



# Mexico's Southern Border: Security, Violence and Migration in the Trump Era

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## Table of Contents

Executive Summary.....	i
Recommendations.....	iii
I. Introduction .....	1
II. The Trump Effect .....	4
A. Central Americans as a Tactical Bargain .....	4
B. Military Cooperation and Migration .....	6
C. Central American Development .....	7
D. Threats to Stop Cooperation.....	8
III. Migration Dynamics and the Trump Presidency .....	11
A. Fear and the Reduced Flow of Central Americans .....	11
B. Rising Xenophobia.....	14
C. Local Resentment .....	16
IV. Criminal Organisations in Flux and the Threat to Migrants and Refugees.....	18
A. The Fall of the Zetas and the Rise of the Jalisco New Generation Cartel in the Tenosique-Medias Aguas Route .....	19
B. Central American Gangs in Chiapas.....	21
V. A Dangerous Destination for Refugees .....	25
A. Between a Rock and a Hard Place .....	25
B. System Failures.....	27
C. International Support .....	28
VI. Conclusion .....	30
APPENDICES	
A. Map of Mexico’s Southern Border.....	31
B. Map of the Northern Triangle .....	32
C. Deportations of Northern Triangle Nationals by the U.S. and Mexico 2013-2017 .....	33
D. Applications for Refugee Status and Refugees Accepted by Mexico 2013-2017 .....	34
E. Total Illegal Alien Apprehensions on the U.S. Border 2010-2017.....	35
F. Rates of Serious Crime in Mexico’s Six Southern States .....	36
G. Acronyms.....	40
H. About the International Crisis Group .....	41
I. Crisis Group Reports and Briefings on Latin America since 2015 .....	42
J. Crisis Group Board of Trustees .....	43

# Principal Findings

**What's new?** Despite U.S. President Donald Trump's tweets to the contrary, Mexico is vigorously policing its southern border, stemming the northward flow of Central Americans escaping poverty and violence. It is deporting thousands and accepting thousands more as refugees, though many remain in legal limbo.

**Why does it matter?** Central Americans have long contended with abuse on their way north. Today they run a gauntlet of threats from criminals and corrupt officials. If Mexico is not better equipped to handle the influx, the human costs and the risk of conflict will rise. Already xenophobia and violence are increasing across Mexico's south.

**What should be done?** Mexico should stop using migration policy as a bargaining chip with the U.S., and instead redouble efforts to protect migrants and refugees, fight crime and promote development in the southern states. The U.S. and EU should provide material assistance for refugee processing and protection, and support efforts to reduce poverty and crime in Central America so that fewer people are compelled to flee.

## *Executive Summary*

The relationship between Mexico and the U.S. is most fraught in the domain where cooperation between the two countries is the closest. At its border with Central America, some 1,500km south of the line where U.S. President Donald Trump wants to build a wall, Mexico effectively acts as an operating arm of U.S. immigration control. It stops hundreds of thousands of Central Americans from travelling north, deporting more of them than the U.S. since 2015, while also granting thousands refugee status. For Mexico, control over its southern border offers some protection from the spasmodic blows of the Trump presidency. But as Central Americans continue to flee poverty and violence at home, Mexico's buffers are turning into bottlenecks. Xenophobia and criminality make southern Mexico increasingly perilous for refugees and migrants. The Mexican government, with the support of Central American states, the European Union (EU) and Washington itself, should strive to reinforce refugee protection, crime prevention and development in the area.

Elected in part on a tough anti-immigration stance, President Trump has planted deep uncertainty in the minds of many who might seek to enter the country. After falling sharply in 2017, arrests by the U.S. Border Patrol are again on the rise. Humanitarian workers and migrants themselves report acute anxiety over what lies in wait for those who do get across. For many of those leaving Central America, their final destination is now closer, and often less welcoming. The number of Latin Americans applying for refugee status in Mexico jumped 66 per cent in 2017. Understaffed and overstretched, the Mexican system for adjudicating asylum cases is close to collapse: when two earthquakes struck Mexico in September 2017, the national refugee agency was briefly paralysed. Many applicants, including children, languish in detention centres, awaiting the verdict as to whether they will be granted protection.

Moreover, Central American refugees' escape from violence is far from assured. In 2017, Mexico tallied its highest number of murders since the country's modern record-keeping began. Homicide rates in the southern states of Oaxaca, Quintana Roo and Veracruz are above the national average and rising. Kidnappings have soared across the south since 2015. Not only are the border states now the main conduit for cocaine trafficked from Colombia's Pacific coast, but violence is fuelled by the fragmentation of the once dominant Zetas and the Sinaloa Cartel, combined with the rise of the Jalisco New Generation Cartel and the spread to southern Mexico of Central American street gangs, notably the Mara Salvatrucha (MS-13). The proliferation of cartels and gangs has intensified turf battles over protection rackets. Long the victims of crime while travelling north, Central Americans must now run an extended gauntlet of criminal organisations ready to kidnap, physically and sexually abuse or kill them. Gangs have even staged raids on migrant shelters.

Yet, in many border towns, locals perceive Central Americans themselves as responsible for the rise in crime, prompting a backlash, including calls for southern Mexico to build a wall of its own. Refugees and migrants face increasing discrimination and are often trapped between erratic state institutions, predatory criminals and alarmed locals.

Mexico is entitled to secure its borders and manage migration flows to ensure refugees', migrants' and host communities' lives and well-being are not endangered. But the realities of its southern frontier impede effective and judicious migration management. The long and porous border, unceasing flight from Central America, and the presence of potent trafficking groups make border control fitful and ineffective. Combined civil and military operations to seal the border have not halted the flows, and the coercive measures Mexico relies upon appear not to identify adequately those in need of protection, or ensure those in transit are free from threats and abuse by criminal groups and corrupt state officials.

As southern Mexican states become assembly points for migrants and refugees from the region, Mexico, with the support of Central American countries, the EU and potentially the U.S., should strive to mitigate the risks of those in transit coming to harm and of friction between them and Mexican host communities. With a new president due to be elected on 1 July, the Mexican state, supported by foreign donors, should redouble crime prevention efforts; ensure that all national and international bodies engaged in refugee and migrant protection, including UN agencies and Central American consulates, coordinate efforts and target areas where threats are most acute; and promote a realistic regional approach to the migration issue that helps Northern Triangle countries deter emigration through greater economic opportunity and a reduction in crime and violence. Latin American governments should expand their efforts to distribute refugees more evenly across the region, building on existing initiatives to strengthen shared regional responses to the challenge.

Mexico's border policy, currently part of the government's efforts to get what it wants in negotiations with the U.S., should turn instead to preventing the festering local resentments, crime and violence that lurk along its southern frontier. The geopolitics of migration must not delay or dilute attempts to lessen the perils that refugees and migrants face.

## *Recommendations*

*To prevent the spread of organised crime, violence and xenophobia, and to support security and development on the Mexico-Central America border:*

### **To the governments of the United States and Mexico:**

1. Enhance bilateral cooperation and partner with Central American countries to ensure orderly migratory and commercial flows and spur local economic development on the border, without making these steps conditional on the outcome of commercial or other bilateral negotiations.
2. Refrain from supporting the further militarisation of Mexico's southern border as a means to halt migrant flows and combat rising crime.
3. Foster exchange of knowledge between the U.S., Mexico and Central American countries on gang prevention and gang members' rehabilitation in vulnerable cities and neighbourhoods on Mexico's southern border.

### **To the government of Mexico:**

4. Provide sufficient financial and human resources to the Mexican Commission for Refugee Assistance (COMAR), so it can coordinate with the National Institute of Migration (INM) in providing attention to those seeking protection, including:
  - a) Improving security for those whose lives are endangered by transnational organised crime according to gender-specific and age-appropriate needs; and deterring their recruitment by these groups through employment and community development programs.
  - b) Giving information about the right to seek asylum to every non-Mexican national detained by any Mexican authority and ending extended detention, especially of children and adolescents.
5. Support local government efforts to accommodate migrants and refugees in the border region; and reinforce state-level attorney general's offices specialised in crimes against migrants.

### **To the governments of Honduras, El Salvador and Guatemala:**

6. Provide the necessary infrastructure, financial and human resources to existing consular offices, and expand their services and geographical reach in Mexico, reducing their dependence on donations and infrastructure provided by the Mexican government.

### **To the European Union and the United States:**

7. Support through technical assistance Mexican and Central American governments' efforts to provide oversight of security agencies and state institutions working on migrant and refugee issues; increase technical support to expand asylum case processing in Mexico and neighbouring countries, especially of children; and provide technical assistance and capacity building to Central American consulates to ensure protection for those in transit.

**Mexico City/Bogotá/Brussels, 9 May 2018**

# Mexico's Southern Border: Security, Violence and Migration in the Trump Era

## I. Introduction

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The border snaking between Mexico and Guatemala was demarcated in the 19th century, but only in recent decades has it experienced mass migration. In the latter stages of the Cold War, thousands of Central Americans arrived in the border area after escaping civil wars. At that time, Mexico ramped up its support for peace talks in El Salvador and Guatemala, leading to the voluntary repatriation of refugees in the 1990s.<sup>1</sup> Today, streams of migrants and refugees are fleeing poverty and violence in the countries to Mexico's south. But this time, control of the southern frontier is not a local issue. Mexico's most important bilateral relationship – with the U.S. – depends to an unprecedented extent on the country's capacity to stem the tide of northward migration.

Mexico's southern border policy, and its strain on ties with the U.S., has evolved in phases. Before the 11 September 2001 attacks, former Presidents Vicente Fox and George W. Bush intended to broker an agreement on immigration.<sup>2</sup> After the attacks, they abandoned those plans in favour of enhanced security cooperation with a counter-terrorism focus between the U.S., Mexico and Central American countries.<sup>3</sup> Mexico adapted its immigration policy to the new security priorities by establishing Plan South, a system of police and military surveillance, and by deferring to the U.S. on every major issue related to the southern border.<sup>4</sup>

Plan South aimed to deter Central American emigration to the U.S. with reinforced roadside inspections of vehicles in search of undocumented migrants across the Isthmus of Tehuantepec, the neck of land where the distance between the Gulf of Mexico and the Pacific Ocean is shortest. Simultaneously, President Fox sought to spur economic growth in Central America with Plan Puebla Panamá.<sup>5</sup> Neither scheme had adequate resources or realistic targets. Both were superseded by the Mérida Ini-

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<sup>1</sup> Manuel Ángel Castillo, Mónica Toussaint Ribot and Mario Vázquez Olivera, *Espacios diversos, historia en común: México, Guatemala y Belice: la construcción de una frontera* (Mexico City, 2006); Manuel Ángel Castillo, Mónica Toussaint Ribot and Mario Vázquez Olivera, *Centroamérica* (Mexico City, 2011); Natalia Armijo and Mónica Toussaint Ribot, *Centroamérica después de la firma de los Acuerdos de Paz: violencia, fronteras y migración* (Mexico City, 2015).

<sup>2</sup> Jorge Castañeda Gutman, *Ex Mex: From Migrants to Immigrants* (New York, 2009).

<sup>3</sup> Crisis Group interview, official of the National Commission of Human Rights, Mexico City, 21 March 2017.

<sup>4</sup> Manuel Ángel Castillo, "Fronteras, migración y seguridad en México", *Alteridades*, vol. 15, no. 30 (2005), pp. 51–60.

<sup>5</sup> Plan Puebla Panamá was launched in 2001 with the aim of strengthening regional integration and promoting economic and social development. The governments of Mexico and the seven Central American countries converted it into the Mesoamerican Integration and Development Project in 2008. See "Portal oficial del Proyecto Mesoamérica", Proyecto Mesoamérica, ([www.proyectomesoamerica.org](http://www.proyectomesoamerica.org)). Crisis Group interview, María del Pilar Fuerte Celis, former official of the National Institute of Migration, Aguascalientes, 7 July 2017.

tiative, signed between the U.S. and Mexico in March 2007 to support the purchase of military equipment and training as part of Mexico's newly declared "war" on drugs and crime.<sup>6</sup>

President Enrique Peña Nieto, who came to power in 2012, when Barack Obama was in the White House, oversaw another sharp turn in cooperation on migration and security. At least since 2014, the number of Mexicans leaving the U.S. has exceeded the number of Mexicans arriving, in part because the total number of Mexicans heading north has dropped to an historical low.<sup>7</sup> In the same period, the number of Central Americans coming to the U.S. has surpassed the number of Mexicans, prompting a new bilateral emphasis on containing the flow.<sup>8</sup> Coinciding with a crisis of unaccompanied children arriving at the U.S.-Mexico border from Central America, this shift pushed Peña's administration to announce a new Southern Border Plan in 2014.<sup>9</sup>

The 2016 Crisis Group report *Easy Prey: Criminal Violence and Central American Migration* examined the causes of this exodus from the Northern Triangle of Central America (El Salvador, Guatemala and Honduras), in particular the epidemic violence that drives many to leave. It also analysed the mistreatment Central Americans endure during their journey through Mexico. In highlighting the role that Mexico has played as both a "buffer state" against migrants – deporting more Central Americans than the U.S. since 2015 – and a destination for asylum seekers, *Easy Prey* stressed the need for a coordinated regional approach to migration.<sup>10</sup>

This report focuses on the latest southern border dynamics and their connection to the chill in U.S.-Mexico relations. It examines the initial consequences of President Donald Trump's anti-immigration rhetoric and Mexican reactions to it for border control and the well-being of refugees and migrants in southern Mexico. In effect, the Mexican government has threatened to condition its deterrence of drug smuggling and Central American migration on the favourable renegotiation of the North American Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA). Although leading U.S. officials generally praise Mexican cooperation on border security, Trump himself has also berated Mexico for supposed lax controls over migrants.<sup>11</sup>

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<sup>6</sup> Sonja Wolf, "La guerra de México contra el narcotráfico y la Iniciativa Mérida: piedras angulares en la búsqueda de legitimidad", *Foro Internacional*, no. 206 (2011), pp. 669-714.

<sup>7</sup> "More Mexicans leaving than coming to the U.S.", Pew Research Center, 19 November 2015.

<sup>8</sup> Andrew Selee, "A New migration agenda between the United States and Mexico", Woodrow Wilson Center for Scholars, 2017.

<sup>9</sup> David Nakamura, "Obama thanks Mexico for 'absorbing' Central American refugees. His own administration wants to turn them away", *Washington Post*, 20 September 2016. The U.S. supported the Southern Border Plan through the Mérida Initiative, donating \$24 million in equipment and training for air mobility and surveillance. See Christopher Wilson and Pedro Valenzuela, "Mexico's southern border strategy: Programa frontera sur", Wilson Center, Mexico Institute, 2014.

<sup>10</sup> Crisis Group Latin America Report N°57, *Easy Prey: Criminal Violence and Central American Migration*, 28 July 2016.

<sup>11</sup> President Trump in March called cooperation with Mexico "another crucial element of border security". Less than three weeks later he attacked Mexico in a tweet for "doing very little, if not NOTHING, at stopping people from flowing into Mexico through their Southern Border, and then into the U.S." "Remarks by President Trump after review of border wall prototypes", White House, 13 March 2018; "This US-bound migrant caravan sparked a Trump twitterstorm", CNN, 2 April 2018.

The report takes measure of the rising tide of xenophobia on the southern border, and the difficulties faced by the Mexican government and society in integrating Central Americans. It also analyses violent crime along Mexico's southern border, including the emergence of transnational gangs, which locals argue are created by incoming migrants. It is based on fieldwork along Mexico's southern border, particularly in the regions of Tapachula, Ciudad Hidalgo, Frontera Comalapa, La Mesilla and San Cristóbal de las Casas, in Chiapas; Tenosique and Villahermosa, in Tabasco; and Minatitlán, Coatzacoalcos, Acayucan and Medias Aguas, in Veracruz. Around 100 interviews were carried out in these areas between July 2017 and March 2018, as well as in Aguascalientes, Oaxaca and Mexico City, with government officials, migrants and refugees, human rights activists, victims of violence and specialists in migration.

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## II. The Trump Effect

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Since launching his presidential campaign in 2015, Donald Trump has frequently resorted to anti-Mexican bombast.<sup>12</sup> He has threatened to build a wall on the U.S.-Mexican border, deport immigrants en masse, terminate or revise NAFTA, and use military force against drug cartels, making some progress toward the first three of these goals.<sup>13</sup> The Mexican government has reacted to the president's statements by keeping open its channels of dialogue with Trump and his inner circle even at the prickliest moments.<sup>14</sup> Mexican political and economic elites are determined to preserve a close working relationship for the sake of financial stability, the value of the peso, and the flow of investment and bilateral trade.<sup>15</sup> Mexican leaders have stressed the benefits of this relationship to the U.S. government, notably through cooperation on border control and drug trafficking. But their approach has come at a cost in Mexico, above all to the popularity of senior government figures.

### A. Central Americans as a Tactical Bargain

Peña Nieto kicked off the diplomatic strategy toward Trump by inviting him to visit Mexico when he was still just a candidate. Peña did himself no favours in public opinion with this move.<sup>16</sup> But he had decided it was essential to stabilise the currency markets, which had the jitters about Trump's heated attacks on trade with Mexico, and to dampen uncertainty about the future of NAFTA.<sup>17</sup> The interdependence of the Mexican and U.S. economies gave Peña Nieto – in the view of a substantial part

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<sup>12</sup> When announcing his candidacy, Trump said: "When Mexico sends its people, they're not sending their best .... They're sending people that have lots of problems, and they're bringing those problems with us. They're bringing drugs. They're bringing crime. They're rapists. And some, I assume, are good people. But I speak to border guards and they tell us what we're getting. And it only makes common sense. It only makes common sense. They're sending us not the right people. It's coming from more than Mexico. It's coming from all over South and Latin America, and it's coming probably – probably – from the Middle East". "Here's Donald Trump's presidential announcement speech", *Time*, 16 June 2015.

<sup>13</sup> Shannon O'Neill, "The Mexican standoff", *Foreign Affairs*, September-October 2017.

<sup>14</sup> Adriana González, Arturo Magaña Duplancher, Ana Margarita Martínez Mendoza, Inés Carrasco Scherer and Emerson Segura Valencia, "El presidente Donald Trump suscribe órdenes ejecutivas en materia migratoria y de seguridad fronteriza en el contexto de un primer esfuerzo de diálogo con México: la controversia sobre la renegociación del TLCAN y la construcción del muro", Centro de Estudios Internacionales Gilberto Bosques, Mexican Senate, 2017.

<sup>15</sup> Crisis Group interview, director of a consultancy firm that interacts with the president's office, Mexico City, 23 May 2017. Jon Lee Anderson, "How Mexico deals with Trump", *The New Yorker*, 9 October 2017.

<sup>16</sup> Ioan Gillo, "Why did Peña Nieto invite Trump to Mexico?", *The New York Times*, 1 September 2016; Eric Martin and Rafael Gayol, "Trump invite marks Mexican president's top mistake, poll shows", Bloomberg, 21 September 2016; Andrés Manuel López Obrador, *Oye Trump: propuestas y acciones en defensa de los migrantes en Estados Unidos* (Mexico City, 2017).

<sup>17</sup> "Transcript of a press briefing on update of the World Economic Outlook", International Monetary Fund, 16 January 2017.

of the Mexican business elite, including telecommunications magnate Carlos Slim – a strong hand in negotiations with Trump.<sup>18</sup>

The architect of the meeting between Peña Nieto and Trump was Luis Videgaray, then secretary of finance and an acquaintance of Trump's son-in-law, Jared Kushner. Amid outrage over Trump's visit, Videgaray was forced to resign. But he returned to become secretary of foreign relations in January 2017, soon after Trump's victory.<sup>19</sup> His reappointment confirmed Mexico's readiness to engage in transactional politics with the U.S., prioritising macroeconomic stability and untouched trade flows through a series of tactical bargains on other issues.<sup>20</sup> The fundamental aim, which Videgaray has acknowledged in public, is to treat the main issues in U.S.-Mexico relations – migration, security, commerce and investment – as a package, in order to gain leverage in the renegotiation of NAFTA.<sup>21</sup> Critics in the Mexican media have rebuked Videgaray for portraying Central America as the root of U.S. grievances and Mexico as the remedy for that region's economic woes.<sup>22</sup>

After strengthening consular resources to protect Mexican nationals in the U.S., Videgaray has stressed Mexico's willingness to cooperate with the U.S. on migration and security.<sup>23</sup> In particular, he has tried to convince his U.S. counterparts that Mexico will beef up its military efforts to control migration. Following high-level military contacts, Videgaray announced that reducing Central American migration and securing the Mexican southern border were the prime areas of common interest for the Trump and Peña Nieto administrations.<sup>24</sup> During a meeting with then U.S. Secretary of State Rex Tillerson and then Department of Homeland Security head John Kelly in Mexico City on 23 February 2017, he stated that:

The migratory phenomenon today has its main origin in the sister countries of Central America, normally those that make up the Northern Triangle: Guatemala, Honduras and El Salvador. We have agreed that the governments of Mexico

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<sup>18</sup> "U.S.-Mexico Economic Relations: Trends, Issues and Implications", Congressional Research Service, 4 November 2016; Jorge Carrasco Araizaga, "Trump y Slim, más cercanos de lo que parece", *Proceso*, 28 January 2017.

<sup>19</sup> David Agren, "Mexico appoints ex-minister behind Trump's visit as new foreign minister", *Guardian*, 4 January 2017.

<sup>20</sup> James Fredrick, Peter Campbell and John Paul Rathbone, "Mexico tries to cut a deal with Trump", *Financial Times*, 5 January 2017.

<sup>21</sup> Eric Martin, "México negociará seguridad con EU en paralelo al TLCAN", *El Financiero*, 12 December 2017.

<sup>22</sup> Gerardo Esquivel, "México y Centroamérica en la era Trump", *El Universal*, 24 February 2017.

<sup>23</sup> In 2017, Peña Nieto budgeted an increase of \$58.7 million (1,070 million Mexican pesos) for consular protection, though in financial year 2016-2017 the number of protection and assistance requests fell 15.8 per cent. Carolina Rivera and Israel Navarro, "Baja 15.8% la atención consular a paisanos", *Milenio*, 2 September 2017.

<sup>24</sup> On 31 January 2017, Lori Robinson, commander of the U.S. Northern Command and of the North American Aerospace Defense Command, and Kurt Tidd, commander of the U.S. Southern Command, met José Antonio Ortiz Guarneros, commander of the 14th Naval Zone in Puerto Chiapas; Jens Pedro Lohmann Iturburu, commander of the 36th Military Zone in Tapachula; and Socorro Flores, undersecretary for Latin America and the Caribbean, among other Mexican officials, in Tapachula, Chiapas. Rubén Zúñiga, "Supervisa EU frontera sur de México", *El Heraldo de Chiapas*, 1 February 2017. "U.S., Mexican officials meet in Mexico, discuss security – sources", Reuters, 1 February.

and the United States must assume a shared responsibility, with an approach that not only includes migration control, but also addresses the real causes of migration, such as the development and stability of these nations.<sup>25</sup>

### B. *Military Cooperation and Migration*

Over the course of 2017, Mexico confirmed its interest in consolidating military cooperation with the U.S. and embracing a newly assertive foreign policy in the region. After the two countries co-hosted, for the first time, the Central America Security Conference in Cozumel on 23-25 April, U.S. officials applauded Mexico for its willingness to project military power. In a Senate hearing, General Lori Robinson, commander of the U.S. Northern Command, described “an evolution of the Mexican military from an internally focused force to one that is willing and increasingly capable of providing security leadership in Latin America”.<sup>26</sup>

Engagement of the Mexican armed forces in efforts to control migratory flows from Central America dates back several years. The Mexican navy created a Southern Border Program in 2013, establishing three security cordons on or close to the border. These cordons included security checks right on the border; a system of checkpoints in areas close to it, where so-called Comprehensive Border Transit Centres were located, bringing together personnel from the navy, army and federal police, as well as prosecutors, customs officials, municipal and state authorities, and representatives of the National Institute of Migration (INM); and a containment zone along a line between Coatzacoalcos, Veracruz and Salina Cruz, Oaxaca (ie, across the Isthmus of Tehuantepec), through the establishment of joint operation bases to fight human trafficking and smuggling.<sup>27</sup>

This program evolved into the Southern Border Plan, coordinated by the Secretariat of the Interior since 2014. The boundary is guarded by a dozen naval bases on rivers, and preserves the security cordons that now reach more than 100 miles north of Mexico's border with Guatemala and Belize. The plan stipulates that migration officials are to work closely with the military, as well as federal and state police, to enforce controls.<sup>28</sup> In addition, the plan provides for issuing registered migrants a Mexican regional visitor card and a worker visitor card, which guarantee them health care and other social services.

The military already has the pre-eminent role in running the Southern Border Plan, and the civilian component is getting smaller still. According to the Secretariat of the Interior, responding to a freedom of information request sent by Crisis Group, the plan's civil coordination budget fell from around \$3.1 million (51 million pesos) in 2015 to around \$1.6 million (30 million pesos) in 2016. More than half of the 97

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<sup>25</sup> See original at “Mensaje a medios del Canciller Luis Videgaray Caso con los Secretarios de Estado y Seguridad Interior de EUA”, Secretariat of Foreign Relations, 23 February 2017.

<sup>26</sup> “Statement of General Lori G. Robinson, United States Air Force commander, United States Northern Command, and North America Aerospace Defense Command before the Senate Armed Services Committee”, 6 April 2017.

<sup>27</sup> Mathieu Tourliere, “Ejército mexicano, artífice de la contención migratoria en la frontera sur”, *Proceso*, 18 February 2017.

<sup>28</sup> Clare Ribando Seelke and Kristin Finklea, “U.S.-Mexican Security Cooperation: The Mérida Initiative and Beyond”, Congressional Research Service, 2017, p. 21.

posts in the plan's civilian administration departments were vacant.<sup>29</sup> Meanwhile, the Mexican navy, responding to another freedom of information request, sent documents showing that, in August 2014, marines helped set up security cordons to remove immigrants from freight trains, while the navy, at least until 2016, was organising new border surveillance projects.<sup>30</sup>

The Mexican government reaffirmed its readiness to deploy military units to seal its frontiers by announcing in April that it would dispatch the recently created National Gendarmerie to the southern border.<sup>31</sup> But the prominent role of the Mexican military in border control has prompted acute concerns about migrants and refugees' rights and well-being. Reports by migrant and refugee defenders have pointed to the military's alleged maltreatment of Central Americans, including the indiscriminate and brutal policing of those travelling on the freight trains known as the "Beast", as well as the knock-on effects of military patrols and roadblocks pushing migrants and refugees toward more remote and dangerous transit routes, especially in rural Chiapas.<sup>32</sup> At the same time, the limited progress made in efforts to ensure civil legal jurisdiction over military crimes and human rights violations stokes fears that abuses of power in border control by the armed forces will go unpunished.<sup>33</sup>

### C. Central American Development

In addition to stressing bilateral military cooperation, Videgaray has sought to dispel U.S. migration fears.<sup>34</sup> The balm to soothe these complaints, he says, is economic development in Central America spurred by Mexico. Videgaray and Miguel Ángel Osorio Chong, then secretary of government, joined a June 2017 conference on Central American "prosperity and security" in Miami with the promotion of this approach in mind. Kelly and Tillerson also attended.<sup>35</sup>

Mexico committed itself to supporting regional development through the Mesoamerican Integration and Development Project, a regional mechanism including

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<sup>29</sup> "Freedom of information request no. 0000400270717", Secretariat of the Interior, answered 10 January 2018.

<sup>30</sup> "Freedom of information request no. 0001300102317", Secretariat of the Navy, answered 3-13 November 2017.

<sup>31</sup> The announcement that the National Gendarmerie, a militarised wing of the Federal Police created in 2014, would be deployed to Chiapas came days after President Trump's Twitter attacks on Mexico's border control. "¿Al estilo Trump? México aumenta el despliegue de gendarmes en la frontera sur para frenar la migración", *Animal Político*, 10 April 2018.

<sup>32</sup> Alice Driver, "The mutilated and the disappeared", *Longreads*, January 2018; "Peña prometió protegerlos, pero delitos contra migrantes en la frontera sur se disparan 200%", *Animal Político*, 13 January 2017.

<sup>33</sup> "Overlooking Justice: Human Rights Violations Committed by Mexican Soldiers against Civilians Are Met with Impunity", Washington Office on Latin America, November 2017.

<sup>34</sup> See Videgaray's and Tillerson's statements after their first meeting, in which Videgaray discussed an agreement on "joint responsibilities" to tackle development and stability in the Northern Triangle, the "real causes of the migratory phenomenon"; "Statements to the press", U.S. Department of State, 23 February 2017, at <https://bit.ly/2rsX3wF>.

<sup>35</sup> Crisis Group interview, Julián Escutia, chief of staff of the undersecretary for North America, Mexico City, 30 May 2017.

Central America, Colombia and the Dominican Republic.<sup>36</sup> It also undertook to coordinate its efforts with the Alliance for Prosperity – a partnership set up by the three Northern Triangle countries and funded through the U.S. Strategy for Engagement in Central America with the aim of reducing migration through economic growth and a crackdown on criminal gangs.<sup>37</sup>

A central element of economic cooperation is the plan to integrate energy markets, an issue highlighted during Tillerson's trip to Latin America in February 2018 and on which certain U.S., Mexican and Central American private-sector actors are aligned.<sup>38</sup> The Inter-American Development Bank pledged to support ongoing efforts to connect the electricity grids from Colombia to Mexico. Mexico and the Northern Triangle countries also expressed support for the integration of gas markets in the region.<sup>39</sup>

Deeper economic cooperation is also what senior U.S. government officials recommend. Speaking at the May 2017 launch of a report on the effect of job creation in Central America on U.S. security, Kelly stated that he and President Trump believe securing the south-western border "begins 1,500 miles south" in partnerships with Mexico and countries further afield.<sup>40</sup>

#### D. *Threats to Stop Cooperation*

The U.S. and Mexico both say they recognise the importance of cooperation on issues such as terrorism, organised crime and migration. But both countries also threaten to hold progress in these areas hostage to desiderata in other crucial talks, such as the renegotiation of NAFTA.

Videgaray made it clear during a Senate hearing on 28 February 2017, months before the first round of NAFTA renegotiation started in the week of 16-20 August, that ending this trade agreement would not be the "end of the world" for Mexico. He warned, however, that cancelling NAFTA could be harmful to U.S. national interests:

We know that Mexico is an important country for [Americans] in commercial matters. We also know that for the United States Mexico is an important country in terms of security, in the fight against organised crime, prevention of terrorism

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<sup>36</sup> The Mexican government invested \$129.7 million in infrastructure projects, especially roads in the Northern Triangle, between 2012 and 2016. "Fondo de Infraestructura para países de Mesoamérica y el Caribe", Agencia Mexicana de Cooperación Internacional para el Desarrollo, 8 February 2017.

<sup>37</sup> "Conferencia sobre prosperidad y seguridad en Centroamérica: comunicado conjunto SRE-SEGOB", Secretariat of Foreign Relations, 16 June 2017.

<sup>38</sup> See Tillerson's speech at the start of his trip to Latin American countries in February 2018. "U.S. engagement in the Western Hemisphere", remarks at the University of Texas at Austin, U.S. Department of State, 1 February 2018, at <https://bit.ly/2EbfCr>. An example of private-sector actors' alignment is the plan to export natural gas from Texas and Louisiana via Mexico. Noé Cruz, "Será México vía de paso para gas natural de EU", *El Universal*, 19 November 2017.

<sup>39</sup> "Conferencia sobre prosperidad y seguridad en Centroamérica: comunicado conjunto SRE-SEGOB", Secretariat of Foreign Relations, 16 June 2017.

<sup>40</sup> Ashish Kumar Sen, "To secure the United States' southern border, look to Central America: US Secretary of Homeland Security John Kelly says improvement in conditions will reduce unauthorized migration", *The Atlantic Council*, 4 May 2017.

and, of course, immigration cooperation. All these issues are important for both parties, a reality that arises from the coexistence that geography has given us. However, at this moment of decision, faced with the challenge posed by the new position in the United States, the position of our country has been clear, expressed in private and in public repeatedly, about the principle of “integrality”; that is, all the issues are on the table simultaneously.<sup>41</sup>

None of these threats, however, seems to have tempered Trump’s hostility to the trade pact. On 10 October, he stated in an interview that “NAFTA will have to be terminated if we’re going to make it good”.<sup>42</sup> In a meeting with Canadian Prime Minister Justin Trudeau, he said: “If we can’t make a deal, it’ll be terminated and it will be fine”.<sup>43</sup> Videgaray, speaking before the Mexican Senate once again, responded with a note of impatience: “I believe that the willingness of Mexico – and we have made it known to the government of the United States – to continue in other areas of cooperation, naturally, would be seriously affected. This is a variable that the government of the United States has to take into account and, in addition, I believe that the effect would be lasting. Beyond the administration of President Enrique Peña Nieto, I believe that, understandably, the attitude of Mexicans toward any kind of cooperation with the United States would be seriously affected”.<sup>44</sup>

Whatever the fate of NAFTA, Mexicans bitterly resent Trump’s verbal assault on immigrants. In the run-up to the 1 July presidential election in Mexico, they question every aspect of the bilateral relationship. Current opinion polls strongly favour the left-leaning, nationalist candidate Andrés Manuel López Obrador, while many Mexicans lambast the Peña Nieto administration for what they see as its conciliation of the White House, among other perceived flaws.<sup>45</sup> By large margins, Mexicans dislike Trump. Among the 85 per cent who have heard of the U.S. president, 89 per cent view him negatively, according to the consulting firm Buendía and Laredo. Antipathy for Trump is translating into distrust of the U.S. as a whole. The same pollster found that 66 per cent of Mexicans had a favourable opinion of the U.S. in 2015, a figure that dropped to 30 per cent at the start of 2018.<sup>46</sup> Yet there is still nuance in

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<sup>41</sup> “Versión estenográfica de la comparecencia del Secretario de Relaciones Exteriores, Luis Videgaray Caso (primera parte)”, Senado de la República, 28 February 2017.

<sup>42</sup> Randall Lane, “Inside Trump’s head: An exclusive interview with the president, and the single theory that explains everything”, *Forbes*, 10 October 2017.

<sup>43</sup> Vicky Needham, “Trump again threatens termination of NAFTA in meeting with Trudeau”, *The Hill*, 11 October 2017.

<sup>44</sup> “Versión de la sesión ordinaria del 10 de Octubre de 2017”, Senado de la República, 11 October 2017.

<sup>45</sup> John Lee Anderson, “How Mexico deals with Trump”, *The New Yorker*, 9 October 2017. Peña Nieto’s approval rating, according to the polling firm Parametría, dropped from 22 per cent in August 2016, when he invited Trump as candidate to Los Pinos, to 15 per cent in January 2017. It has marginally recovered since then, but Peña is still the least popular Mexican president since the 1990s and probably in Mexican history. “Carta paramétrica: evaluación presidencial. Quinto informe de Gobierno”, Parametría, 5 September 2017; Francisco Abundis, “Evaluación presidencial; quinto informe de gobierno”, *Milenio*, 5 September 2017.

<sup>46</sup> Craig Kafura, Dina Smeltz, Duncan Wood, Esteban Guzmán Saucedo and René Bautista, “For first time, majority of Mexicans hold unfavorable view of United States”, Chicago Council of Global Affairs, Wilson Center-Mexico Institute and Buendía and Laredo, January 2018.

popular opinion, and dislike for the White House incumbent is intermixed with repudiation of Mexico's own authorities. One protester at an anti-Trump march explained as follows:

I admire the American people very much .... The problem in Mexico is that our leaders have stolen so much that now we have little left to fight back against Trump and his policies.<sup>47</sup>

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<sup>47</sup> Patrick McDonnell, "Thousands march against Trump in Mexico City: 'Pay for your own wall!'", *Los Angeles Times*, 12 February 2017.

### III. Migration Dynamics and the Trump Presidency

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Following President Trump's inauguration, the number of Central Americans passing through Mexico to the U.S. fell, though recent months have seen an uptick. Enhanced enforcement and surveillance explain part of the decline, as does a resort to more remote and dangerous routes by those travelling north. But observers agree that Trump's caustic rhetoric has heightened fears of arrest, deportation or abuse en route.

The Trump administration has shown itself determined to curb arrivals from Mexico, the Northern Triangle and the Caribbean. Over the next year and a half, the U.S. will revoke the residency rights of 59,000 Haitians and 200,000 Salvadorans who had enjoyed the Temporary Protected Status (TPS).<sup>48</sup> On 5 September 2017, Trump rescinded the Deferred Action for Childhood Arrivals (DACA) program, created by the Obama administration to provide work permits for 800,000 undocumented immigrants who entered the U.S. as minors. A decision in late February by the U.S. Supreme Court not to reverse a lower-court ruling that halts Trump's repeal of DACA will delay the start of deportations of DACA residents, known as the "dreamers". As of late April 2018, negotiations between the White House and Democratic leaders in Congress over DACA's future had reached no agreement, though President Trump indicated earlier that month that his approach to dreamers' residency rights might be hardening.<sup>49</sup>

Meanwhile, Mexico is absorbing migratory pressure from its southern neighbours, but not without repercussions. Xenophobia is spreading across the southern states as anger festers about the arrival of unprecedented numbers of Central Americans insufficiently supported by the state.

#### A. *Fear and the Reduced Flow of Central Americans*

After the wave of unaccompanied children arrived at the U.S. border in 2014, President Obama strove to protect Central American minors while negotiating with Mexico to restrict the flow. Due largely to increased surveillance along the U.S.-Mexico

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<sup>48</sup> The U.S. government gave Haitians until July 2019 and Salvadorans until September 2019 to leave the country or be forcibly repatriated., "Secretary of Homeland Security Kirstjen M. Nielsen announcement on Temporary Protected Status for El Salvador", U.S. Department of Homeland Security, 8 January 2018; and "Acting Secretary Elaine Duke announcement on Temporary Protected Status for Haiti", U.S. Department of Homeland Security, 20 November 2017.

<sup>49</sup> The White House offered protection for DACA beneficiaries until 2020 in exchange for Democratic support for \$25 billion to fund border security, above all for the construction of a border wall. Democrats appear willing to back the funding proposal, but only in exchange for full permanent protection, which should include a path to citizenship for 1.8 million undocumented immigrants, including DACA beneficiaries. Congress approved the Consolidated Appropriations Act that provides only \$1.6 billion for border security on 23 March. On the Supreme Court ruling see, Joseph P. Williams, "SCOTUS: DACA recipients can stay for now", *U.S. News & World Report*, 26 February 2018; on the negotiations to approve the appropriations bill, see Lauren Fox et al., "Congress unveils \$1.3 trillion spending package, includes background check bill", CNN, 22 March 2018. On Trump's early April remarks, see "Trump says DACA is 'dead', and calls on Mexico to enforce border security", *The New York Times*, 2 April 2018.

border and containment further south via the three security cordons, Mexico deported more Central Americans than the U.S. from 2015 onward.<sup>50</sup>

Tougher border enforcement and detention regimes have also led to widespread abuse of those in transit by authorities and criminals. Doctors Without Borders (MSF) reported that two thirds of Central Americans surveyed who were journeying through Mexico to the U.S. had fallen victim to violence.<sup>51</sup> Almost one third of the women surveyed by MSF had been sexually assaulted while in transit.<sup>52</sup> The Mexican government has endeavoured to reduce impunity for such crimes by creating special local prosecutors' offices and a federal unit at the Attorney General's Office. But one study shows some 99 per cent of the perpetrators get away scot free: of the 5,821 crimes against migrants reported in Chiapas, Oaxaca, Tabasco, Sonora, Coahuila and at the federal level, the Washington Office for Latin America found evidence of only 49 court sentences.<sup>53</sup>

Crisis Group gathered testimony about typical abuses on a visit to Medias Aguas, a small town in the state of Veracruz where the migrant route from Tenosique, in the Tabasco jungle, joins the route from Tapachula, near the Chiapas coast. Most of those in transit whom Crisis Group encountered were Honduran citizens. Two had arrived in Medias Aguas walking and hitch-hiking after the train in which they were travelling derailed. One left Honduras looking for opportunities in the U.S., but had reportedly lost all his money to blackmail by police and was unsure he could go on. Another migrant said he was fleeing violence, but also doubted he would make it to the U.S., having already been repatriated once after a failed attempt to apply for asylum in that country at the Laredo border crossing in southern Texas.

These and other Central Americans reported that the main danger on the freight trains they use to travel north, the so-called Beast, is the numerous migration officials who stop and board the trains to detain undocumented migrants. Migrant and refugee activists have recorded reports of verbal and physical abuse allegedly committed by INM officials using Taser guns to threaten and control the travellers. Central American gang members who board the trains and charge fees in sections of the route between Tenosique and Palenque also threaten those in transit, as do raiders who jump into the train in the tunnels between Orizaba and Puebla.<sup>54</sup>

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<sup>50</sup> In 2014, the Obama administration repatriated 122,298 migrants from the Northern Triangle. That figure fell to 75,478 in 2015 and 76,472 in the last year of his term. During fiscal year 2017, the U.S. deported 74,789 individuals from the Northern Triangle. Along Mexico's southern border the trend of deporting more Northern Triangle citizens than the U.S. has continued since 2015. Mexico increased repatriations from 91,067 to 165,524 in 2015 and 149,209 in 2016. During the fiscal year 2017, Mexico deported 20,000 more Northern Triangle citizens than the U.S., ie, a total of 94,561 people. "ICE Statistics", U.S. Immigration and Customs Enforcement, last reviewed/updated 2 April 2018; and "Boletines estadísticos de la Secretaría de Gobernación", Secretariat of the Interior, consulted 22 January 2018.

<sup>51</sup> "Forced to Flee Central America's Northern Triangle: A Neglected Humanitarian Crisis", MSF, 11 May 2017.

<sup>52</sup> Ibid.

<sup>53</sup> "Access to Justice for Migrants in Mexico: A Right That Exists Only on the Books", Washington Office on Latin America, July 2017.

<sup>54</sup> Crisis Group interviews, Central Americans using the Tenosique route of the Beast, Medias Aguas, Veracruz, 26 September 2017. On the accusations against INM officials, see for example "En los límites de la frontera, quebrando los límites: situación de los derechos humanos de las personas

As these cases suggest, greater numbers of Central Americans have decided to stay in Mexico, in some instances applying for refugee status there, especially since Trump took office.<sup>55</sup> During his first 100 days as U.S. president, migration to the U.S. across the Mexican border reportedly dropped to its lowest level in seventeen years.<sup>56</sup> Fears of Trump's policies – actual, potential or imagined – are repeatedly invoked to explain the decline by human rights activists, migrant shelter workers, UN officials and Central American consuls in Tapachula, Frontera Comalapa, Tenosique, Acayucan and other key points along the migration routes.<sup>57</sup> One Central American consul in Acayucan, a town in Veracruz state just under 50km from Medias Aguas, said: “Trump's wall is psychological, because he inserted the idea [of the wall] in everyone's mind”.<sup>58</sup>

The White House trumpets its view that fear is the most effective deterrent of undocumented immigration.<sup>59</sup> “Now, people aren't coming because they know they're not going to get through, and there isn't crime”, the president asserted in an interview.<sup>60</sup> According to John Kelly, “the message is, ‘If you get here – if you pay the traffickers you will probably get here – you will be turned around within our laws relatively quickly and returned. It is not worth wasting your money’”.<sup>61</sup>

Migrants and refugees along the routes to the U.S. seem to believe Trump and Kelly are sincere – and many are staying put as a result.<sup>62</sup> In the countries that individuals are leaving, there is likewise ambient dread of what might await them in the

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migrantes y refugiadas en Tenosique, Tabasco”, Hogar refugio para personas migrantes La 72, April 2017, p. 20; and Adam Isacson, Maureen Meyer and Hannah Smith, “Mexico's Southern Border: Security, Central American Migration and U.S. Policy”, Washington Office for Latin America, June 2017, p. 12.

<sup>55</sup> A total of 14,596 people from Northern Triangle countries and Venezuela applied for asylum in Mexico in 2017, the highest ever figure recorded by COMAR and an increase of 66 per cent over 2016. “Estadísticas 2013-2017”, Comisión Mexicana de ayuda a refugiados. See also Adam Isacson, Maureen Meyer and Hannah Smith, “Mexico's Southern Border: Security, Central American Migration and U.S. Policy”, op. cit.; and Daniella Burgi-Palomino and Emma Buckhout, “Does My Story Matter? Seeking Asylum at Mexico's Southern Border”, Latin American Working Group Education Fund, July 2017.

<sup>56</sup> “US-Mexico illegal border crossings fall to 17-year low”, BBC, 5 April 2017.

<sup>57</sup> Crisis Group interviews, locations across southern border, July 2017-March 2018.

<sup>58</sup> Crisis Group interview, Acayucan, Veracruz, 27 September 2017.

<sup>59</sup> Overall, deportations by the Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE) agency fell from 240,255 in 2016 to 226,119 in fiscal year 2017. ICE enforcement and removals operations' arrests, however, jumped around 30 per cent from 110,104 in 2016 to 143,470 in 2017. The number of migrants arrested without a criminal record has more than doubled since 2016, increasing from 5,498 to 13,600 in 2017. “Southwest Border Migration FY2018”, U.S. Customs and Border Protection, 9 January 2018. On the established use of fear as a migration deterrence policy on the U.S.-Mexico border, see Jason De León, *The Land of Open Graves: Living and Dying on the Migrant Trail* (Oakland, 2015).

<sup>60</sup> “Transcript of AP interview with Trump”, Associated Press, 23 April 2017.

<sup>61</sup> “A new strategy for US engagement with Central America”, Atlantic Council, 4 May 2017.

<sup>62</sup> Crisis Group interviews, migrants in transit, Frontera Comalapa, Chiapas, 1 October 2017; migrants in transit, Medias Aguas, Veracruz, 26 September 2017; refugee applicants, Tenosique, Tabasco, 24 July, 2017; migrants in transit, Tapachula, Chiapas, 18 July 2017.

U.S.<sup>63</sup> Rather than head for the Rio Grande, many Guatemalans use regional visitor cards for safe, legal entry to Mexico, and then look for jobs in the tourism industry in Quintana Roo, on the Yucatán Peninsula.<sup>64</sup>

According to the U.S. Border Patrol, the number of apprehensions of undocumented migrants at the border fell significantly during fiscal year 2017, from a monthly average of 57,736 apprehensions before Trump took power to an average of 23,031 afterward. The first five months of fiscal year 2018 (October 2017 to February 2018) have seen an uptick, however, with a monthly average of 37,373 apprehensions – though this number is still far from the highs recorded in 2014 and 2016.<sup>65</sup>

Altered patterns in remittances sent by foreign residents in the U.S. also point to a profound change in attitudes toward migration. According to the World Bank, the continuous increase in remittances from the U.S. to Mexico, Honduras, El Salvador and Guatemala since Trump's inauguration is connected to the fear of deportation.<sup>66</sup> Instead of paying smugglers to bring family and friends into the U.S., Mexicans and Central Americans are investing in their home countries, possibly with a view to their potential return.<sup>67</sup>

## B. *Rising Xenophobia*

Mexico is frequently portrayed as a country that celebrates *mestizaje* (miscegenation) and cultural hybridity. But policies and social attitudes in Mexico have long discriminated against its indigenous people, accounting in large part for the Zapatista uprising in Chiapas in 1994. Nationalist reactions to Trump's anti-Mexican bluster have also incited a racist and xenophobic backlash against Central Americans all over Mexico, but especially on the southern border.

"Trump's idea [of building a wall] is good, but rather than on the northern border of Mexico the wall should be built on the south-eastern border to slow the migration of Central Americans to both countries", declared the editorial page of a major regional newspaper in Mexico's north-east, *El Mañana de Reynosa*, in 2016.<sup>68</sup> A year later, public acceptance of discrimination against Central Americans was widespread in towns such as Tapachula, the main border city near Guatemala and economic hub of the wealthy agricultural region of Soconusco.<sup>69</sup> "There has been a redefinition of the public image of the criminal into a Central American. Even if they do nothing wrong, they are represented and treated like criminals in the media and socially", said one UN employee in Tapachula.<sup>70</sup>

<sup>63</sup> Kirk Semple, "Central Americans 'scared of what's happening' in U.S., stay put", *The New York Times*, 3 July 2017.

<sup>64</sup> Crisis Group interview, Guatemalan consular official, Tenosique, Tabasco, 24 July 2017.

<sup>65</sup> "Southwest Border Migration FY2018", U.S. Customs and Border Protection, 8 March 2018.

<sup>66</sup> "Migration and Remittances: Recent Developments and Outlook Special Topic: Return Migration", Migration and Development Brief no. 28, World Bank, October 2017, p. 23.

<sup>67</sup> Crisis Group interview, Ramón Márquez, director of the La 72 migrant and asylum applicant shelter, Tenosique, Tabasco, 26 July 2017.

<sup>68</sup> "Sí al muro fronterizo... pero en el sur de México", *El Mañana de Reynosa*, 24 July 2016.

<sup>69</sup> Crisis Group interview, Diego Lorente, director of the Centre for Human Rights Fray Matías de Córdoba, Tapachula, Chiapas, 18 July 2017.

<sup>70</sup> Crisis Group interviews, Tapachula, Chiapas, 18 July 2017.

Neftalí del Toro Guzmán, mayor of Tapachula, seemed to blame Central Americans and poor locals who associate with them for looting, vandalism and other crimes during January 2017 protests against petrol price hikes.<sup>71</sup> Yet reports indicate that of the 401 people arrested for these offences in the state of Chiapas, only 25 were not Mexican;<sup>72</sup> residents also said participation of locals was not limited to the poor.<sup>73</sup> Part of the local business community has continued to denounce the presence of Central Americans in criminal gangs, even though many members are said to be Mexican. For example, in the February 2017 arrest of 103 suspected members of the Mara Salvatrucha (MS-13) and the 18th Street gang (Barrio 18, or B-18), more than three quarters (80 of them) were reportedly Mexican.<sup>74</sup>

Central American consular staff in Tapachula recognise that some co-nationals are indeed involved in crime, but they report that at public events, Mexican local officials point the finger at Central Americans for most of the insecurity and economic problems on the southern border.<sup>75</sup> This sentiment appears to be shared by the local press and part of the population. Residents of Tenosique, for example, were quick to accuse Central American migrants for the 31 May 2017 strangulation of a well-liked butcher.<sup>76</sup> The murder sparked two anti-migrant marches in Tenosique, with protesters demanding the immediate expulsion of Central Americans.<sup>77</sup> Some residents zeroed in on an Afro-Caribbean Honduran man as the suspect, although evidence has since indicated that Central Americans were not involved in the killing.<sup>78</sup>

One deputy in the Tabasco state Congress asserted that 300 crimes committed by Central Americans had been reported from January to August 2017, producing “terror” in the region.<sup>79</sup> This figure amounts to 0.72 per cent of the total number of crimes reported in the state in that period.<sup>80</sup>

Refugee and migrant support organisations have denounced what they see as harassment and bureaucratic obstacles from the INM. The INM representative in Tabasco lodged a formal legal complaint against Fray Bernardo Molina Esquiliano of the La 72 migrant shelter for supposed human trafficking in June 2017. The shelter says the clergyman was accused because he picks up Central Americans on the road between

<sup>71</sup> Efraín Ramírez and María Sánchez, “Maras participan en saqueos en las tiendas de Tapachula”, *Noticias Voz e Imagen*, 6 January 2017.

<sup>72</sup> “Más de 400 personas detenidas por saqueos, vandalismos y daños en Chiapas”, *Quadratin Chiapas*, 7 January 2017.

<sup>73</sup> Crisis Group interviews, residents of downtown Tapachula, Chiapas, 20 July 2017.

<sup>74</sup> “Detiene a 103 ‘Maras’ en Chiapas, 80 son mexicanos”, *Milenio*, 15 February 2017.

<sup>75</sup> Crisis Group interview, Tapachula, 17 July 2017.

<sup>76</sup> Hilario Paredes, “Matan a carnicero para robarle ganancias, en Tenosique. Los colonos señalan que los posibles homicidas son centroamericanos que vagan por la zona en busca de dinero”, *Tabasco Hoy*, 31 May 2017; Francisco Díaz Ballina, “Carnicero es asesinado por presunto migrante”, *El Sol del Sureste*, 31 May 2017.

<sup>77</sup> José Manuel Soberano, “Marcha contra migrantes en Tenosique. Colonos exigen la expulsión de los indocumentados que violentan la ley, ante más robos y crímenes”, *Tabasco Hoy*, 7 June 2017.

<sup>78</sup> Crisis Group interviews, UN employees, Tenosique, Tabasco, 24-25 July 2017.

<sup>79</sup> Josué Pérez Hernández, “Aumentan delitos cometidos por ilegales en Tabasco. Más de 300 centroamericanos se han visto relacionados en diversos hechos delictivos”, *Tabasco Hoy*, 11 October 2017.

<sup>80</sup> Crisis Group calculations using data from the Executive Secretariat of the National System of Public Security and the Attorney General’s Office of Tabasco.

the El Ceibo migration station and the shelter to protect them from dangers including rape, robberies, forced disappearance, murder and kidnapping.<sup>81</sup> The head and founder of the shelter, Tomás González Castillo, dismisses the suit as intimidation.<sup>82</sup>

Low-key efforts by public officials to block the work of groups supporting migrants and refugees reportedly are also frequent. The Centre for Human Rights Fray Matías de Córdoba recounted that a series of bureaucratic obstacles hinder its personnel from monitoring conditions and giving legal advice to migrants in the 21st Century migratory detention centre in Tapachula.<sup>83</sup>

### C. Local Resentment

Resentment of efforts to protect Central Americans is also spreading in districts along the southern border that are home to such shelters. Poor neighbours of the Albergue Belén shelter in Tapachula have repeatedly requested its relocation, arguing that the shelter exposes them to the predations of Central American gangs. During the day the shelter puts its occupants out in the street, where neighbours believe they are loitering with ill intent.<sup>84</sup> Locals complain that the authorities are more interested in defending migrants' rights than attending to impoverished citizens' needs. One resident expressed gratitude to the state for newly installed sewers, but she was indignant that the shelter offers facilities that she and her neighbours lack – such as a sidewalk, street lighting and a playing field. She worried that the lack of safe public spaces would make her children vulnerable to criminal recruitment.

Another Tapachulan, a naval officer, said his neighbours do not expect their voices to be heard as those of migrant activists are. He expressed acute concern about illegal drug transactions in the streets close to the shelter. “The government should listen and support us, because many of the people arriving in the shelter are not migrants but *mareros* [members of the MS-13], and when the government decides to take them out they will not be able to”.<sup>85</sup>

Some locals, especially the less well-off, feel that migrants and asylum applicants have “more rights” than they do. According to one municipal official in Tenosique, locals are irritated when they see an international NGO or UN agency providing ref-

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<sup>81</sup> Crisis Group interviews, Ramón Márquez, director of the La 72 migrant and asylum applicant shelter, Tenosique, Tasbaco, 26 July 2017; Friar Tomás González, founder of La 72, 24 July 2017. La 72 was the main organiser of the Viacrucis Migrante 2018 march, which President Trump denounced in early April as an effort to flout border controls. “Trump arremete con furia contra México y el Viacrucis Migrante”, AFP, 2 April 2018.

<sup>82</sup> “Refugio de migrantes La 72 acusa que el gobierno criminaliza su labor y quiere intimidarlos”, *Animal político*, 26 June 2017.

<sup>83</sup> Isaín Mandujano, “El INM obstaculiza derecho a la defensa de migrantes en Tapachula: Centro Fray Matías”, *Proceso*, 7 December 2017. See the centre's statement at “El INM debe facilitar el acceso del CDH Fray Matías al centro de detención migratoria de Tapachula”, Centro de Derechos Humanos Fray Matías de Córdoba, consulted 2 April 2018.

<sup>84</sup> Marvin Bautista, “Por enésima vez colonos protestan para exigir el cierre del albergue Belén”, *Agencia Intermedios*, 6 June 2017.

<sup>85</sup> Crisis Group interviews, residents of San Antonio Caohacán and Venustiano Carranza, Tapachula, Chiapas, 18-19 July 2017.

ugees or migrants with aid while giving little consideration to the native-born poor.<sup>86</sup>  
A local tourist guide summed up the deepening resentment as follows:

I talk as someone from Tenosique, who wants his kids to grow up here – not as a “citizen of the world”, as a UN guy told me we have to think like .... We are becoming a filter, a barrier, so Trump does not have to build the wall, but this is no guarantee my kids will grow up in the Tenosique I grew up in. There are a lot of strange people arriving with different cultures, and there is no guarantee that we and our lifestyle will have security. All the guarantees are for the refugees.<sup>87</sup>

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<sup>86</sup> Crisis Group interview, Directorate of Economic Development, Tenosique, Tabasco, 25 July 2017.

<sup>87</sup> Crisis Group interviews, Tenosique, Tabasco, 25 July 2017.

#### IV. Criminal Organisations in Flux and the Threat to Migrants and Refugees

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Across Mexico, transnational criminal organisations have been fragmented by a “war” on drugs that targets supposed kingpins. But the highly militarised campaign has not improved security. The south of Mexico is no exception. Even as the army and police kill or capture crime bosses, there is just as much intra- and inter-cartel violence, if not more, in Tabasco, Quintana Roo, Campeche, Chiapas, Veracruz and Oaxaca.

Homicide has risen across the nation, with murder totals in 2017 the highest since modern criminal record-keeping began in 1997. Across the south, the diversification of illicit economies has led to a sharp rise in various violent offences. Oaxaca, Quintana Roo and Veracruz have murder rates that exceed the national average and are rising.<sup>88</sup> The incidence of kidnapping in southern states is far above the national average and has skyrocketed since 2015.<sup>89</sup> Cases of extortion in Tabasco were over twice the national average in 2017.<sup>90</sup> According to Renato Sales Heredia, commissioner of national security in the Peña Nieto administration, the biggest reason for the rise in violence is the battle between fractured criminal organisations over trafficking of opiates (heroin and fentanyl), and a glut of Colombian cocaine destined for the U.S.<sup>91</sup>

But the southern border region does not produce opiates, and there is not much commerce in these substances there. Evidence suggests, furthermore, that it is scarcity – more than abundance – of a valuable illegal drug such as cocaine that leads to more violence.<sup>92</sup> Andean cocaine is doubtless one of the many illicit goods crossing the southern border, maybe in greater quantities than ever.<sup>93</sup> Nevertheless, Crisis Group fieldwork along the main migratory and commercial routes suggests that violence in the region stems primarily (though not always) from struggles among criminal groups over local protection rackets, involving small businesses but also migrant smuggling, rather than transnational trafficking.

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<sup>88</sup> “Semáforo delictivo en México, diciembre 2017”, consulted on 25 January 2018; Carlos Vargas Sepúlveda. “Semáforo: el deterioro del país se ha generalizado; 26 estados tuvieron aumento de homicidios”, *Sin Embargo*, 23 January 2018.

<sup>89</sup> These figures were calculated by Crisis Group based on data from the Executive Secretariat of the National System of Public Security and the National Population Council. See Appendix F.

<sup>90</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>91</sup> J. Jesús Esquivel, “La violencia por factores geopolíticos: Renato Sales a Proceso”, *Proceso*, 13 January 2018.

<sup>92</sup> Juan Castillo, Daniel Mejia and Pascual Restrepo, “Scarcity without Leviathan: The Violent Effects of Cocaine Supply Shortages in the Mexican Drug War”, working paper no. 356, Center for Global Development, 2014; Juan Carlos Garzón and John Bailey, “Displacement Effects of Supply-Reduction Policies in Latin America: A Tipping Point in Cocaine Trafficking, 2006-2008”, in Henry Brownstein (ed.), *The Handbook of Drugs and Society* (Hoboken, 2015).

<sup>93</sup> Colombian police and judges warn of a larger Mexican cartel presence in Colombia, particularly along the Pacific coast, from where an estimated 60 per cent of the country’s booming national cocaine production ships out. “En estos diez departamentos hacen presencia los carteles mexicanos”, *El Tiempo*, 29 January 2018. Much of this cocaine is reported to go ashore in Central America, and then transported overland into Mexico. Crisis Group interview, senior government official, Guatemala City, 11 December, 2017.

A. *The Fall of the Zetas and the Rise of the Jalisco New Generation Cartel in the Tenosique-Medias Aguas Route*

Until 2016, the Zetas cartel was reportedly the dominant force in the extortion of those in transit along the route from Tenosique to Medias Aguas. But it is now common to hear that Central American gangs have broken the Zetas' former monopoly, charging \$100 along sections of the track travelled by the Beast. Other major criminal organisations are making inroads as well. Once a strict hierarchy controlling illegal migration and the drug trade across southern Veracruz and Tabasco, the Zetas are now a network of unstable cells with interests in oil theft, train robbery, kidnapping, protection rackets, human trafficking for sexual or child exploitation, and work as mercenaries for new and bigger players.

The town of Tenosique exhibits the increased diversity in criminal actors. Migrant rights activists, who had long suffered abuse at the Zetas' hands, report that the Jalisco New Generation Cartel has taken over most trafficking in the town.<sup>94</sup> According to Friar González, founder of the La 72 migrant shelter, Central American gang members are also arriving in the guise of refugees escaping violence, but do not regroup in Tenosique.<sup>95</sup> Other residents said that local gangs are trying to recruit teenagers in poor neighbourhoods.<sup>96</sup>

The Jalisco New Generation Cartel's efforts to seize drug trafficking routes from the Zetas, and the emergence of other smaller criminal players, have brought a high tide of fear and insecurity to Villahermosa, capital of Tabasco, since 2016.<sup>97</sup> On 21 June, twelve members of a cartel cell were arrested for the murder of five people. Among the suspects are two minors who confessed that they had been forced to eat the flesh of their victims as an initiation rite, according to local prosecutors.<sup>98</sup> In Villahermosa, as Crisis Group witnessed, families no longer allow children to play outdoors; residents avoid wearing jewellery or taking walks at night.<sup>99</sup> According to the National Survey of Urban Public Security, 98.4 per cent of locals believe Villahermosa is unsafe – the highest proportion with such a perception in any Mexican city.<sup>100</sup>

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<sup>94</sup> Crisis Group interviews, Tenosique, Tabasco, 24-25 July 2017; Crisis Group interviews, Colonia Pueblos Unidos, Tenosique, Tabasco, 26 July 2017. There is other evidence of Jalisco New Generation Cartel's involvement in drugs. In June 2017, for example, the Tabasco state police asked for military assistance to raid a house next to the railroad in Tenosique, where they seized 300kg of marijuana and a weapons cache. Hilario Paredes, "Decomisa Ejército 200 kilogramos de marihuana en Tenosique", *Tabasco Hoy*, 29 June 2017; "Cerca de 300 kg. de marihuana asegurados en Tenosique, en operativo de FGE junto al ejército", Boletín informativo no. 1697, Fiscalía General del Estado de Tabasco, Tabasco, 29 June 2017.

<sup>95</sup> Crisis Group interview, Friar Tomás González, founder of La 72 shelter, Tenosique, Tabasco, 24 July 2017.

<sup>96</sup> Crisis Group interview, Tenosique, Tabasco, 26 July 2017.

<sup>97</sup> Crisis Group interviews, Villahermosa, Tabasco, 10 July 2017.

<sup>98</sup> Armando Guzmán, "Comer carne humana, el rito de iniciación en el CJNG: fiscal de Tabasco", *Proceso*, 18 July 2017.

<sup>99</sup> "Encuesta nacional de victimización y percepción sobre seguridad pública (ENVIPE) 2017. Principales resultados Tabasco", INEGI, 26 September 2017.

<sup>100</sup> Armando Guzmán, "Percepción de inseguridad en Villahermosa 'pega' al turismo en Tabasco", *Proceso*, 19 October 2017.

According to the same survey, residents of Coatzacoalcos, a port city in Veracruz, have the second highest perception of insecurity, in large part because of a bloody fight for supremacy between the Zetas and Jalisco New Generation Cartel.<sup>101</sup> Until 2012, the city had a low homicide rate by Mexican standards, but the murder rate has since risen to 27 per 100,000 people, according to the National Institute of Statistics and Geography (INEGI), slightly higher than the national rate.<sup>102</sup> On 10 March 2017, the Jalisco cartel announced in a “narco-message” that it would “cleanse” Coatzacoalcos of Zetas.<sup>103</sup> In subsequent months, alleged members of both gangs have been killed in the port city and elsewhere in Veracruz, while civilians have received more and scarier threats.<sup>104</sup>

Westward on the highway, residents in the town of Acayucan also note the diminishing clout of the Zetas and the growing power of the Jalisco New Generation Cartel. Local media reported a spate of homicides in 2017, an average of ten per month between January and October, in Acayucan’s vicinity.<sup>105</sup> One journalist cited the competition among cartels, as well as the emergence of a new generation enlisted as children by the Zetas for small tasks, but who are now establishing their own lines of illicit business.<sup>106</sup>

These shifts in power in the underworld reverberate in the realm of migrant smuggling. A man from Acayucan said he used to bill a smuggler from Palenque, Chiapas, 500 pesos (around \$25) to sneak migrants through checkpoints in his car. But in 2017 the smuggler stopped offering him work and then disappeared. Some months later, the driver found out the smuggler had been killed.<sup>107</sup> Numerous observers underline that migrant smuggling is becoming more transnationally integrated, sophisticated and expensive. In May 2017, smugglers were reportedly offering to transport migrants from El Salvador to the U.S.-Mexico border for \$12,000 to \$15,000, with no guarantee of crossing into the U.S. Just a few months before Trump’s inauguration – so only about half a year earlier – the cost was \$7,000 to \$10,000, including three attempts at crossing.<sup>108</sup>

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<sup>101</sup> Ibid.

<sup>102</sup> These figures were calculated by Crisis Group based on data from INEGI.

<sup>103</sup> Narco-messages are pieces of paper left on corpses or in other visible spots by criminal organisations and aimed at rival gangs, the government or society. In the past, Mexican criminal organisations communicated exclusively through violence and the choice of victims. But as these organisations became stronger between 2007 and 2011, they started to sign their messages. Laura Atuesta, “Narcomessages as a Way to Analyse the Evolution of Organised Crime in Mexico”, *Global Crime*, vol. 18, no. 2 (2017), pp. 100-121.

<sup>104</sup> The narco-message is here: “Cartel Jalisco Nueva Generación anuncia ‘limpia’ en Veracruz”, video, YouTube, channel Grillonautas2, 11 March 2017; Noé Zavaleta, “Con ejecutado y narcomensaje, Los Zetas Vieja Escuela unido al CDG declaran la guerra al CJNG en Veracruz”, *Proceso*, 21 July 2017.

<sup>105</sup> “Terrorífico el mes de octubre en la zona de Acayucan; contabilizan 17 muertes con violencia”, *Imagen del Golfo*, 1 November 2017.

<sup>106</sup> Crisis Group interview, Cecilio Pérez, editor, *El Diario de Acayucan*, Acayucan, Veracruz, 25 September 2017.

<sup>107</sup> Crisis Group interview, driver, Acayucan, Veracruz, 28 September 2017.

<sup>108</sup> Crisis Group interview, Ramón Márquez, director of the La 72 shelter, Tenosique, Tabasco, 26 July 2017. This information is similar to data from journalistic reports and the Secretariat of Social Development in Mexico. Oscar Martínez, “Los coyotes del norte están aumentando las cuotas por

Hondurans, who generally cannot afford these fees, are now the main travellers on the freight train called the Beast. Hondurans are also the most vulnerable to discrimination and attacks, in part because of the Afro-Caribbean ethnic heritage of many of those travelling, according to Central American diplomatic sources.<sup>109</sup> One Honduran among a group disembarking from a train from Ixtepec said he had been robbed in Tapachula, but forged ahead to Arriaga. There he met another group of migrants, one of whom also had been held up on the railroad. They decided to walk five days to Reforma de Pineda, where they ate for the first time in days before boarding the Beast for Ixtepec. He said he felt lucky because an earthquake in southern Mexico had distracted officials and criminals from their usual extortion.<sup>110</sup>

### B. Central American Gangs in Chiapas

Reports have pointed to Central American gangs' criminal activities in Mexico, in coordination with local drug trafficking organisations, since at least 2010.<sup>111</sup> But there has been little clarity as to the organisational structure behind these operations. The expansion of gangs into southern Mexico appears primarily to be a profit-driven response to the opportunity of preying on extraordinarily vulnerable people, or a flight from crackdowns by the authorities in their home countries. Members active in Mexico remain part of the Central American groups from which they come, but it is unclear if their presence is part of a gang-approved effort to exploit migrants' and refugees' vulnerabilities or the work of individuals who happen to be part of gangs. In either case, gangs are negotiating space for their activities with drug trafficking cartels, even though the more alarmist accounts exaggerate the extent of their presence.<sup>112</sup>

There are three main reported types of Central American gang presence in Mexico. First, gang leaders from El Salvador flee persecution from security forces in their country due to conflict with other gangs or rivalries within their own groups, and seek safety in Mexico. Howard Cotto, the Salvadoran police chief, acknowledged this and said the fugitives continue ordering criminal actions in El Salvador from abroad.<sup>113</sup> This movement of gang leaders seems to have produced little violence in Mexico until recently, when Shyboy, as the alleged head of a purported splinter group from the MS-13 is known, was killed in Mexico City in March 2018.<sup>114</sup>

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Trump", *El Faro*, 9 February 2017; Daniel Blancas Madrigal and Hugo Ruvalcaba, "Polleros cuadruplican su tarifa para cruzar a E.U.", *Crónica de Hoy*, 20 April 2017.

<sup>109</sup> Crisis Group interviews, diplomats from Guatemala and Honduras, Tapachula, Chiapas, Tenoisique, Tabasco and Acayucan, Veracruz, July and September 2017.

<sup>110</sup> Crisis Group interviews, Central American migrants using the Tapachula route of the Beast, Medias Aguas, Veracruz, 26 September 2017.

<sup>111</sup> Óscar Martínez, "Secuestro masivo de migrantes en México apunta a Los Zetas y MS", *El Faro*, 23 December 2010.

<sup>112</sup> *Ibid.*; Crisis Group interviews, Chiapas, March 2018.

<sup>113</sup> Roberto Valencia, "Asesinan en Ciudad de México al Shyboy, el vocero de la MS-503", *El Faro*, 3 March 2018. Increasingly, members of the Salvadoran security forces are being detected among migrants as they flee violence back home. At least two such cases are detected monthly in the monitoring carried out by the NGO Voces Mesoamericanas. Crisis Group interview, Miguel Ángel Paz, director, Voces Mesoamericanas, Chiapas, 29 March 2018.

<sup>114</sup> *Ibid.*

A second group comprises lower-ranking Central American gang members who flee to Mexico with the aim of defecting,<sup>115</sup> while a third group produces violence in a systematic way, preying on migrants' and refugees' vulnerabilities by stealing, extorting, kidnapping and raping them. They reportedly coordinate with Mexican criminal groups to traffic humans and physically, psychologically or sexually exploit their most unfortunate victims.<sup>116</sup> Defenders of migrants' rights say gang members, allegedly in cahoots with Mexican officials, have infiltrated detention centres and migrant shelters to identify who is migrating and from where.<sup>117</sup>

The growing cross-border presence of Central American gangs has been made possible by the demise of the Sinaloa Cartel, which once ran most of the drug trafficking across the Guatemalan border, especially cocaine from Tapachula to Medias Aguas via Ixtepec, but has now largely vacated the region. In total, the cartel is estimated to have ceded control of over half the Mexican territory it dominated before the 2017 extradition to the U.S. of its leader Joaquín Guzmán Loera, or El Chapo. These areas have been taken over by splinters of the Zetas, the Jalisco New Generation Cartel, local criminal groups and the expansionist Central American gangs, above all the MS-13 and the Barrio 18. In Tapachula, Frontera Comalapa and Metapa, arrests of suspected members of MS-13 and Barrio 18 increased from fourteen in 2016 to 148 during the first half of 2017, according to the Secretariat of Security and Citizen Protection of Chiapas. Media sources report an increase from fourteen murders by gangs in the whole of 2016 to 28 in just the first half of 2017.<sup>118</sup>

Aside from their reported involvement in the drug trade, the gangs' primary objective has been to target the centres where migrants and refugees cluster. In March 2017, Father Flor de María Rigoni, founder of the Albergue Belén shelter, said gangs had occupied the building twice, demanded payment from individuals seeking entry and stripped men naked to check for rival gang tattoos. "Their plan is to take advantage of the fall of El Chapo and certain weaknesses of the Gulf Cartel [Sinaloa's traditional rival] to open their own criminal route", said Rigoni.<sup>119</sup> In response, Albergue Belén managers asked local authorities to install eighteen cameras around the shelter and requested the guards be allowed to carry weapons.<sup>120</sup> These measures have not stopped gangs from robbing migrants and refugees or from selling drugs (especially marijuana) near the shelter.<sup>121</sup>

Gang intimidation proved even worse in the Jesús el Buen Pastor de Pobres shelter, a place known for accepting individuals who are badly injured – even mutilated

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<sup>115</sup> Crisis Group interviews, Chiapas, March 2018.

<sup>116</sup> Daniel Blancas Madrigal, "La mara domina ruta de migrantes CA-México", *Crónica*, 25 April 2017.

<sup>117</sup> Crisis Group interview, Miguel Ángel Paz, director, Voces Mesoamericanas, Chiapas, 29 March 2018.

<sup>118</sup> Saúl Hernández, Omar Escamilla and Miguel Rojas, "Los maras acorralan a Chiapas", *El Sol de México*, 17 July 2017.

<sup>119</sup> Rubén Zúñiga, "Maras buscan crear su propio cartel", *Diario del Sur*, 23 October 2017.

<sup>120</sup> Crisis Group interview, Irmí Pundt, administrator of Albergue Belén shelter, Tapachula, Chiapas, 18 July 2017.

<sup>121</sup> Crisis Group interviews, residents of San Antonio Caohacán, Tapachula, Chiapas, 18 July 2017.

– by attacks on or falls off the Beast.<sup>122</sup> Director Aracy Matus Sánchez first took note in early 2016 when occupants started to complain of being robbed nearby. She realised that a gang had bought two houses across the street to monitor the shelter. After she sounded the alarm, the government sent an army detachment, as well as INM officials and the prosecutor for crimes against migrants, to investigate.

The gang appeared to retreat. But following other episodes when she thought the shelter was being watched, Matus requested periodic inspections from state prosecutors and invested in sixteen cameras around the shelter. As an added security measure, she published photographs of migrants she suspected had worked for Central American gangs or the Zetas. This generated friction with Mexican authorities, human rights defenders and even the UN High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR), which considered Matus's action a way to reinforce the perception that all migrants are potential criminals. Amid these tensions, the shelter stopped receiving migrants and asylum applicants and closed its doors in October 2017.<sup>123</sup>

Meanwhile, in the border municipality of Frontera Comalapa, Central American gangs appear to have the sole stake in the extortion and exploitation of migrants and refugees. Efforts by the Jesuit Services for Migrants and Refugees to erect a series of shelters are now under threat. In under four years, the Jesuits have built two shelters (one for migrants and another for asylum applicants, financed by the UNHCR), a dining room, and a centre offering legal, psychosocial and administrative advice to migrants and refugees.<sup>124</sup>

Just months after opening a wing of the shelter for families, the managers obtained proof of criminal activities by Central American gangs supposedly working for a “Mexico program” near the shelter.<sup>125</sup> The same happened in June and July 2017. As a preventive measure, the Jesuits decided to close their service for families. But the priests live in fear of being spied on by gang members. They also worry that their services for vulnerable groups will be abused by the gangs as an instrument to expand in Mexico, and at times even speculate that the government could use the gangs' presence to justify a militarised response.<sup>126</sup> According to José Luis González, leader of the project:

Letting the *maras* settle in the border area helps create public support for militarisation. It increases both the fear of migrants and the fear felt by migrants, who

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<sup>122</sup> Zoé Robledo A., “Olguita no se dio por vencida: una chiapaneca”, *Siempre! Presencia de México*, 11 March 2017.

<sup>123</sup> Crisis Group interviews, Aracy Matus, director of Jesús el Buen Pastor de Pobres shelter, Tapachula, Chiapas, 4 October 2017; UN worker, Tapachula, Chiapas, 26 October 2017 (electronic communication). The notice announcing the closure of the refuge is available here: [www.alberguebuenpastor.org.mx/2017/10/26/cierre-del-albergue](http://www.alberguebuenpastor.org.mx/2017/10/26/cierre-del-albergue).

<sup>124</sup> Crisis Group interview, scholar specialised in migration, Tapachula, Chiapas, 3 October 2017.

<sup>125</sup> A “program” is an intermediate part of the gang structure usually between the *ranfla* or highest level of national leadership, and neighbourhood-level *clicas*. Each *clica* and program seeks its own means of income, providing for diverse sizes, activities and power. See Douglas Farah and Kathryn Babineau, “The Evolution of MS-13 in El Salvador and Honduras”, PRISM-National Defense University, 14 September 2017.

<sup>126</sup> Crisis Group interviews, members of the Jesuit Service for Migrants and Refugees, 30 September 2017; Carlos Martínez, “Lo que es necesario saber sobre la MS-13 para entender la Operación Jaque”, *El Faro*, 8 November 2017.

are afraid of being here with the same *maras* who persecute them there. This would help to stop refugee status applications and migration flows in a very cheap way, simply creating these fears.<sup>127</sup>

Numerous media reports of crimes committed by Central American gangs have led to coordination between local and federal security forces and an exchange of information with Guatemala, especially its military.<sup>128</sup> The risk of this approach is that Mexico will follow the Central American states in meeting the spread of gangs with expanded *mano dura* (iron fist) policies in the south of the country, such as the militarisation of public security and mass arrests based on physical appearance. Where applied, these policies have led to prison overcrowding and communities alienated from local police forces, while failing to curb violent crime.<sup>129</sup>

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<sup>127</sup> Electronic communication, José Luis González Miranda, director of the Frontera Comalapa project, Jesuit Service for Migrants and Refugees, 29 August 2017.

<sup>128</sup> Ildefonso Ochoa, "Persecución de Maras y Barrio 18 en Centroamérica provoca que huyan peligrosamente a esta región", *El Orbe*, 8 July 2017; Saúl Hernández, Omar Escamilla and Miguel Rojas, "Los Maras: vuelve la pesadilla al sur de la frontera de México", *El Sol de México*, 17 July 2017; Rubén Zúñiga, "Delincuentes y 'mareros' se apoderaron de Suchiate: regidora", *Diario del Sur*, 10 July 2017; "Las Maras están invadiendo México por la frontera sur", *Cultura Colectiva*, 20 July 2017; "Maras azotan en la frontera sur", *Insurgentes Press*, 17 July 2017; Jesús Suárez, "Acuerda Chiapas cooperación bilateral con Guatemala para reforzar seguridad", *Insurgentes Press*, 13 July 2017; "Se reúnen altos mandos de los ejércitos de México y Guatemala", *Insurgentes Press*, 15 July 2017; "Combate frontal de pandillas centroamericanas Mara Salvatrucha 13 y Barrio 18 en la frontera sur", *El Orbe*, 25 July 2017.

<sup>129</sup> Crisis Group Latin America and Caribbean Report N°62, *Mafia of the Poor: Gang Violence and Extortion in Central America*, 6 April 2017; Crisis Group Latin America and Caribbean Report N°64, *El Salvador's Politics of Perpetual Violence*, 19 December 2017; Sonja Wolf, *Mano Dura: The Politics of Gang Control in El Salvador* (Austin, 2017).

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## V. A Dangerous Destination for Refugees

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Current U.S. immigration policies are barring the door to a large number of people trying to escape violence in Central America. Although many have abandoned all hope of reaching the U.S. and are seeking asylum in Mexico instead, there are compelling reasons to doubt whether this country offers a safe alternative. The frequency of crimes against migrants and refugees, the deportation of many with protection needs, and the lack of a properly resourced national system of asylum case adjudication stand out among the concerns over Mexico's new role as a refugee haven. More often than not, those fleeing violence find themselves trapped in places that expose them to new criminal threats rather than offer them greater security.

### A. *Between a Rock and a Hard Place*

In 2016, Mexico received 8,788 requests for refugee status, of which 3,079 were granted. In 2017, the total number of requests reached 14,596, with 1,907 granted.<sup>130</sup> According to Mark Manly, UNHCR representative in Mexico, from January 2015 to August 2017, the number of monthly asylum claimants grew 1,114 per cent, but after the earthquakes that hit Mexico in September 2017, the Mexican Commission for Refugee Assistance (COMAR) effectively stopped working for a while.<sup>131</sup> The number of applications from the Northern Triangle has risen steadily since 2013, while applications from Venezuela have soared because of that country's economic, political and security crisis.<sup>132</sup>

U.S. policies have placed huge obstacles in the way of refugees seeking to arrive by land from Mexico. On 25 January 2017, an executive order on "border security and immigration enforcement improvements" proposed to return non-U.S. citizens or nationals seeking entry to the U.S. from a contiguous territory "to the territory from which they came", mainly Mexico, where they were to wait "pending a formal removal proceeding".<sup>133</sup> This provision was never negotiated with the Mexican government. A few weeks after the executive order's publication, Videgaray stated that Mexico would not accept returns of any non-Mexican nationals or, for that matter, any other uni-

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<sup>130</sup> "Recomendación no. 35/2017. Sobre el caso de violaciones a los derechos humanos a la seguridad jurídica y legalidad, libertad personal, así como al principio del interés superior de la niñez en agravio de un grupo de personas en contexto de migración que solicitaron el reconocimiento de la condición de refugiado", National Commission of Human Rights (CNDH), 2017; "La CNDH hace un llamado urgente al gobierno federal ante el posible colapso del sistema de protección a refugiados en México", CNDH, 25 February 2018, at <https://bit.ly/2wnRsfV>.

<sup>131</sup> UNHCR calculation based on data from COMAR, published in Tweet by Mark Manly, UNHCR representative in Mexico, @MarkManly, 31 October 2017; Crisis Group interview, COMAR official, Acayucan, 27 September 2017.

<sup>132</sup> "Estadísticas 2013-2017", COMAR, consulted 2 April 2018. Apparently, the number of approvals of Venezuelan applications has risen because COMAR officials recognise Venezuela is suffering generalised violence, a situation they do not discern in Honduras, El Salvador or Guatemala. Crisis Group interviews, Tenosique, Tabasco, 25 July 2017; and Acayucan, Veracruz, 27 September 2017.

<sup>133</sup> "Executive Order: Border Security and Immigration Enforcement Improvements", White House Office of the Press Secretary, 25 January 2017, Section 7.

lateral decision by the Trump administration.<sup>134</sup> The effect of this executive order, as well as measures purportedly aimed at preventing terrorists from abusing U.S. immigration laws, has been to harden U.S. law enforcement agencies' approach to those seeking protection at the border.<sup>135</sup> Human rights organisations have asserted that Customs and Border Protection agents have unlawfully turned away an undetermined number of asylum seekers.<sup>136</sup>

Some seeking asylum in the U.S. have been stranded in Mexico, among them thousands of Haitians, who have been allowed by the Mexican government to stay in the border cities of Tijuana or Mexicali until the U.S. government processes their applications.<sup>137</sup> The late 2017 announcement of TPS termination for Haitians dashed many of these people's hopes of getting to the U.S. Some have decided to apply for refugee status or other means of staying legally in Mexico, such as the humanitarian residence permits granted, until December 2017, to 2,890 Haitian citizens by the state of Baja California.<sup>138</sup>

Meanwhile, members of the U.S. Congress have attempted to give the secretary of homeland security authority to declare Mexico a "safe third country" for asylum applicants, despite evidence to the contrary.<sup>139</sup> On 26 July 2017, the House of Representatives Judiciary Committee approved for consideration by the full House a bill that would do just that.<sup>140</sup> The bill has attracted opposition from human rights activists concerned about the U.S. abdicating its responsibilities to protect refugees, as well as the diplomatic conflicts it could spark with Mexico, which lacks a system of asylum case adjudication with sufficient resources to respond to the sharp rise in applications and the needs of applicants.<sup>141</sup> The U.S. government, however, has reportedly raised the prospect of reaching a bilateral agreement with Mexico that would classify it as a safe third country for asylum seekers.<sup>142</sup>

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<sup>134</sup> "Mensaje a medios Canciller Luis Videgaray al término de la reunión con la Junta de Coordinación Política de la Cámara de Diputados", Secretariat of Foreign Relations, 22 February 2017. Crisis Group interview via electronic communication, Vidal Llerenas, federal deputy, 23 February 2017.

<sup>135</sup> "Executive Order: Border Security and Immigration Enforcement Improvements", White House Office of the Press Secretary, op. cit.; "Executive Order: Protecting the Nation from Foreign Terrorist Entry into the United States", White House Office of the Press Secretary, 27 January 2017; "Crossing the Line: U.S. Border Agents Illegally Reject Asylum Seekers", Human Rights First, May 2017.

<sup>136</sup> "Audio Recording Reveals Border Agents Turning Back Asylum Seekers", Human Rights First, 13 July 2017; "Crossing the Line: U.S. Border Agents Illegally Reject Asylum Seekers", op. cit.

<sup>137</sup> Rafael Alarcón Acosta and Cecilia Ortiz Esquivel, "Los haitianos solicitantes de asilo a Estados Unidos en su paso por Tijuana", *Frontera Norte*, vol. 29, no. 58 (July-December 2017), pp. 171-179; Kirk Semple, "As migrants strain border towns, pressure builds on Mexico to act", *The New York Times*, 27 January 2017; Ariadna Estévez, "As U.S. closes borders, thousands of Haitian refugees trapped in Mexico lose hope", *The Conversation*, 27 February 2017.

<sup>138</sup> Rosela Rosillo, "2mil 890 haitianos se legalizaron en BC", *El Mexicano*, 15 December 2017.

<sup>139</sup> "Crossing the Line: U.S. Border Agents Illegally Reject Asylum Seekers", op. cit.; and "Dangerous Territory: Mexico Still Not Safe for Refugees", Human Rights First, July 2017.

<sup>140</sup> Markup of: 5 H.R. 391, The 'Asylum Reform and Border Protection Act'; and 6 H. Res. 446, the 'Resolution of Inquiry', House of Representatives Committee on the Judiciary, 26 July 2017.

<sup>141</sup> Eleanor Acer, "U.S. should stop pretending Mexico is a safe third country for refugees", *News Deeply*, 25 August 2017.

<sup>142</sup> "Democrats: Speed up DACA processing", *Politico*, 8 March 2018.

## B. *System Failures*

According to Mexican official procedures, all applications for refugee status in Mexico must be filed before either COMAR or the INM within 30 days of arrival in the country.<sup>143</sup> The process should not last more than 45 days, during which the applicant cannot be removed from Mexico and must provide evidence to support his or her petition. Applicants are entitled to legal representation during the process, at the end of which COMAR must issue a resolution justifying its decision to grant or reject refugee status or complementary protection. Applicants can ask for a hearing if rejected. If refugee status or complementary protection is granted, the person is entitled to request permanent residence in Mexico.<sup>144</sup>

Despite the UNHCR's and other organisations' best efforts, many of the people fleeing violence through Mexico do not know they have the right to apply for refugee status.<sup>145</sup> Although it should be possible to file applications with any migration officer, the fact that COMAR has no offices at the border means that applicants must go to its offices in Mexico City, Tapachula (some 40km from the main border crossing at Ciudad Hidalgo-Tecún Umán) or Acayucan, or to a detention centre for migrants.<sup>146</sup>

In 2017, the National Commission of Human Rights reported rights violations by both the INM and COMAR in processing asylum applications. According to the commission, the INM held claimants, including children, in detention centres while their requests were being considered, in some cases for as long as 150 days.<sup>147</sup>

Even applicants who manage to get help from UNHCR, or shelter and legal assistance from the Catholic Church or human rights organisations, must navigate a tortuous application process, which ends up recognising the request in well under half of all cases.<sup>148</sup> From the perspective of people escaping violence, the Mexican government seems intent on wearing down their willpower. For Mexican officials, on the

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<sup>143</sup> For relevant legal procedures and requirements, see Mexican Chamber of Deputies, "Ley sobre refugiados, protección complementaria y asilo político", 30 October 2014, <https://bit.ly/1GoSuSk>; and "Reglamento de la ley sobre refugiados y protección complementaria", 21 February 2012, <https://bit.ly/2FVC3CX>; "Procedimiento para ser reconocido como refugiado en México", Mexican government, consulted 30 March 2018. There are some exceptions to the noted timeframes.

<sup>144</sup> Ibid.

<sup>145</sup> Crisis Group interviews, Tapachula, Chiapas, July 2017; refugee applicants, Tenosique, Tabasco, September 2017; migrants fleeing violence, Medias Aguas, Veracruz, September 2017.

<sup>146</sup> Crisis Group interviews, collaborators of the La 72 shelter, Tenosique, Tabasco, September 2017; collaborators of the Jesuit Service for Migrants and Refugees, Frontera Comalapa, Chiapas, September 2017.

<sup>147</sup> "Recomendación no. 35/2017. Sobre el caso de violaciones a los derechos humanos a la seguridad jurídica y legalidad, libertad personal, así como al principio del interés superior de la niñez en agravio de un grupo de personas en contexto de migración que solicitaron el reconocimiento de la condición de refugiado", National Commission of Human Rights, 2017, pp. 62-77. See also "Dangerous Territory: Mexico Still Not Safe for Refugees", Human Rights First, July 2017; "Overlooked, Under-protected: Mexico's Deadly Refoulement of Central Americans Seeking Asylum", Amnesty International, 2018. Crisis Group interviews, Central American diplomats, Tapachula, Chiapas, Tenosique, Tabasco and Acayucan, Veracruz, July and September 2017.

<sup>148</sup> In 2016, 37 per cent of applications were successful. "Estadísticas 2013-2017", COMAR, consulted 2 April 2018.

other hand, the problem is the lack of human and financial resources needed to deal with a larger pool of applications.<sup>149</sup>

This increase in applicants has also generated basic security problems for refugees and migrants, as well as for civil society initiatives aimed at protecting people in transit. Managers of migrant shelters and Central American diplomats complain that COMAR has granted refugee status to criminals and suspected gang members.<sup>150</sup> The agency has tried to avoid these mistakes, and it is working with the INM, police and the Mexican intelligence service to screen applicants for criminal backgrounds. But heightened security concerns appear to further depress the number of applications that are granted.

At the same time, COMAR lacks the resources to confront organised crime or prevent other forms of violence against those applying for protection. As a local COMAR official in Acayucan commented: "Security is affected for the migrant community, as it is for everyone else. We and every Mexican citizen feel the same anger they feel".<sup>151</sup> Despite current limitations, a priority for the agency and other relevant state bodies should be to improve security for those whose lives are endangered by organised crime according to gender-specific and age-appropriate needs, and deter the threat of recruitment by criminal groups through employment and community development programs.

### C. *International Support*

The risks faced by migrants and refugees in southern Mexico, as well as the failings of the current Mexican asylum adjudication system, should spur urgent international efforts to improve the country's ability to handle its new role as a magnet for people fleeing Central America. Six countries in the region, including Mexico and five Central American states, have already taken a step in this direction by signing up late in 2017 to a UNHCR-backed program aimed at protecting refugees and migrants in transit and sharing the responsibility for handling migration flows.<sup>152</sup> For now, limited cooperation between Mexico and the source countries of migrants and refugees is hindering effective responses to threats faced by people in transit.

While the U.S. government clearly is intent on buttressing its own southern border against Central Americans, it should compensate for the resulting pressure on Mexico's institutions and resources by supporting Mexican and Northern Triangle authorities' efforts to strengthen the oversight of security agencies and state institutions working on migrant and refugee issues, including the state-level attorney general's offices for crimes against migrants. U.S. and European Union (EU) technical assistance and capacity-building support for under-resourced Central American consulates on the migrant route through Mexico would help ensure better protection for

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<sup>149</sup> Burgi-Palomino and Buckhout, "Does My Story Matter?' Seeking Asylum at Mexico's Southern Border", op. cit.; Crisis Group interview, COMAR official, Acayucan, Veracruz, September 2017.

<sup>150</sup> According to the director of one refuge in Tapachula, 30 per cent of suspected gang members from Central America apply for refugee status. "Maras buscan crear su propio cartel", *Diario del Sur*, 27 March 2017.

<sup>151</sup> Crisis Group interview, Acayucan, Veracruz, 27 September 2017.

<sup>152</sup> "Comprehensive regional protection and solutions framework", UNHCR, October 2017.

migrants and refugees, especially at a time of increasing xenophobia in southern states.

In the same spirit, the U.S. and the EU should intensify support for violence prevention and economic development in the communities of southern Mexico that are most affected by the arrival of Central Americans. They should urgently assist the three Northern Triangle countries and Mexico in developing new programs to help them reintegrate deportees in their home countries and refugees abroad, including through initiatives to help them get access to health care, training, employment and psychosocial support when necessary.

To spread the burden of migration flows, the U.S. and the EU could also boost technical support to expand the processing of asylum petitions filed by Central American nationals in neighbouring countries (mainly Belize and Costa Rica), particularly minors, and ensure governments and NGOs in the region provide adequate shelter to those awaiting decisions. Financial and logistical support to neighbouring countries such as Panama and Costa Rica, as well as to other Latin American countries that agree to take a share of refugees, would help cushion the impact of increasingly restrictive immigration policies in more traditional destinations.

## VI. Conclusion

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Mexico has sought to draw the Trump administration's sting by complying with U.S. demands regarding security, migration and economic development along its southern border. At the same time, both sides of what is now a tense bilateral standoff have threatened to suspend cooperation on those matters if they do not get what they want from an overall renegotiation of their relationship.

Migrants, refugees and native-born residents along the southern Mexican border are the principal victims of the troubles in this partnership. Since 2014, Mexico has served as the main buffer against flows of Central American migrants, a haven for refugees from the same countries and a willing ally in the U.S. security strategy for the region. Yet the visceral anti-immigration tone of the Trump presidency has helped turn southern Mexico into a warehouse for people escaping poverty and violence. More applications for refugee status than ever were filed in Mexico in 2017, as already dire security conditions worsened across the southern states. Towns aggrieved by the arrival of newcomers from Central America, among them members of violent street gangs, have lurched toward xenophobia, while migrant shelters have found themselves forced to adopt tougher security measures.

A more lenient U.S. stance toward Central American refugees and migrants appears a remote prospect any time soon. In the absence of such a shift, Mexico must look to other nations, including its Central American neighbours, for help in handling the migration flows, preventing migrants suffering harm, providing protection to refugees and distributing the burden across various countries. Over the long run, only the reduction of chronic violence in the Northern Triangle countries, above all El Salvador and Honduras, will help reduce levels of flight. As Crisis Group has argued, both of these countries will continue to need support for programs to bring development to afflicted communities, rehabilitate jailed gang members, and enhance employment and educational opportunities for young people at risk of drifting into gang life.<sup>153</sup>

With Mexico as a whole facing its worst homicide rates for at least twenty years, no easy solutions to the current insecurity of the southern states are at hand. But in these areas, where increasingly large numbers of migrants and refugees are clustered, it is essential to reinforce crime prevention in localities blighted by intra-cartel disputes or rising gang activity, adequately equip local communities to absorb new arrivals, toughen legal responses to migrant abuse, ensure refugees' protection needs are met and avoid any moves toward heavy-handed, militarised policing either of migrant flows or local crime waves. In neighbouring countries, this last measure has served only to heighten violence and strengthen the command-and-control structures of organised crime. While mounting insecurity in southern border regions is not a problem entirely of Mexico's making, it will worsen if the country continues to treat a major humanitarian concern as a diplomatic chip in a high-stakes contest with its northern neighbour.

**Mexico City/Bogotá/Brussels, 9 May 2018**

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<sup>153</sup> Crisis Group Reports, *Mafia of the Poor: Gang Violence and Extortion in Central America* and *El Salvador's Politics of Perpetual Violence*, op. cit.

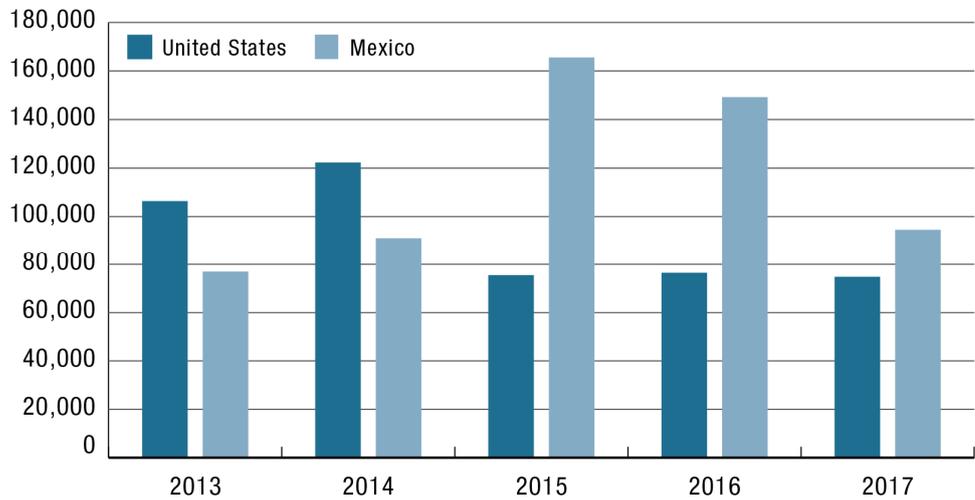
Appendix A: Map of Mexico's Southern Border



Appendix B: Map of the Northern Triangle



Appendix C: Deportations of Northern Triangle Nationals by the U.S. and Mexico 2013-2017



Source: Compilation based on information from statistic bulletins of the Secretariat of the Interior 2012-2017 ([http://politicamigratoria.gob.mx/es\\_mx/SEGOB/Boletines\\_Estadisticos](http://politicamigratoria.gob.mx/es_mx/SEGOB/Boletines_Estadisticos)) and U.S. Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE) (<https://www.ice.gov/statistics>)

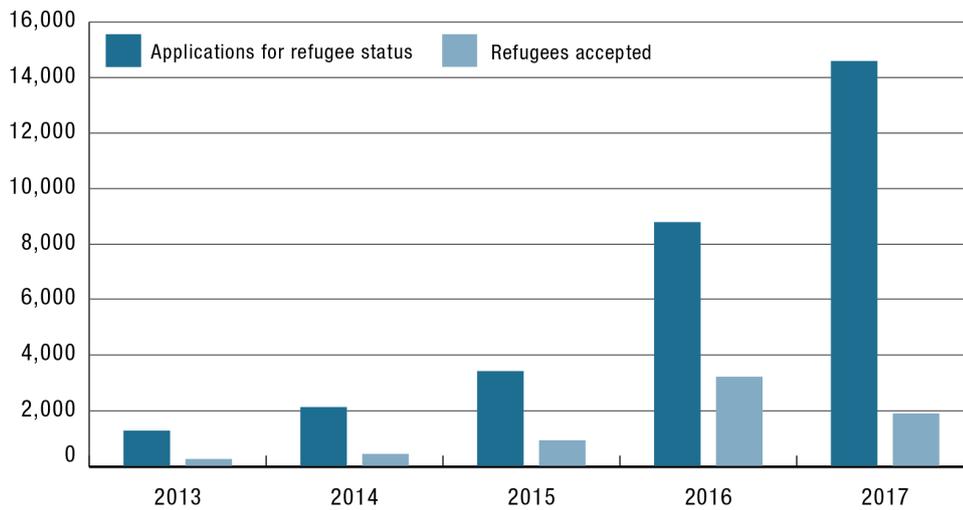
Note: Deportees by Mexico include the total number of returnees, assisted returnees and assisted minor returnees. Deportees by the United States is based on the total number of annual removals by the ICE according to the U.S. fiscal year (October of the previous year until September the following year).

Appendix D: Applications for Refugee Status and Refugees Accepted by Mexico 2013-2017

Year	Applications for refugee status					Refugees accepted				
	Total	Honduras	Guatemala	El Salvador	Venezuela	Total	Honduras	Guatemala	El Salvador	Venezuela
2013	1,296	530	48	309	1	280	110	7	97	1
2014	2,137	1,035	108	626	56	460	236	20	152	9
2015	3,424	1,560	102	1,476	57	951	379	27	474	26
2016	8,796	4,129	473	3,493	361	3,223	1,254	142	1,412	340
2017	14,596	4,272	676	3,708	4,042	1,907	378	55	525	907

Source: Compilation based on statistical information from the Mexican Commission for Refugee Assistance (COMAR) 2013-2017.

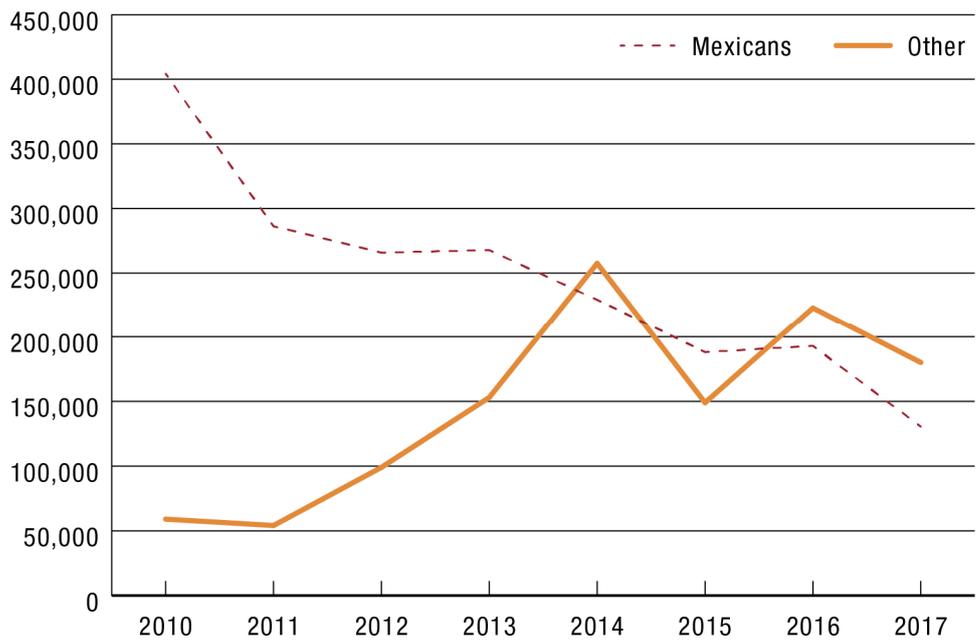
[https://www.gob.mx/cms/uploads/attachment/file/290340/ESTADISTICAS\\_2013\\_A\\_4TO\\_TRIMESTRE\\_2017.pdf](https://www.gob.mx/cms/uploads/attachment/file/290340/ESTADISTICAS_2013_A_4TO_TRIMESTRE_2017.pdf)  
[https://www.gob.mx/cms/uploads/attachment/file/290340/ESTADISTICAS\\_2013\\_A\\_4TO\\_TRIMESTRE\\_2017.pdf](https://www.gob.mx/cms/uploads/attachment/file/290340/ESTADISTICAS_2013_A_4TO_TRIMESTRE_2017.pdf)



Appendix E: Total Illegal Alien Apprehensions on  
the U.S. Border 2010-2017

Year	Mexicans	Non-Mexicans	Total
2010	404,365	59,017	463,382
2011	286,154	54,098	340,252
2012	265,755	99,013	364,768
2013	267,734	153,055	420,789
2014	229,178	257,473	486,651
2015	188,122	148,995	337,117
2016	192,969	222,847	415,816
2017	130,454	180,077	310,531

Source: Compilation based on information supplied by the U.S. Border Patrol.  
<https://www.cbp.gov/newsroom/media-resources/stats>



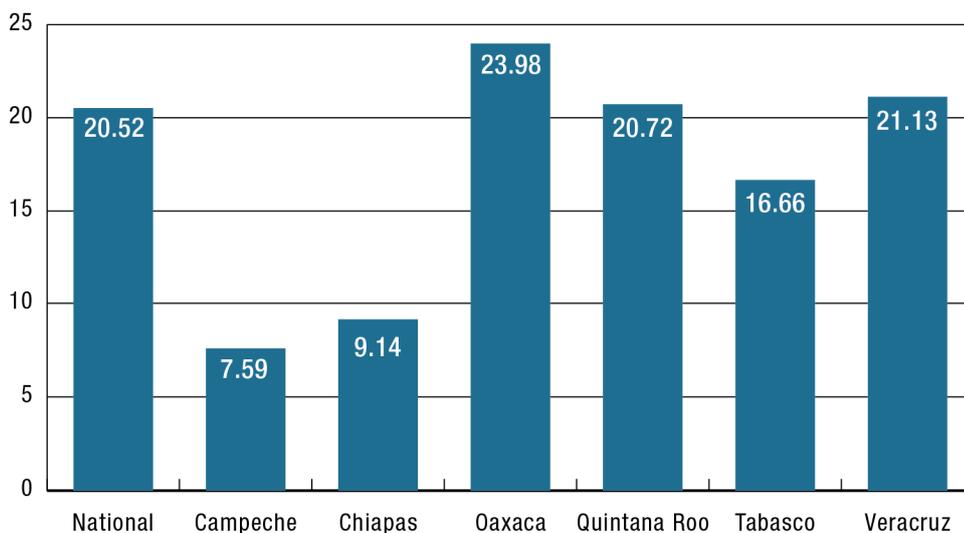
Appendix F: Rates of Serious Crime in Mexico's Six Southern States

Annual Homicide Rates per State 2000-2017

Year	National	Campeche	Chiapas	Oaxaca	Quintana Roo	Tabasco	Veracruz
2000	13.73	7.85	30.49	35.19	26.10	10.63	6.43
2001	13.57	7.28	29.53	35.65	25.81	8.43	6.43
2002	12.71	7.15	24.45	38.61	19.11	6.93	6.17
2003	12.10	7.42	20.94	42.28	21.62	7.27	6.83
2004	11.00	4.90	17.58	30.22	12.61	5.74	6.31
2005	10.50	6.64	9.12	28.08	10.49	3.96	6.19
2006	10.89	3.58	7.76	28.69	10.13	7.73	5.82
2007	9.34	4.53	7.64	25.12	14.45	8.88	6.37
2008	11.82	5.56	6.85	19.27	15.21	6.72	6.30
2009	14.28	4.98	10.32	19.59	13.55	5.25	4.54
2010	18.10	7.05	10.46	17.22	17.32	6.35	7.56
2011	19.53	6.92	12.31	16.43	19.28	7.10	11.42
2012	18.12	7.96	11.35	12.01	17.36	5.37	12.32
2013	15.12	7.61	9.83	13.54	14.41	6.00	10.89
2014	12.83	7.27	7.89	16.06	11.24	7.12	6.10
2015	13.83	5.84	9.56	18.74	14.48	9.77	7.02
2016	16.63	9.12	8.80	21.55	10.19	11.46	15.52
2017	20.52	7.59	9.14	23.98	20.72	16.66	21.13

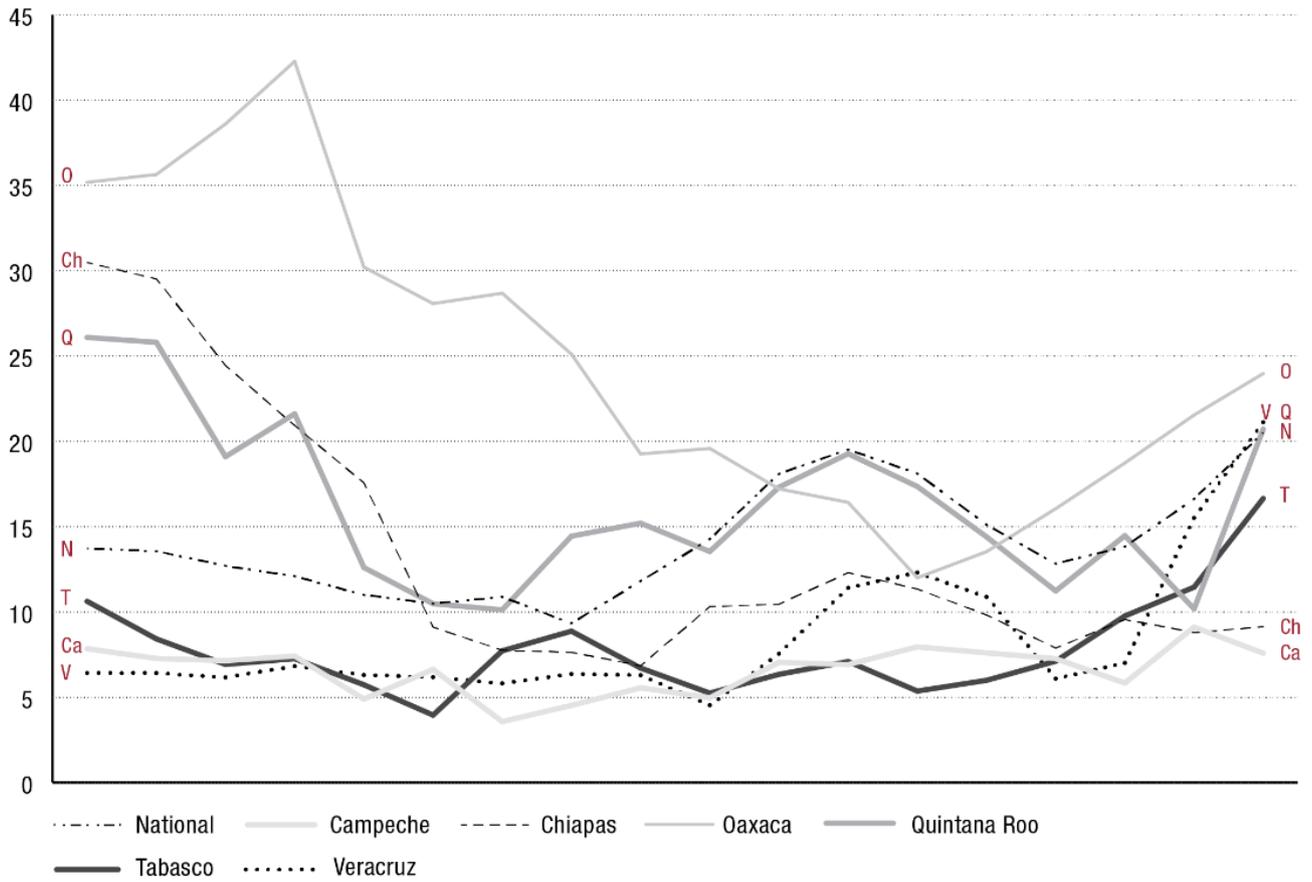
Source: Compilation based on information supplied by the Executive Secretary of Public Security and the National Council of Population (CONAPO).

Homicide Rates 2017



Source: Compilation based on information supplied by the Executive Secretary of Public Security and CONAPO.

Annual Homicide Rate 2000-2017

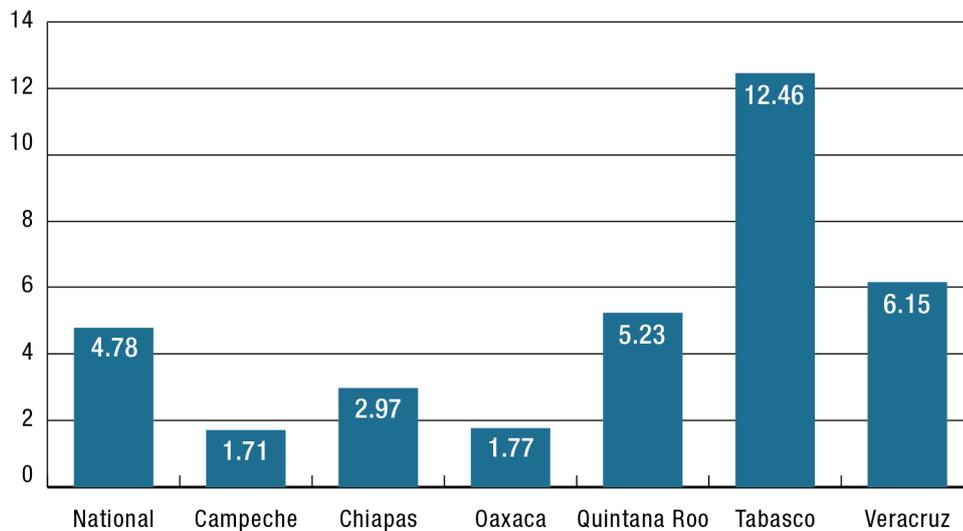


**Annual Extortion Rates per State 2000-2017**

Año	National	Campeche	Chiapas	Oaxaca	Quintana Roo	Tabasco	Veracruz
2000	1.16	0.00	1.68	2.34	0.00	1.06	0.61
2001	1.31	0.42	2.74	2.77	0.00	1.50	0.81
2002	1.58	0.14	2.55	2.73	0.59	1.23	0.97
2003	1.82	0.00	2.43	3.66	0.95	0.92	1.42
2004	2.28	0.00	2.86	5.00	2.28	1.43	1.72
2005	2.78	0.00	2.48	4.16	2.64	0.00	2.50
2006	2.91	0.00	1.88	6.26	1.87	1.58	2.13
2007	2.84	0.00	2.60	10.10	3.28	2.76	2.92
2008	4.37	0.00	1.66	8.57	8.48	6.40	5.11
2009	5.61	0.00	1.49	14.51	8.58	12.29	4.84
2010	5.36	0.00	1.92	9.82	11.77	8.61	4.55
2011	3.97	0.00	1.79	3.10	10.53	6.70	5.13
2012	6.22	1.85	2.34	3.64	15.90	6.32	5.69
2013	6.94	9.54	2.87	4.37	13.74	8.05	5.82
2014	4.83	5.59	3.18	2.53	16.99	5.89	3.19
2015	4.24	3.74	4.13	2.27	7.37	7.17	1.57
2016	4.31	1.95	3.08	0.79	2.53	6.15	2.37
2017	4.78	1.71	2.97	1.77	5.23	12.46	6.15

Source: Compilation based on information supplied by the Executive Secretary of Public Security and CONAPO.

**Extortion Rates 2017**



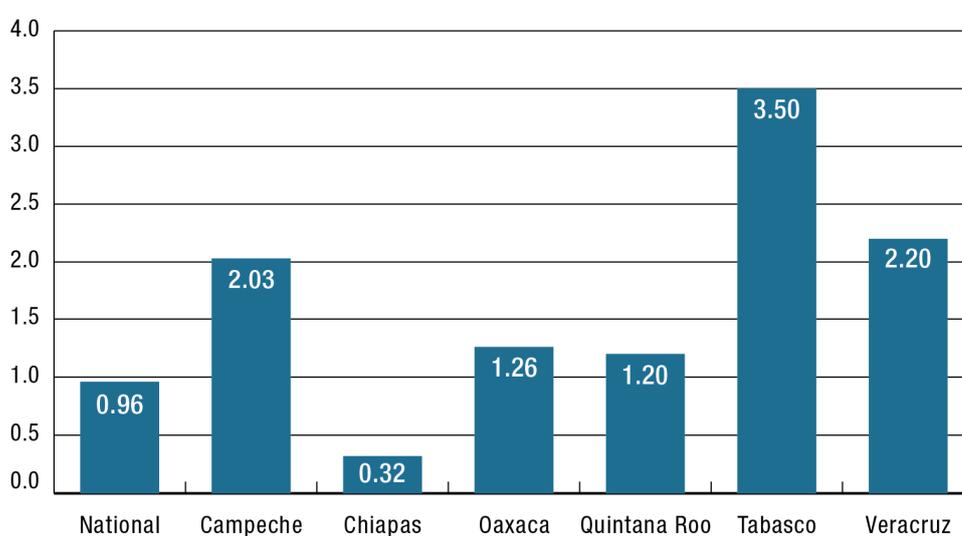
Source: Compilation based on information supplied by the Executive Secretary of Public Security and CONAPO.

**Annual Abduction Rates per State 2000-2017**

Year	National	Campeche	Chiapas	Oaxaca	Quintana Roo	Tabasco	Veracruz
2000	0.59	0.00	0.67	0.27	0.32	0.00	0.06
2001	0.49	0.28	0.71	0.05	1.23	0.00	0.10
2002	0.42	0.00	0.28	0.16	0.00	0.00	0.14
2003	0.39	0.13	0.30	0.16	0.00	0.00	0.22
2004	0.30	0.27	0.11	0.13	0.09	0.00	0.18
2005	0.26	0.13	0.13	0.03	0.18	0.00	0.08
2006	0.68	0.00	0.11	0.13	0.34	0.00	0.09
2007	0.40	0.38	0.32	0.24	0.57	0.46	0.17
2008	0.81	0.00	0.19	0.71	0.79	1.54	0.13
2009	1.03	0.00	0.37	0.86	0.46	0.72	0.00
2010	1.07	0.36	0.49	0.67	1.78	1.15	0.22
2011	1.24	0.35	0.60	1.61	1.50	3.28	0.77
2012	1.21	0.35	0.26	1.42	1.11	2.51	1.16
2013	1.43	0.11	0.23	1.14	0.81	4.45	1.38
2014	1.17	0.22	0.21	0.88	0.39	4.24	1.80
2015	0.88	0.66	0.19	0.62	0.32	3.27	1.21
2016	0.92	0.65	0.28	1.41	0.49	3.53	1.63
2017	0.96	2.03	0.32	1.26	1.20	3.50	2.20

Source: Compilation based on information supplied by the Executive Secretary of Public Security and CONAPO.

**Abduction Rates 2017**



Source: Compilation based on information supplied by the Executive Secretary of Public Security and CONAPO.

## Appendix G: Acronyms

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COMAR	Mexican Commission for Refugee Assistance
DACA	Deferred Action for Childhood Arrivals
ICE	Immigration and Customs Enforcement
INEGI	National Institute of Statistics and Geography
INM	National Institute of Migration
MS-13	Mara Salvatrucha
NAFTA	North American Free Trade Agreement
TPS	Temporary Protected Status
UNHCR	United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees

## Appendix H: About the International Crisis Group

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The International Crisis Group (Crisis Group) is an independent, non-profit, non-governmental organisation, with some 120 staff members on five continents, working through field-based analysis and high-level advocacy to prevent and resolve deadly conflict.

Crisis Group's approach is grounded in field research. Teams of political analysts are located within or close by countries or regions at risk of outbreak, escalation or recurrence of violent conflict. Based on information and assessments from the field, it produces analytical reports containing practical recommendations targeted at key international, regional and national decision-takers. Crisis Group also publishes *CrisisWatch*, a monthly early warning bulletin, providing a succinct regular update on the state of play in up to 70 situations of conflict or potential conflict around the world.

Crisis Group's reports are distributed widely by email and made available simultaneously on its website, [www.crisisgroup.org](http://www.crisisgroup.org). Crisis Group works closely with governments and those who influence them, including the media, to highlight its crisis analyses and to generate support for its policy prescriptions.

The Crisis Group Board of Trustees – which includes prominent figures from the fields of politics, diplomacy, business and the media – is directly involved in helping to bring the reports and recommendations to the attention of senior policymakers around the world. Crisis Group is chaired by former UN Deputy Secretary-General and Administrator of the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP), Lord Mark Malloch-Brown. Its Vice Chair is Ayo Obe, a Legal Practitioner, Columnist and TV Presenter in Nigeria.

Crisis Group's President & CEO, Robert Malley, took up the post on 1 January 2018. Malley was formerly Crisis Group's Middle East and North Africa Program Director and most recently was a Special Assistant to former U.S. President Barack Obama as well as Senior Adviser to the President for the Counter-ISIL Campaign, and White House Coordinator for the Middle East, North Africa and the Gulf region. Previously, he served as President Bill Clinton's Special Assistant for Israeli-Palestinian Affairs.

Crisis Group's international headquarters is in Brussels, and the organisation has offices in ten other locations: Bishkek, Bogota, Dakar, Kabul, Islamabad, Istanbul, Nairobi, London, New York, and Washington, DC. It has presences in the following locations: Abuja, Algiers, Bangkok, Beirut, Caracas, Gaza City, Guatemala City, Hong Kong, Jerusalem, Johannesburg, Juba, Mexico City, New Delhi, Rabat, Sanaa, Tblisi, Toronto, Tripoli, Tunis, and Yangon.

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**May 2018**

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**Appendix I: Reports and Briefings on Latin America since 2015**

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**Special Reports**

*Exploiting Disorder: al-Qaeda and the Islamic State*, Special Report N°1, 14 March 2016 (also available in Arabic and French).

*Seizing the Moment: From Early Warning to Early Action*, Special Report N°2, 22 June 2016.

*Counter-terrorism Pitfalls: What the U.S. Fight against ISIS and al-Qaeda Should Avoid*, Special Report N°3, 22 March 2017.

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*Venezuela: Hunger by Default*, Latin America Briefing N°37, 23 November 2017 (also available in Spanish).

*El Salvador's Politics of Perpetual Violence*, Latin America Report N°64, 19 December 2017 (also available in Spanish).

*Back from the Brink: Saving Ciudad Juárez*, Latin America Report N°54, 25 February 2015 (also available in Spanish).

*On Thinner Ice: The Final Phase of Colombia's Peace Talks*, Latin America Briefing N°32, 2 July 2015 (also available in Spanish).

*Venezuela: Unnatural Disaster*, Latin America Briefing N°33, 30 July 2015 (also available in Spanish).

*Disappeared: Justice Denied in Mexico's Guerrero State*, Latin America Report N°55, 23 October 2015 (also available in Spanish).

*The End of Hegemony: What Next for Venezuela?*, Latin America Briefing N°34, 21 December 2015 (also available in Spanish).

*Crutch to Catalyst? The International Commission Against Impunity in Guatemala*, Latin America Report N°56, 29 January 2016 (also available in Spanish).

*Venezuela: Edge of the Precipice*, Latin America Briefing N°35, 23 June 2016 (also available in Spanish).

*Easy Prey: Criminal Violence and Central American Migration*, Latin America Report N°57, 28 July 2016 (also available in Spanish).

*Colombia's Final Steps to the End of War*, Latin America Report N°58, 7 September 2016 (also available in Spanish).

*Venezuela: Tough Talking*, Latin America Report N°59, 16 December 2016 (also available in Spanish).

*In the Shadow of "No": Peace after Colombia's Plebiscite*, Latin America Report N°60, 31 January 2017 (also available in Spanish).

*Veracruz: Fixing Mexico's State of Terror*, Latin America Report N°61, 28 February 2017 (also available in Spanish).

*Mafia of the Poor: Gang Violence and Extortion in Central America*, Latin America Report N°62, 6 April 2017 (also available in Spanish).

*Power without the People: Averting Venezuela's Breakdown*, Latin America Briefing N°36, 19 June 2017 (also available in Spanish).

*Colombia's Armed Groups Battle for the Spoils of Peace*, Latin America Report N°63, 19 October 2017 (also available in Spanish).

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