



Advocacy for Human Rights in the Americas

SUMMARY



AP Photo/Rebecca Blackwell

MEXICO'S SOUTHERN BORDER

Security, Central American Migration, and U.S. Policy

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KEY FINDINGS

It has been nearly three years since the Mexican government announced its Southern Border Program, which dramatically increased security operations and apprehensions of northbound migrants. This report—based on field research in the area surrounding Tenosique, Tabasco along Mexico’s border with Guatemala—examines migration flows, enforcement, and insecurity in southern Mexico.

- **THERE HAS BEEN A SHARP INCREASE IN THE NUMBER OF MIGRANTS AND ASYLUM SEEKERS WHO INTEND TO STAY IN MEXICO, RATHER THAN TRAVEL TO THE UNITED STATES.** Many are seeking asylum or other forms of immigration status. Between 2014 and 2016, there was a 311 percent increase in asylum requests in Mexico. In the first three months of 2017, Mexico had received more asylum applications than all of 2015. The UN Refugee Agency estimates that Mexico will receive up to 20,000 asylum requests in 2017.
- **DECREASED MIGRATION FLOWS THROUGH MEXICO AND AT THE U.S. SOUTHWEST BORDER DURING THE MONTHS FOLLOWING PRESIDENT TRUMP’S INAUGURATION ARE NOT SUSTAINABLE.** News of the Trump administration’s hard line appears to have caused a wave of Central American migration before January 20, and a sharp drop afterward. However, until there are improvements in the violence and adverse conditions from which Central Americans are fleeing, people will continue to migrate in large numbers. By May 2017, apprehension levels at the U.S-Mexico border had begun to tiptoe back up, with a 31 percent increase in total apprehensions compared to April, and a 50 percent increase in apprehensions of unaccompanied minors.
- **ALTHOUGH MEXICO REGISTERED LOWER APPREHENSION LEVELS IN THE FIRST FOUR MONTHS OF 2017 COMPARED TO PREVIOUS YEARS, MIGRATION ENFORCEMENT UNDER MEXICO’S SOUTHERN BORDER PROGRAM REMAINS HIGH.** Total migrant apprehensions increased by a staggering 85 percent during the Southern Border Program’s first two years of operation (July 2014 to June 2016) compared to pre-Program levels. Limited government resources, migrants’ and smugglers’ ability to adjust to new security patterns, corruption among authorities, and an overall drop in migration from Central America since President Trump took office have all likely contributed to the leveling off of apprehensions seen in Mexico in recent months.

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- **CRIMES AND ABUSES AGAINST MIGRANTS TRAVELING THROUGH MEXICO CONTINUE TO OCCUR AT ALARMING RATES, AND SHELTERS HAVE NOTED A MORE INTENSE DEGREE OF VIOLENCE IN THE CASES THEY DOCUMENT.** While Mexico's major organized criminal groups do not operate heavily in the Tenosique corridor, smaller criminal bands and Central American gang affiliates routinely rob, kidnap, and sexually assault migrants along this portion of the migration route. Migrant rights organizations in southern Mexico documented an increase in cases of migration and police authorities' abuse of migrants as a result of the Southern Border Program, including recent accounts of migration agents, who are supposed to be unarmed, using pellet guns and electrical shock devices.
- **THERE HAVE BEEN FEWER U.S. ASSISTANCE DELIVERIES TO MEXICO FOR THE SOUTHERN BORDER PROGRAM THAN ORIGINALLY EXPECTED, BUT BIOMETRIC AND COMMUNICATIONS PROGRAMS CONTINUE APACE.** The U.S. State and Defense Departments are currently implementing a US\$88 million dollar program to increase Mexican immigration authorities' capacity to collect biometric data and share information about who is crossing through Mexico with the U.S. Department of Homeland Security. The U.S. State and Defense Departments are also funding a US\$75 million project to improve secure communications between Mexican agencies in the country's southern border zone. This program has erected 12 communications towers so far, all of them on Mexican naval posts.
- **THE MIGRATION ROUTE INTO MEXICO THROUGH TENOSIQUE, TABASCO HAS SEEN A SHARP INCREASE IN CHILDREN AND FAMILIES FLEEING VIOLENCE IN THE NORTHERN TRIANGLE REGION.** Between 2014 and 2016, the number of children (both accompanied and unaccompanied) apprehended in the state of Tabasco increased by 60 percent. The majority of migrants traveling through this area of the border are from Honduras.

RECOMMENDATIONS

We visited the Mexico-Guatemala border during a singular period: a “trough” of migration following President Trump’s inauguration and preceding the modest increases that began in May. We heard little evidence of the cocaine trafficking that occurs quietly in this zone amid an increase in Colombian production. We noted an increase in U.S. assistance to security and migration agencies, and to the justice system, though at levels well below what were expected when the Southern Border Program launched in mid-2014. We were encouraged to see some progress in alternatives to detention programs for asylum seekers, but very alarmed to see that violent abuse of migrants continues to be chronic, and to occur with near-total impunity.

It would be inaccurate to allege that Mexico and Central America are moving backward in efforts to address the root causes of migration and to punish the abuse of migrants, but progress is proving to be excruciatingly slow, and political will to move forward is uneven at best.

- **MEXICO SHOULD CONTINUE TO STRENGTHEN ITS ASYLUM PROCEDURES AND CAPACITY TO SCREEN APPREHENDED MIGRANTS FOR PROTECTION CONCERNS.** While UNHCR support to COMAR is important, it is not a long-term solution to improving the asylum process in Mexico. The government should seek to fund and dramatically expand the capacity and size of COMAR to ensure a transparent and quick processing of requests, with procedures that do not violate the rights of those seeking protection. UNHCR-supported “alternatives to detention” programs have eased the asylum application process and should be supported and expanded.
- **THE INM SHOULD CONTINUE TO MOVE FORWARD WITH INSTITUTIONAL REFORMS AIMED AT DECREASING ABUSES AND STRENGTHENING ACCOUNTABILITY.** It is urgent that the INM create an internal affairs unit, fully establish its civil service for agents, improve and solidify training, and develop use-of-force guidelines. Any additional U.S. support for the INM should prioritize these areas.
- **NEITHER U.S. ASSISTANCE NOR THE STRATEGIES OF MEXICO AND GUATEMALA SHOULD ENCOURAGE THE USE OF MILITARY FORCE FOR INTERNAL SECURITY MISSIONS IN BORDER ZONES.** We repeat our June 2014 and November 2015 recommendation against encouraging a military role in citizen security and migrant enforcement missions. While this has not been a principal focus of the Southern Border Program, efforts are underway to increase military

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capacities in the region, especially for Mexico's Navy and Guatemala's Interagency Task Forces. We once again emphasize that missions placing military personnel in regular contact with citizens—including tense situations like checkpoints, searches, detentions, and interrogations—should be avoided and minimized wherever possible. Whether police or military, units with border security responsibilities need training in protection and credible fear procedures, so that they do not return migrants to the very threats that they are fleeing.

- **THE U.S. DEPARTMENTS OF STATE, DEFENSE, AND HOMELAND SECURITY SHOULD INCREASE TRANSPARENCY REGARDING U.S. ASSISTANCE TO MEXICO FOR SOUTHERN BORDER ENFORCEMENT.** The U.S. government should continue to support training and professionalization programs for the INM. Additionally, migrants' and smugglers' ability to adjust to new security patterns demonstrates that heavy-handed enforcement strategies only provide temporary results, and furthermore, these strategies often lead to abuses and due process concerns.
- **U.S. ASSISTANCE TO CENTRAL AMERICA MUST CONTINUE TO FOCUS ON THE PUSH FACTORS OF MIGRATION.** In May 2017, the U.S. Congress approved \$US655 million in Fiscal Year 2017 aid to Central America to continue implementing a multi-year strategy that addresses the underlying conditions driving Central Americans to leave their countries. This strategy began in Fiscal Year 2016 when Congress approved \$750 million. Though former assistance to the region focused primarily on security, the revamped strategy recognized the need to reduce violence, strengthen institutions, combat corruption, and expand economic opportunities. The proposed 39 percent reduction in support for Central America in the Trump administration's Fiscal Year 2018 budget request would cripple programs aimed at strengthening security and justice institutions, as well as violence-prevention and job-creation efforts in the region.

ABOUT WOLA

WOLA is a leading research and advocacy organization advancing human rights in the Americas. We envision a future where public policies in the Americas protect human rights, recognize human dignity, and where justice overcomes violence.

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