran Inter-Agency Commission for the Protection of Persons Displaced by Violence supported by UNHCR and the Joint IDP Profiling Service [www.internal-displacement.org/countries/honduras](http://www.internal-displacement.org/countries/honduras)

5. See *Forced Migration Review* issue 37 (2011) 'Armed non-state actors and displacement' [www.fmreview.org/non-state](http://www.fmreview.org/non-state)

6. Statistics cited in discussions with Honduran authorities in November 2016, and in public statements made by Guatemalan officials at Global Consultations on Migration in May 2017.

7. See for example UNHCR (2014) *Arrancado de Raiz* <http://bit.ly/UNHCR-UprootedExecSummary-2014>  
Also: UNHCR (2014) *Children on the Run* [www.unhcr.org/uk/children-on-the-run](http://www.unhcr.org/uk/children-on-the-run)