

## Readings for the October 2014 Ed Night on the Root Causes of Migration

Unfortunately, there is no one article that sums up ALL the complex factors so here is a compilation of six readings, ranging from 2 pages to 5 pages. If folks in your chapter don't have the time to read all of them, assign 1-2 articles per person and have them come prepared to summarize and share the key points.

- **Excerpts from the United Nations High Commission on Refugees Report:** This UN report has been extensively quoted by migrant and refugee advocates to show the high percentage of kids who are crossing the US-Mexico border who might qualify for international protection or potentially for refugee status. This data has been a strong counterweight to proposals to expedite screenings and hearings in order to more quickly deport children, women and families.
- **The Central America Refugee Crisis: Made in the USA, by Alex Main:** This is a great overview of intersecting factors and US policies that have contributed to the rising rates of children and families leaving Central America. It also de-bunks a lot of the myths that were promoted about why the kids were coming. Alex Main works with the Center for Economic and Policy Research (CEPR), which has co-hosted a number of Congressional briefings with CISPES.
- **Witness for Peace Fact Sheet on Trade and Migration:** While a bit dated, this fact sheet clearly shows the impact of free trade agreements like NAFTA and CAFTA on rising unemployment and the destruction of rural livelihoods in Mexico and Central America. As you can see from the footnotes, the information from Central America was drawn from reports from the Stop-CAFTA coalition, of which CISPES was a leading member (and highlights the need for a CAFTA at 10 report!)
- **Meso-American Working Group Report:** This is an excerpt from the Executive Summary of a report on U.S.-backed militarization in México and Central America. The recommendations are likely to guide whatever Congressional asks we might make this fall to stop increased military/police aid to the region, as is being requested by the Defense Department. The section prepared by School of the Americas watch closely links rising immigration from Mexico and Central America to violence caused by US-backed security policies. Since the writing of this report, CISPES has since joined this coalition.
- **100 Days of the Sánchez-Cerén Administration:** This post from the CISPES blog reflects the main priorities of the FMLN administration to address violence in the short and long-term, from increasing economic opportunity and equality to alternative policing models.
- **Child Migrants, Violence and the Nicaraguan Exception, by José Miguel Cruz:** This article explains several major reasons – beyond the triumph of the Sandinista revolution - why the number of children coming from Nicaragua is so much lower, despite the fact that Nicaragua is officially poorer than the countries in the “Northern Triangle.”

The following is excerpted from the United Nations High Commission on Refugees (UNHCR) report: “Children on the Run: Unaccompanied Children Leaving Central America and Mexico and the Need for International Protection.” The full report can be found at <http://www.unhcrwashington.org/children/reports>

**CONTEXT:** Since 2009, UNHCR has registered an increased number of asylum-seekers – both children and adults – from El Salvador, Honduras and Guatemala lodging claims in the Americas region. The United States recorded the largest number of new asylum applications out of all countries of asylum, having receiving 85% of the total of new applications brought by individuals from these three countries in 2012.

The number of requests for asylum has likewise increased in countries other than the U.S. Combined, Mexico, Panama, Nicaragua, Costa Rica and Belize documented a 435% increase in the number of asylum applications lodged by individuals from El Salvador, Honduras and Guatemala.

In the United States, the number of adults claiming fear of return to their countries of origin to government officials upon arriving at a port of entry or apprehension at the southern border increased sharply from 5,369 in fiscal year (FY) 2009 to 36,174 in FY 2013. Individuals from El Salvador, Honduras, Guatemala and Mexico account for 70% of this increase.

Beginning in October 2011, the U.S. Government recorded a dramatic rise – commonly referred to in the United States as “the surge” – in the number of unaccompanied and separated children arriving to the United States from these same three countries – El Salvador, Guatemala and Honduras. The total number of apprehensions of unaccompanied and separated children from these countries by U.S. Customs and Border Protection (CBP) jumped from 4,059 in FY 2011 to 10,443 in FY 2012 and then more than doubled again, to 21,537, in FY 2013.

At the same time, a tremendous number of children from Mexico have been arriving to the U.S. over a longer period of time, and although the gap is narrowing as of FY 2013, the number of children from Mexico has far outpaced the number of children from any one of the three Central American countries. For example, in FY 2011, the number of Mexican children apprehended was 13,000, rising to 15,709 in FY 2012 and reaching 18,754 in FY 2013. Unlike the unaccompanied and separated children arriving to the U.S. from other countries, including El Salvador, Guatemala and Honduras, most of these children were promptly returned to Mexico after no more than a day or two in the custody of the U.S. authorities, making it even more difficult to obtain a full picture of who these children were and why they were coming to the U.S.

#### **FINDINGS:**

- Our data reveals that no less than 58% of the 404 children interviewed were forcibly displaced because they suffered or faced harms that **indicated a potential or actual need for international protection.**
- The central conclusion of this study is that given the high rate of children who expressed actual or potential needs for protection, **all unaccompanied and separated children from these four countries must be screened for international protection needs.**
- Two overarching patterns of harm related to potential international protection needs emerged: **violence by organized armed criminal actors and violence in the home.** Forty-eight percent of the displaced children interviewed for this study shared experiences of how they had been personally affected by the augmented violence in the region by organized armed criminal actors, including drug cartels and gangs or by State actors. Twenty-one percent of the children confided that they had survived abuse and violence in their homes by their caretakers.

#### CHILDREN FROM EACH COUNTRY WITH POTENTIAL INTERNATIONAL PROTECTION NEEDS

El Salvador	72%
Guatemala	38%
Honduras	57%
Mexico	64%
<i>TOTAL</i>	<i>58%</i>

EL SALVADOR: Of the 104 children from El Salvador UNHCR interviewed, 72% provided responses that raised potential international protection needs. Sixty-six percent of the children cited violence by organized armed criminal actors as a primary motivator for leaving, and 21% percent discussed abuse in the home. Fifteen percent of the children discussed both violence in the society and abuse in the home. Seven percent pointed to situations of deprivation. Only one child mentioned the possibility of benefiting from immigration reform in the U.S.

GUATEMALA: Thirty-eight percent of the 100 children from Guatemala raised international protection concerns. Overall, the three dominant themes that emerged were deprivation, discussed by 29% of the children; abuse in the home, discussed by 23%; and violence in society, discussed by 20%. Almost half of the children interviewed, 48%, were members of an indigenous population, yet they represented 55% of the Guatemalan children who discussed issues of deprivation, 30% of those who discussed abuse in the home and 25% of those who discussed violence in society. Five percent of the Guatemalan children reported that they had been victims of both violence in society and abuse in the home.

HONDURAS: Of the 98 children from Honduras, 57% raised potential international protection concerns. Forty-four percent of these displaced children were threatened with or were victims of violence by organized armed criminal actors. Twenty-four percent of the children reported abuse in the home. Eleven percent reported that they had been victims of both violence in society and abuse in the home. Forty-three percent of the Honduran children did not mention serious harm as a reason for leaving. Twenty-one percent of the children discussed situations of deprivation.

MEXICO: Out of the 102 Mexican children interviewed, 64% raised potential international protection needs. Thirty-two percent spoke of violence in society, 17% spoke of violence in the home and 12% spoke of both. Seven percent discussed situations of deprivation. Unlike children from the other three countries, Mexican children are frequently recruited by organized crime and other criminal actors to work as guides in the human smuggling industry. In addition to their smaller size and greater tolerance for risk taking, it is widely understood that if these children are caught, they will simply be returned to Mexico. A striking 38% of the children from Mexico had been recruited into the human smuggling industry – precisely because of their age and vulnerability.

#### **Key Recommendations:**

1. Recognize that the violence and insecurity within El Salvador, Guatemala, Honduras and Mexico, as well as across their borders, have led to the displacement of children and others in the region; have implications as foreign policy and political issues; and have connections with international protection needs.
2. Recognize the international protection needs – actual and potential – at stake and the need to ensure that these displaced children are provided safety upon arrival, screened for any international protection needs, and provided access to the assessment and provision of international assessment.

## The Central American Child Refugee Crisis: Made in U.S.A.

By [Alexander Main](#) - July 30, 2014

When the long-simmering child migrant crisis bubbled over onto front pages in early June, Republicans predictably pounced on President Obama. The reason, they claimed, for the enormous surge in the number of child migrants apprehended along the United States' southwestern border—[an increase of 160 percent in less than a year](#)—was the administration's lax border and immigration enforcement policies. Never mind that Obama has [deported more immigrants](#) than any previous U.S. president in history or that, under his

administration, border and immigration enforcement spending has reached an all-time high of [\\$17 billion per year](#) (which, rather than curtailing illegal immigration, has [only made it more deadly](#)). Republicans and [much of the media](#) also blamed a 2008 anti-trafficking law (signed by George W. Bush) mandating full immigration hearings—as opposed to immediate removal—for unaccompanied children from countries other than Mexico and Canada. (Though detained migrant children often have no access to legal representation, the law at least provides them with limited due process rights and the opportunity to apply for asylum.)



*At a memorial for indigenous protesters killed by police in Guatemala, Oct. 2013 (Alba Sud Foto)*

In response to its Republican critics, the Obama administration has embraced some of their arguments, hinting that it may support changes to the 2008 law and asking Congress to approve an [emergency \\$3.7 billion spending bill](#) aimed at further strengthening border security and immigration enforcement. The proposed bill also calls for a public relations campaign to let would-be illegal immigrants know that they face prompt deportation if apprehended. But there's little evidence to suggest that migrants aren't already well aware of the risks they are taking—not just of deportation but also of theft, rape, mutilation, extortion, and murder on the way to the U.S. border. A recent survey of detained migrant children by the U.N. High Commission on Refugees indicates that very few—[only 9 out of 404](#)—believed that they would be treated well in the United States or benefit from permissive immigration policies.

A number of Democrats have aggressively rejected Republicans' claims and emphasized the “push factors” or “root causes” driving child migration. The three countries that are the source of the majority of the unaccompanied child migrants—El Salvador, Guatemala, and Honduras—are all poor and have high rates of unemployment. They are also experiencing appalling levels of violence, higher than any other region of the world, outside of war zones. Gangs and drug cartels are responsible for much of this violence, but state security forces have also played a role, [according to human rights groups](#). The confluence of these two factors—economic turmoil and violence—appears to be decisive in driving increasingly desperate citizens of these nations to the United States. Tellingly, the adjacent country of Nicaragua—though the second-poorest nation in the hemisphere—has relatively low levels of violence and few of its inhabitants are leaving the country. On the contrary, large numbers of Salvadorans, Hondurans, and Guatemalans are now [also migrating](#) to Nicaragua, as well as Mexico, Panama, Costa Rica, and Belize.

The administration has meekly acknowledged this reality and [promised](#) “to help address the underlying security and economic issues that cause migration”—although this “help” is [barely perceptible](#) in Obama’s spending proposal. Only a small number of U.S. politicians have cast a critical eye on their country’s policy toward these three tiny nations—often referred to as the “Northern Triangle”—and dared suggest that it might bear some responsibility for the current crisis. In a [July 10 statement](#), the Progressive Caucus (which includes sixty-seven of the more left-leaning members of Congress, including Bernie Sanders in the Senate), asserted that free trade agreements with the United States have “led to the displacement of workers and subsequent migration.” The statement cited reports by human rights groups that the U.S. government is “bolstering corrupt police and military forces that are violating human rights and contributing to the growth of violence in the Northern Triangle.”

Indeed, the United States has had a long history of supporting security forces engaged in violent repression in all three Northern Triangle countries. In the 1980s and early ‘90s, U.S.-sponsored counterinsurgency campaigns, often targeting civilians, resulted in the deaths of tens of thousands and sparked the first major migratory wave to the States from El Salvador and Guatemala. In Honduras, too, hundreds of activists were disappeared, but the violence wasn’t as generalized and Hondurans didn’t flee the country in droves.

Briefly suspended after the 2009 coup, U.S. funding for the Honduran military has since reached its highest level since the early 1990s.

Today, the situation in Honduras has changed. The country has by far the highest level of homicides in the world (again, outside of war zones) and has become the largest source of unaccompanied children fleeing to the United States and other countries. Honduras also offers the most striking illustration of what’s wrong with the U.S. government’s current policies toward the region and how they’ve contributed to the child migrant crisis. [In the Spring 2014 issue of \*Dissent\*](#), I described how the Obama administration—opposed to Honduran president Manuel Zelaya’s leftward turn—helped whitewash his illegal ouster by the military in 2009 through its support for flawed and illegitimate elections later that year. After having been briefly suspended, U.S. funding for training and assistance to the Honduran military was resumed and reached its highest level since the early 1990s. Meanwhile, the widespread military and police repression of the country’s peaceful resistance movement in the months following the coup gave way to frequent targeted killings and attacks against activists of all stripes as well as those seeking to fight or expose state corruption, human rights abuses, and organized crime activity.

Among those killed have been [dozens of LGBT advocates](#), [over one hundred land rights activists](#), [more than thirty journalists](#)—most recently, TV reporter [Herlyn Espinal](#) on July 21, 2014—[human rights lawyers](#), [labor activists](#), and [at least twenty opposition candidates and organizers](#). Although state security agents are often prime suspects in these incidents as well as in numerous extrajudicial killings of young people who may or may not be involved in gang activity, Honduras’ broken judiciary system fails to investigate or prosecute these and other crimes. Indeed, the extraordinary level of violence in Honduras—[with homicides rising 50 percent after the 2009 coup](#)—is only matched by the overwhelming rate of impunity, generally estimated to be above 90 percent. In addition to being rife with corruption and critically under-resourced, the Honduran judiciary’s independence was subverted in December 2012 when the congress, controlled by the ruling National Party, illegally replaced four supreme court judges in the middle of the night.

While U.S. security assistance has continued to pour into Honduras, law enforcement—perhaps more aptly referred to as lawless enforcement—has become increasingly militarized. Since 2011, military troops have been deployed regularly for policing activities and, at the same time, police units have

made use of increasingly lethal equipment and military style tactics. In late 2013, a hybrid “military and public order” police force was created and quickly became the government’s banner crime-fighting force. With U.S. support, Honduras’ security apparatus has become more sophisticated and far-reaching. In 2012, for instance, the two countries signed a memorandum of understanding that formalized U.S. assistance in [developing Honduran authorities’ wiretapping capacity](#) for intercepting telephone and Internet communication nationwide. As a Honduran human rights defender recently put it at a meeting of U.S. advocacy groups in Washington: thanks to U.S. support, Honduran security agents are developing a “more technically advanced ability to advance crime and corruption.”

Even in cases where police and military units aren’t corrupt or infiltrated by organized crime, children and teenagers that happen to be in the wrong place at the wrong time are often suspected of belonging to gangs and killed.

Militarization and brutal *mano dura* (iron fist) crime-fighting methods have also been making a reappearance in El Salvador and, even more so, in Guatemala, where 40 percent of security posts are reportedly in the hands of active and former military officers. The last half-decade of re-militarization of the Northern Triangle, funded and promoted by the United States in the name of the “War on Drugs,” came with the promise of enhanced citizen security. Instead, in many communities, the fear of repressive security forces—often jokingly referred to as *fuerzas de inseguridad* (insecurity forces)—is now nearly as great as the fear of gang violence. Even in cases where police and military units aren’t corrupt or infiltrated by organized crime, children and teenagers that happen to be in the wrong place at the wrong time are often suspected of belonging to gangs and are summarily attacked and killed. Child rights advocates who oppose the systematic criminalization of youth end up attacked as well, as was the case with the director of Casa Alianza Honduras, [José Guadalupe Ruelas](#), who was brutally beaten by Honduran military police troops in May of 2014.

Gang violence in the Northern Triangle, cited by the [UN High Commission on Refugees](#) and other organizations as a major factor in child migration, is also to some degree a byproduct of U.S. policy. Many of the gangs of El Salvador and Honduras—in particular MS-13 and Calle 18—were [first formed in the streets of Los Angeles](#) and included children of Salvadoran war refugees. Since the 1990s, gang members have been deported massively to their countries of origin—though they retain few or no connections there—and have gone on to engage in extortion, drug trafficking, and forced recruitment of teenagers and young children.

Add to this climate of terror rampant joblessness and economic stagnation, and you have a perfect recipe for mass migration. Here, again, Honduras stands out. Since the 2009 coup, it has experienced [dramatic increases in poverty, inequality, and unemployment](#). Some of this is likely attributable to the post-coup violence, but there’s little doubt that the ruling party’s neoliberal policies—including cuts to social services, anti-labor legislation, and privatizations—have also played an important role. The United States has accompanied the International Monetary Fund in promoting these policies even though the U.S. army’s Southern Command, in an [internal memo](#), cited them as a potential cause of unrest. The memo noted that “should key social programs remain under- or unfunded, preexisting socio-economic cleavages between the poor and elite business sectors may be further aggravated and lead to an escalation in protests.”

The Dominican Republic-Central America-United States Free Trade Agreement (CAFTA-DR), which entered into force in 2006, was billed as a game changer that would provide a huge boost to the economies of the region. “Together, we will reduce poverty and create opportunity and hope,” [declared U.S. Trade Representative Robert Zoellick](#) in 2005. But instead the economies of the Northern Triangle have sagged—averaging only 0.9 percent annual per capita growth since 2006—

and poverty has increased. The agreement has led to the displacement of workers, particularly small farmers incapable of competing with the exports of U.S.-subsidized agribusiness, and has in all likelihood been a major push factor for migration. In Honduras, workers' rights have been trampled and labor leaders attacked despite minimal guarantees mandated under CAFTA, prompting a [2012 complaint by the AFL-CIO](#) to which the U.S. Department of Labor has so far failed to respond.

On July 25, the presidents of Honduras, Guatemala, and El Salvador [met with President Obama](#) at the White House to discuss what to do about the child migrant crisis. Obama asked his counterparts for their help in keeping refugees at home, in part through further militarization and enforcement of their own borders. In remarks made before and after the meeting, Honduran president Juan Orlando Hernández and Guatemalan president Otto Pérez Molina both placed blame where it belonged—on the U.S.-led “War on Drugs.” But Hernández also [asked the United States](#) for a “Plan Colombia for Central America” to mitigate the push factors driving migration. Plan Colombia, often touted by the State Department as a great success, involved a [no-holds-barred military and police offensive](#) against drug traffickers and insurgents that resulted in the [displacement of hundreds of thousands of Colombian civilians](#) and [thousands of extrajudicial killings](#) and other abuses by security forces. The initiative appears in fact to be a model for the United States' 2011 regional security plan—the Central American Regional Security Initiative (CARSI)—which has provided the Northern Triangle with hundreds of millions of dollars of security assistance in addition to millions in bilateral assistance.

Why criticize the drug war and then ask for more of precisely the sort of assistance that has exacerbated violence and insecurity?

Why criticize the drug war and then ask for more of precisely the sort of assistance that has exacerbated violence and insecurity? Both Hernández and Pérez Molina, an ex-military chief implicated in war crimes, have helped reestablish the military as key political actors in their countries, with the unflagging support of the United States. In the 1980s and early '90s, military control was seen as essential—by national right-wing elites and the U.S. government—for guaranteeing the elimination of potentially subversive leftwing movements. In 2009, the same priority reemerged in Honduras when Zelaya was ousted and a broad-based grassroots movement took to the streets to try to return him to power.

But an additional factor can be seen at play both in Honduras and Guatemala: the militarized defense of a neoliberal agenda that is being met with stubborn resistance by community groups. Increasingly, public and private security forces act in tandem to attack and intimidate small farmers or indigenous and Afro-indigenous communities that refuse to be displaced by agribusiness corporations or resource-hungry multinationals. Such is the case in San Rafael, Guatemala, where the community continues to oppose the San Rafael mining operation; in the Bajo Aguan in Honduras, where over a hundred campesinos have lost their lives defending land claimed by the Dinant Corporation; and in Rio Negro, Honduras, where a Lenca indigenous community has sought to prevent the destruction of their land by a hydroelectric project. Human rights defenders that have tried to assist communities in holding security forces accountable for killings and attacks—such as Berta Cáceres of COPINH, Miriam Miranda of the Black Fraternal Organization of Honduras, and Annie Bird of Rights Action—have been subjected to threats and attacks themselves.

Right-wing pundits here in the United States have asserted that the border crisis is “not our responsibility.” The evidence on the ground in the Northern Triangle suggests the contrary. The economic and trade policies that the United States has supported in Mexico and Central America have resulted in the displacement of millions of workers and economic stagnation. The militarized drug war that the United States has promoted and funded in Mexico and Central America has further

unleashed repressive, abusive security forces and undermined the civilian institutions that might hold them accountable. It's time to change our policies toward these countries in their interest and our own.

Human rights groups and progressives in Congress have made important policy recommendations, and the administration should listen. In terms of immediate action, the unaccompanied children—the majority of whom appear to have legitimate claims to asylum, according to the United Nations High Commission on Refugees and other organizations—should be granted legal protection and reunited with family members and legal guardians in the United States. In particular, anxious Honduran and Salvadoran parents residing in the United States legally under Temporary Protected Status are understandably concerned about their children's safety and should be authorized to reunite with them without resorting to human smugglers and other desperate and dangerous means.

In terms of addressing the root causes, the United States should allow Mexican and Central American governments to revise trade agreements so as to protect vulnerable economic sectors and prevent more jobs from being lost. U.S. security assistance programs should be curtailed—especially when governments fail to prosecute abuses perpetrated by state security agents—and, in the words of the Congressional Progressive Caucus Co-chair Raúl Grijalva, “we should reassess the aid we send to nations with corrupt police and military forces to ensure we are part of the solution, not the problem.”

Rather than empowering security forces with appalling human rights records, the United States and other countries should help these governments reestablish basic rule of law. Successful multilateral programs like Guatemala's International Commission Against Impunity—which, since 2006, has provided international teams of attorneys to support judicial investigations of organized crime groups—should be strengthened and replicated in other countries with high rates of impunity.

Should the U.S. fail to revise its flawed policies toward the region, the humanitarian crisis in the Northern Triangle and Mexico will only grow, and children and their parents will continue to have few options but to risk the perilous journey across the U.S. border.

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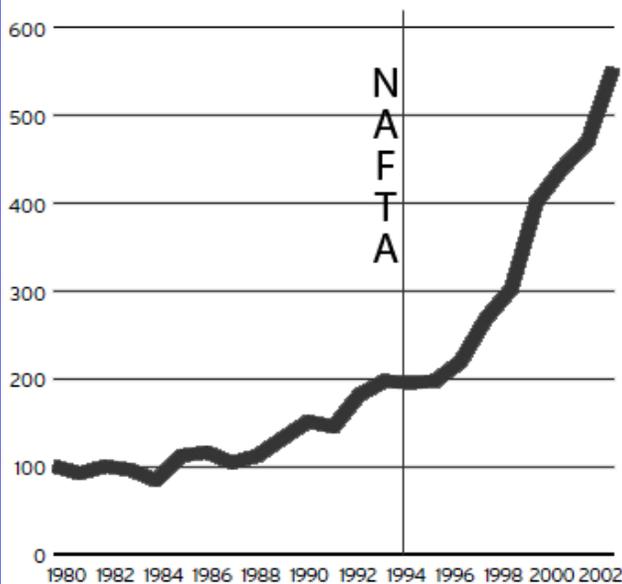


# Fact Sheet: Unjust Trade and Forced Migration

## NAFTA's and CAFTA's Broken Promises Increase Migration

When NAFTA was implemented in 1994, and CAFTA in 2006, Mexicans and Central Americans were told that increases in trade, foreign direct investment and exports would raise incomes and the standard of living. The trade agreements were supposed to reduce migration, create more and better jobs, and reduce prices for goods. While trade and foreign direct investment have dramatically increased in Mexico, only 10% of the population has seen a higher standard of living. **With millions of jobs made obsolete by cheap imports from the United States, many Mexicans and Central Americans have been left with no choice but to migrate north looking for work.**<sup>1</sup> For example, in CAFTA's first year 11,457 jobs were lost in El Salvador alone and the number of Salvadorans leaving for the United States increased from 507 per day to 740 per day.<sup>2</sup>

**Migration from Rural Mexico to the U.S.**  
Household Members: 1980 = 100



Source: Analysis of data from Mexico National Rural Household Survey of 2002. Taken from Carnegie Endowment for International Peace report: NAFTA's Promise and Reality, pg. 51.

Since the 1994 passage of NAFTA, the number of Mexicans migrating each year to the U.S. has more than doubled (from 235,000 to 577,000).<sup>3</sup>

Two thirds of the current population of undocumented Mexicans that live in the U.S., came after NAFTA's implementation in 1994.<sup>4</sup>

CAFTA did not create more jobs in El Salvador. Unemployment in the countryside increased by 71 % from 2005 to 2007. The majority of the unemployed find immigration to the U.S. to be their only alternative..<sup>5</sup>

### Why is immigration on the rise? A look at the agricultural sector:

- The U.S. subsidizes agriculture with \$20 billion each year compared to \$3.5 billion in Mexico,<sup>8</sup> enabling U.S. corn to be sold at prices 30 percent below Mexico's cost of production.<sup>9</sup>
- The influx of cheap subsidized grains from the U.S to Mexico under NAFTA resulted in the **decimation of at least two million farming jobs.**<sup>6</sup>
- Every hour Mexico imports \$1.5 million worth of food; in that same hour 30 farmers migrate to the U.S.<sup>10</sup>
- Under CAFTA thousands upon thousands of workers have been forced to migrate to Mexico or the United States because farming is not only no longer profitable, but cannot even sustain an already impoverished family.<sup>7</sup>



## NAFTA Fails to Create Jobs in the Industrial Sector:

NAFTA and the economic policies that paved its way reoriented the Mexican economy from subsistence agriculture into providing a low wage labor force for multinational assembly plants called *maquilas*. During the peak growth period from 1994-2001, only 1.3 million jobs were created in the *maquila* sector, not nearly enough to offset jobs lost in agriculture, or in Mexico's decimated domestic industry,<sup>11</sup> not to mention the 730,000 Mexicans who enter the labor market per year.<sup>12</sup>

### Rising Prices for Basic Necessities

- NAFTA and CAFTA promised lower food prices. However, with consolidated corporate control, prices for tortillas, which represent 75% of the nutrition for Mexico's 50 million poor<sup>16</sup>, increased by 571% during the first six years of NAFTA<sup>17</sup>, and by January 2007 had nearly tripled again.<sup>18</sup>
- Not only tortilla prices have risen. The cost of the basic food basket in Mexico rose 60% in 2008 alone. Families are spending practically 10 times the daily minimum wage of approximately \$3.80 to acquire basic products for their meals, personal hygiene and home.<sup>19</sup>
- Between 2005 and 2007 in El Salvador, the price of corn almost doubled, the price of beans increased by 52% and the price of rice increased by 45%.
- **The collision of rising prices and precarious, low-paid employment and job loss leave many Mexicans and Central Americans with few options for survival.** Many make the choice to migrate to the U.S. in order to provide for their families.

### Unstable Jobs and the *Maquila* Sector

- A factory worker makes an average of \$7-9 a day in Mexico, equivalent to what an undocumented worker might make per hour in the U.S.
- To attract new factories, Mexico and the countries in Central America were pressured to provide special tax breaks. The factories are notorious for abhorrent health, safety<sup>13</sup> and labor conditions.<sup>14</sup>
- An estimated 1/3 of the jobs created in the manufacturing sector in Mexico have been lost since 2001 as a result of companies moving their production orders to Central America, Southeast Asia, and China where labor is cheaper.<sup>15</sup>

## Take Action

NAFTA and CAFTA cause economic desperation and migration. The story is the same in the United States – larger corporations prosper while workers and small farmers flounder. The TRADE (Trade Reform Accountability, Development and Employment) Act would launch a new, more just era of trade by enforcing economic justice, human rights, labor and environmental standards. Join Witness for Peace's *Migrating Toward Justice* campaign as we demand trade and immigration policies that work for the majority by making sure this legislation passes. **To take action, visit [www.WitnessforPeace.org/Trade](http://www.WitnessforPeace.org/Trade)**

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# Americas Program

A new world of action and communication for social change

## Report: Rethinking the Drug War in Central America and Mexico (Excerpts)

By [The Mesoamerican Working Group \(MAWG\)](#) | 21 / January / 2014

### Executive Summary

U.S. security policy in Mexico and Central America, focused on militarized counter-narcotics efforts known as the war on drugs, has had severely negative effects on the region. This report analyzes the effects in four areas – militarization, drug policy, violence against women and forced migration—and examines the impact of this security policy on three countries: Mexico, Guatemala and Honduras.



### Findings

The report finds that current drug war policy has dramatically increased the transfer of arms, equipment and military/police training to the region. Concurrently, we find that violence in the region has exploded.

Our findings raise serious concerns regarding increased U.S. military influence and presence in the region, combined with expanded national military and police activities under the war on drugs. We find that the impact on public safety, human rights, violence against women and democratic institutions has been disturbingly negative. This indicates an urgent need to review and rectify programs and spending priorities. ...

Along with a rise in generalized violence, we found a significant rise in violence against women, particularly femicides. This increase correlated with greater militarization in all three countries examined. Under recent U.S.-supported policies, security forces have frequently perpetrated acts of violence against women and women human rights defenders have been specifically targeted. These alarming trends not only directly affect women, but also serve as a barometer of human rights and stability.

This report also finds that as a result of the rise of violence in the region, the number of people migrating to flee the violence has increased. Exploding homicide rates and widespread fear in the region contribute to this trend. Migrants in transit also face far greater risk of death and abuses as cartels encroach on migrant smuggling routes in Mexico. Despite the security build-up, the region's governments systematically fail to combat these attacks and protect migrant men, women and children.

We have seen a significant shift in opinions regarding the underlying rationale of the war on drugs—prohibition of certain substances and enforcement of prohibition laws. This shift, combined with the problems identified above, requires that we rethink our foreign policy related

to counternarcotics efforts. A majority of people in the U.S. favor legalization of marijuana and twenty states have regulated its use for medicinal or general purposes. Latin American leaders have publicly questioned the huge commitment of resources and high political and social costs in their countries of enforcing prohibition, in the U.S. which remains the main consumer market for illicit drugs. Recognizing the need for change, the Organization of American States has released a report on alternative scenarios for drug policy reform, one of which includes regulating marijuana.

## **Country Findings**

Mexico has experienced a marked increase in the homicide rate, with estimates showing 80,000 dead since the war on drugs was launched, 27,000 disappeared, and many thousands more displaced from their homes. The U.S. Merida Initiative has not only failed to improve public safety but correlates with a dramatic erosion of citizen security. The armed forces and police supported by U.S. policy have consistently been implicated in human rights abuses and corruption. Under the government of Enrique Peña Nieto, cooperation on the war on drugs has continued despite these disastrous results and deepening concern in both U.S. and Mexican legislatures.

In Guatemala, a militarized approach to security has not led to a decrease in criminal activity or violence. Instead, it has led to increased repression, human rights violations, and has debilitated Guatemala's transitional justice process. Current U.S. support to the Guatemalan military encourages human rights abuses and has fueled organized crime. Recent reports show evidence of close links between the Guatemalan military and criminal organizations. The questionable use of the military in matters of internal security threatens to open old wounds, and places the long-term peace process in jeopardy, and with it, Guatemala's fragile democracy. Despite legal restrictions on military aid to Guatemala since 1977, counter-narcotics programs through the Central American Regional Security Initiative (CARSI) ultimately reinforce a militarized security model, contributing to the climate of violence in the country.

In Honduras, since the 2008 Merida Initiative and later CARSI were applied in Central America, the homicide rate has gone from 58 to 85 per 100,000 residents, giving it the highest murder rate in the world. In the context of the 2009 coup d'état, impunity and dysfunctional institutions compound the problem. Honduran security forces have been plagued with scandal and accusations of human rights violations and have been systematically used to repress public protest, particularly in defense of land and resource rights. Despite this situation, U.S. aid concentrates on supporting these forces.

## **Recommendations to Congress**

- **Demilitarize our approach to regional security.** Policy should address organized crime not with military support, but through prosecution and transnational anti-money laundering efforts, arms control and anti-smuggling initiatives. Pentagon budget authorities for the drug war should be zeroed out, including all non-prevention funds from the DOD Counternarcotics Central Transfer Account. Military assistance under Foreign Operations Appropriations should be redirected. Meanwhile, Congress should fund independent evaluation of human rights impacts of such assistance and demand greater transparency.
- **Hold oversight hearings on the Drug Enforcement Administration,** especially concerning its activities overseas.

- **Stem the rise in violence against women.** Draw down aid to abusive security forces, carry out human rights reviews that include a gender perspective, and support women human rights defenders by denouncing and urging investigation of attacks on them and publicly recognizing their role in building democracy.
- **End policies that feed migration and crimes against migrants:** Divert military aid to job creation, small business infrastructure, human rights defense (including the protection of migrants in Mesoamerica), and other policies that prevent migration or lessen risks to migrants; halt the militarization of the border and de-link border militarization from Comprehensive Immigration Reform and eliminate deportation policies that make migrants vulnerable to organized crime, including night deportations.
- **Open a debate on drug policy and review law enforcement priorities.** Hold hearings on drug policy reform in the Americas, including marijuana regulation, sentencing reform, and harm reduction; advocate that State Department internationalize the Attorney General's policy position to encourage reduced sentencing for nonviolent drug offenses; endorse a formal position that the U.S. will not intervene in nations pursuing drug policy reform.

The Mesoamerican Working Group (MAWG) is a network of independent, non-governmental organizations that share diverse and longstanding partnerships with national, regional, and local groups throughout Mesoamerica; a region that includes: Mexico, Belize, Guatemala, El Salvador, Honduras, Nicaragua, and Costa Rica. MAWG member organizations are Drug Policy Alliance, Guatemala Human Rights Commission-USA, Rights Action, JASS (Just Associates), Center for Economic and Policy Research, CIP American Program, Fellowship of Reconciliation, Witness for Peace, Global Exchange, School of the Americas Watch, Sisters of Mercy of the Americas-Justice Team, and the Committee in Solidarity with the People of El Salvador (CISPES).

## **Immigration and the Escalation of the Drug War in Mesoamerica**

*By School of the Americas Watch*

Immigration to the United States from Mexico, El Salvador, Guatemala and Honduras has been the result of a unique combination of economic, social, and political factors in each respective country. Although the root causes of migration waves from Mesoamerica may vary, the entire region has seen an increase in migration due to drug war related violence in the last 2-3 years.

### **1980 to the Present**

The civil wars in Central America produced a boom in migration to the U.S. Only 353,900 Central American immigrants resided in the U.S. in 1980. Ten years later, the population had almost tripled to 1.13 million. There are now over 3 million Central American born immigrants living in the U.S.<sup>[57]</sup> Immigration from Mexico has also dramatically risen over the last three decades, increasing from approximately 1 million Mexican born immigrants in 1980 to over 11 million today.<sup>[58]</sup> Historically, Mexican migration to the U.S. can be largely attributed to economic

antecedents, including the Mexican peso crisis of 1994 and the post-NAFTA displacement of subsistence farmers.

### **Recent Indications of Increasing Links Between Drug War Violence and Immigration**

Since 2008 the United States has funneled billions of dollars into Mesoamerica through the Merida Initiative and CARSI, utilizing a militarization strategy to combat the supply of drugs rather than preventative measures to curb demand. However, this strategy has not curtailed the flow of drugs. Instead it has left behind a wake of human rights abuses by drug cartels and Mesoamerican security forces, cultivated a climate of fear, and forced many citizens to choose between migration or the very real possibility of death.

The increase in the flow of Mesoamerican migration as a result of drug war related violence can be seen in the dramatic increase of asylum applications in recent years, from 5,369 in FY2009 to an anticipated 28,600 through the end of FY2013. Those statistics were cited in drafted comments obtained by the Associated Press by USCIS Associate Director Joseph Langlois, where he also stated that  $\frac{2}{3}$  of those requests come from the Northern Triangle as a result of “increased drug trafficking, violence and overall rising crime.”<sup>[59]</sup> Border apprehension statistics from countries ‘Other Than Mexico’ (predominantly comprised of Northern Triangle migrants) also support this claim, nearly doubling from FY2011 (54,098) to FY2012 (99,013).<sup>[60] [61]</sup>

Because Mexican migration to the United States is fueled primarily by economic reasons, the US recession combined with Mexican economic growth and a lower birthrate have contributed to a 75 percent drop in illegal crossings to the United States since 2005.<sup>[62]</sup> However, new asylum applications from Mexico have grown from 3,855 in FY2009 to 9,206 in FY2012. The dramatic increases in Mesoamerican asylum applications have prompted House Judiciary Chairman Rep. Bob Goodlatte (R-VA) to accuse asylum seekers of fraud. Given the region’s rising homicide rates, including the over 70,000 drug war related deaths in Mexico since 2006, such accusations are short-sighted at best. Despite genuine and credible fears of death, over 90% of Mesoamerican applications are denied due to the limited definition of legal asylum.<sup>[63]</sup>

### **Conclusion**

Despite a clearly failing strategy, the US continues to squander billions in its militarized tactical approach to the drug war in Mexico and Central America while neglecting to address its domestic policies which fuel the demand for illegal drugs. The citizens of Mesoamerica suffer the consequences through the loss of life and livelihoods. Until this approach is reevaluated, the violence and murder spurring migration from Mexico and Central America into the US cannot be expected to slow anytime soon. Adding additional danger and risk to these scenarios is the encroachment of migrant smuggling routes and operations by drug cartels subjecting transmigrants to a litany of human rights abuses including sexual assault, forced recruitment, extortion, kidnapping for ransom and human trafficking, all of which the government is not combatting effectively, if at all.

committee in solidarity with

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the people of el salvador

## 100 Days of the Sánchez Cerén Administration, September 24, 2014.

Last week, the administration of Salvador Sánchez Cerén celebrated its 100<sup>th</sup> day of governance, taking the opportunity to provide a [report](#) to the public of actions taken to advance towards equality and wellbeing for all Salvadorans.

Among the achievements of the country's second leftist Farabundo Martí National Liberation Front (FMLN) administration is the opening of 43 new community health clinics along with the first specialized pharmacy for patients with chronic illnesses at the National Maternity Hospital. Working to guarantee the right to dignified living conditions, the administration has also installed cement floors in 4,619 homes in 28 impoverished municipalities and constructed 177 new homes with another 388 underway in communities damaged by the 2001 earthquake. In addition, potable water service has been extended to 35,000 Salvadorans.

In the realm of public security, 90% of the police force has been trained in preparation for the new Community Policing program, already underway in several neighborhoods throughout the greater San Salvador metropolitan area. The President has also convened a National Citizen Security Council with representatives from across Salvadoran society and the political spectrum to create comprehensive community responses to violence and develop violence prevention initiatives.

Continuing with the previous administration's efforts to reactivate the nation's neglected agricultural sector, the Ministry of Agriculture distributed 200,000 [agricultural packets](#) of bean seeds to peasant farmers and invested \$400,000 in phase one of a new urban and suburban agriculture project in the greater San Salvador metropolitan area. The administration has also granted 2,124 land titles to rural families, 865 of which went to women.

In economic measures, the Development Bank of El Salvador (BANDESAL) has been granted \$15.3 million to provide low-interest loans, credit and advising to women running small businesses. And in addition to [new tax initiatives](#) to increase state income, El Salvador is projected to save millions of dollars after [joining Petrocaribe](#), a Venezuelan oil purchasing association.

The right wing opposition has responded to the administration's publication with a counter-campaign to smear the leftist government, bolstered by the conservative media's work to promulgate a sense of chaos and despair in national headlines. But despite these [destabilizing efforts](#), the FMLN government has much to celebrate in the first few months of this newest phase of El Salvador's struggle for social and economic justice.



# [Child Migrants, Violence, and the Nicaraguan Exception](#)

by José Miguel Cruz, Monday, August 18, 2014 (*Global Observancy*)

The [recent surge](#) of children migrating from Central America to the United States has caused many to ask who or what is responsible. The vast majority of these children—78 percent, according to one figure from FY 2014—are from Guatemala, El Salvador, and Honduras, countries that make up what is sometimes called the Northern Triangle, and are places that are strikingly poor, unequal, and extremely violent.

Their closest neighbor to the south—Nicaragua—is even poorer, and yet its children are not part of this migration. Nicaragua has an annual GDP per capita of less than \$2,000 USD, making it the poorest country in the Western hemisphere, except for Haiti. Further, this Central American country shares a turbulent history of long political conflicts, bloody civil war, recurring foreign occupations, and enduring corruption.

Yet Nicaragua has significantly less crime and violence than any other country in this region that stretches from the Rio Grande to the Amazon. Only Costa Rica, the longest continuous democracy in Latin America and the most developed country in Central America, has slightly lower rates of crime and violence.

How is this so? Several observers have contended that the stark differences in the levels of violence between the Northern Triangle and Nicaragua can be traced back to the [dissimilar historic migration patterns](#) in these countries. These flows started during the 1980s, as civil wars pushed Salvadoran and Guatemalan refugees to Southern California, while Nicaraguans fled to Costa Rica and South Florida.

Criminal gangs, such as the infamous *Mara Salvatrucha*, flourished in the Northern Triangle, the argument goes, because mass numbers of migrants who returned after being deported by the US destabilized those countries. Once in Central America, they took over the streets and, lacking in legitimate options for supporting themselves, opted for a life of crime and violence.

Conversely, according to this line of thought, Nicaragua dodged these effects because Nicaraguans received special treatment from the US. In the 1980s, the Reagan Administration had fought the Sandinista government and was sympathetic toward the Nicaraguan refugees flocking to Miami. In addition, most of the poor Nicaraguans who could not afford to travel to South Florida settled in Costa Rica, where they were safe from gangs.

Although circular migration-deportation patterns have certainly played a part in the development of gangs and the growth of violence in northern Central America, it is misleading to blame it all on migration. If we accept [this argument](#) as it is commonly presented, we could not explain why, after years of unrivaled deportation from the US, gangs formed by Mexican migrants were not able to gain a foothold in Mexico the way they did in northern Central America. Moreover, if the root of the problem is US-made gangs, we would have a hard time explaining why the Central American *maras* have not created the same havoc in the American cities where they roam.

The main reasons why Nicaragua has lower levels of violence while the Northern Triangle's countries are collapsing under the siege of legions of criminal bands lie elsewhere. They have to

do with the way Central American governments addressed and tackled the problems of citizen security when youth gangs, criminal organizations, and other violent actors started to emerge and spread across the region.

The best example of this is the implementation of the *mano dura* (iron fist) approach in northern Central America, versus the prevention-based approaches that prevailed in Nicaragua. While the countries of northern Central America enacted draconian anti-crime laws that unleashed massive crackdowns on their marginalized youth, Nicaragua decided to take [community-based](#) preventive approaches to control crime. Police institutions in Guatemala and Honduras let their oversight mechanisms and human rights units weaken in order to give them more leeway to tackle crime; in contrast, the Nicaraguan police invested their institutional energy in creating family and youth specialized units. While the Salvadoran government used its resources to [arrest](#) more than 30,000 youth and throw them into dilapidated prisons, the Nicaraguans used their police to promote and participate with community organizations.

In northern Central America, overcrowded prisons not only became national centers for criminal recruitment, they also turned into sites of massacres, inexplicable fires, and systemic abuse. As a result, gangs and other criminal groups [grew stronger](#) in prisons, where they developed more opportunities, contacts, and motivations to confront the authorities and go against anyone viewed as a collaborator of law-enforcement.

But these differences in institutional behavior between Nicaragua and the countries of the Northern Triangle are not merely a matter of policy choice. They are fundamentally a matter of how criminal justice institutions were reformed after the political transitions that ended the civil conflicts two decades ago. In northern Central America, those reforms [failed to move](#) the nascent security and justice institutions away from the maneuvers of corrupt politicians and stopped short of removing the old regimes' abusive officials. Hence, brand-new institutions just changed their names and their uniforms without transforming their practices and, more importantly, some of their crooked leaders. As one Salvadoran gang member once told me in reference to the *mano dura* crackdowns:

“The police chase us the way they used to hunt guerrillas during the war, circling us up and shooting at us. But you know what? We are not guerrillas. We are homeboys, and we don't care about people liking us. So if the police want war, they'll have their war, because all we care about is revenge.”

Conversely, Nicaragua went through a different political process. There, security institutions emerged after a revolution wiped out the overseers of the old authoritarian regime and after the victorious revolutionaries ended up losing power in an electoral process. Those radical changes created new relationships between state institutions and the population, while at the same time they [forced](#) the political elites to “de-partisanize,” professionalize, and clean up the security institutions in order to make them reliable. Law-enforcement leaders understood that in order to survive, they had to work with the community and be efficient.

Such a process was largely absent in northern Central America, where the electoral success of political elites who had been in charge during the authoritarian era provided political cover to corrupt officials and their impunity.

This is not to give the impression that Nicaragua is a haven of peace and tranquility, unhampered by serious conflicts and corruption. In fact, there is very disturbing news recently of [government maneuvers](#) to manipulate and re-politicize the police. But in comparison with the nearly anarchical state of its northern neighbors, Nicaragua still feels like another world—one where regular people can still start a small business without the fear of being extorted by youth gangs, and unarmed licensed police officers can still ride public buses without the fear of being shot by a community member with a grudge.

Violence in Central America has more to do with poor governance—that is, draconian security policies, corrupt law-enforcement institutions, and entrenched impunity—than with migration and deportation. Political and criminal justice institutions are a key factor that can no longer be neglected if we are to explain the gap between Nicaragua and the rest. Unfortunately, the fixation on *maras*, drug trafficking, and migration have limited the most important discussion thus far.

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