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**CENTRAL AMERICA'S  
MIGRATION CRISIS**



# Central America's Migration Crisis

## A WPR REPORT



The heated debate in America over migrants and asylum-seekers seeking to cross into the country from Mexico has often overshadowed the origins of the problem: the push factors that drive so many to flee from the so-called Northern Triangle states of El Salvador, Honduras and Guatemala. Crime and insecurity coupled with corruption and lack of accountability make life precarious for many of the region's most vulnerable populations, who are preyed on by criminal gangs and at times the state. U.S. policy has in the past contributed to these problems or else failed to help address them effectively, putting part of the responsibility for finding lasting solutions on Washington.

*Editor's Note: All time references in this report are in relation to each article's original publication date, which is shown at the top of each article.*

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# The U.S. Contributed to Central America's Migrant Crisis. It Must Help Fix It

Christine Wade | Nov. 13, 2018

Late last week, the Trump administration declared in a proclamation that it would deny asylum applications to anyone who entered the country through illegal ports of entry, even though it has been clear for months that asylum-seekers are being **denied access** at official ports of entry. It was the latest attempt by the administration to discourage migrants, primarily from Central America, from coming to the United States.



*Central American migrants, part of the caravan hoping to reach the U.S. border, leave a temporary shelter early in the morning in Queretaro, Mexico, Nov. 11, 2018 (AP photo by Rodrigo Abd).*

In the recent pre-election fervor, President Donald Trump likened the caravan of Central Americans, which is slowly making its way north from Honduras and into southern Mexico, to an invasion. Yet the latest caravan was notable not for the number of migrants—roughly 1,500 Central Americans migrate north toward the U.S. daily—but the fact that they were **traveling together**. Migrants, who have been subjected to horrible abuses on the journey northward, have increasingly sought safety in numbers.

Still, the administration responded by militarizing the U.S.-Mexico border and restricting access to asylum, which will likely lead to several legal challenges. What administration officials fail to acknowledge is that these efforts are unlikely to stem the flow of migrants from Central America. On top of that, they endanger already vulnerable populations.

Central Americans living in the so-called Northern Triangle countries of Guatemala, El Salvador and Honduras are caught in a **complex web** of violence and corruption, poverty and inequality. Regional governments have failed to provide their citizens with basic guarantees of the rule of law and physical or economic security. For the past decade, the Northern Triangle has been the most dangerous region in the world, with homicide rates that vastly exceed those of other countries. El Salvador's homicide rate actually declined last year to 60 per 100,000 people, down from 81.2 in 2016 and 104.5 in 2015—but it is still one of the **most violent** countries in the world.

Among those fleeing violence, women and children have been migrating in greater numbers since 2012. In 2017, Mexican authorities said that **25 percent** of the migrants they apprehended were women, while U.S. authorities said it was 27 percent. Girls under the age of 18 represented 32 percent of migrants apprehended by U.S. authorities in 2017.

Central American women and girls are routinely the victims of violence both by the state and at home, as they are targeted by gangs and organized crime and face high rates of domestic violence. El Salvador and Honduras had the third- and fifth-highest **rates of femicide**—the targeted killing of women because of their gender—in the world in 2015. In **El Salvador**, one out of every three pregnancies is to an adolescent mother, most of whom have been raped. Despite laws to protect women, few cases are ever investigated and even fewer result in prosecution. Given the states' failure to protect them, the prospect of asylum in the U.S. is a lifeline. But a June decision by the now-former attorney

general, Jeff Sessions, **prevents women** from seeking asylum in the U.S. based on gender and gang violence.

Meanwhile, few victims of crime in Central America ever receive justice. Only a small portion of victims of violence file police reports. Not only do victims believe their reports won't be investigated, but reporting opens them up to abuse by both police and criminals. Collusion between state officials and criminal organizations is but one particularly nefarious form of corruption that is rampant in **El Salvador** and **Honduras**. Yet despite the attention given to corruption in the region in recent years, and the previous backing of both the United States and the United Nations in anti-corruption campaigns, it's difficult not to feel discouraged by the **lack of progress**. Last year's disputed presidential election in Honduras, in which the corruption-tainted incumbent won, and the brazen attempts by Guatemalan President Jimmy Morales to dismantle the U.N.-backed anti-graft commission earlier this year, have shown that the region's elites have little to fear. The Trump administration congratulated President Juan Orlando Hernandez on his re-election in Honduras and has stayed silent about Morales, which looks like tacit support for his moves.

***The Trump administration should recognize the crisis that exists not on the southern U.S. border, but some 1,500 miles south in Guatemala, Honduras and El Salvador.***

Of course, violence and corruption are intimately linked to economic issues. The lack of the rule of law reduces investment. Businesses close because of extortion. Collusion between governments and organized crime deprives states of much-needed revenue to provide public services. Violence keeps children out of school. Families abandon their homes and businesses due to threats of violence. More than 500,000 Salvadorans have been displaced over the past two years due to violence alone.

The Salvadoran economy has been stagnant for a decade, growing only 2.3 percent last year. Guatemala fared little better at 2.8 percent. More than two-thirds of Hondurans, more than half of Guatemalans and one-third of



Salvadorans live below the poverty line. Nearly one-quarter of Guatemala's population lives in extreme poverty. Honduras has the highest level of income inequality in Latin America. There are few jobs, and even fewer good jobs. Approximately two-thirds of those living in the Northern Triangle are employed in the informal sector, which offers no job security.

People living in rural areas experience poverty and inequality at higher rates than the general population. This is particularly true for those working in agriculture. Increasingly, Central Americans living in the *zona seca*, or dry corridor, have cited severe drought, crop failure and food insecurity as reasons for migrating north. Nearly **60 percent** of Guatemalan migrants have said the drought and food insecurity was their reason for leaving.

Developing and maintaining the rule of law is vitally important to creating a secure, prosperous Central America. Central American governments need more technical assistance and more funding directed at improving and professionalizing the judiciary and the police. The Trump administration should rigorously apply the Leahy Laws, which bar U.S. assistance to foreign security forces accused of abuse, rather than rewarding them with more weapons and equipment. The region's anti-corruption and anti-impunity bodies need to be strengthened, and they need Washington's full support. Morales' attempts to shut down the successful anti-corruption commission, which has struck at the heart of a rotten political elite, should be viewed not only as a threat to the stability of Guatemala, but to the region.

Weak economies also need assistance. **A recent report** by Manual Orozco at the Inter-American Dialogue offers some excellent recommendations for how to stem migration and improve economic development in the Northern Triangle, including formalizing the workforce, investing in human capital and growing new markets. The Trump administration's decision to terminate the temporary protected status, or TPS, for Hondurans and Salvadorans will require more than 250,000 migrants who have been living and working legally in the U.S., some for as many as 20 years, to return home in 2019. Not only are these economies unprepared to absorb such a sizeable number of returnees, but their return will also result in a decline in remittances—both of which are likely to exacerbate the migration crisis. It's estimated that the revocation of TPS will cost those economies more than \$60 million annually, including nearly \$47 million in El Salvador alone. With Democrats in control of the House of Representatives, they should push the administration to instead renew and expand TPS for

Hondurans and Salvadorans, as well as Nicaraguans and Haitians for that matter, and develop a path to citizenship for them.

Finally, the administration should recognize the crisis that exists not on the southern U.S. border, but some 1,500 miles south in Guatemala, Honduras and El Salvador. Actually addressing that humanitarian crisis requires improving access to official U.S. ports of entry, restoring the **Central American Minors Program**—which allowed minors in the Northern Triangle who had parents legally living in the U.S. to apply for asylum from their home countries—and re-evaluating the administration’s policy on gender-based and gang-related violence. Those with legitimate claims for asylum should be able to make them and have them processed expeditiously.

The United States, across multiple administrations, has contributed to the current crisis in Central America in many ways. It has a role to play in remedying it.

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# A Split Emerges in Latin America Over How to Deal With Rising Violence



*A soldier patrols in the Chapadao complex of favelas in Rio de Janeiro, Brazil, Dec. 11, 2018 (AP photo by Leo Correa).*

Mathew Charles | Jan. 8, 2019

BOGOTA, Colombia—On the surface, the future looks bleak for Latin America. In an era of slow economic growth, with deeply polarized societies and increasingly entrenched violence, the continent's leaders face some daunting challenges. Latin America is grappling with a surge in homicide, which has made it the world's most dangerous region. The illicit drug trade is booming,

organized crime is proving to be more agile than most states, and anti-corruption efforts have been rolled back across the continent, undermining democracy.

There are, however, glimmers of hope if you look closer. Amid the carnage, solutions and experiments are emerging that could slow the violence and reduce the killing.

According to [data from the Igarapé Institute](#), a Brazilian think tank, 17 of the 20 most violent countries in the world by murder rate are in Latin America and the Caribbean. Marginalized communities across the region still live under the control of organized crime and nonstate armed groups. In countries like El Salvador, Guatemala and Honduras, residents are held hostage by “invisible borders” that define gang turf. Trapped in their neighborhoods, they are unable to move freely, and crossing into rival territory nearly always carries a death sentence. People become victims of elaborate extortion rackets, forced to pay monthly fees to gangs and cartels, or face execution.

State legitimacy, it seems, is evaporating across the continent. “In some cases, this is due to the fact that the state is unable to establish complete control, and in some cases it is unwilling to do so,” says Michael Weintraub, an associate professor of political science at the University of the Andes in Bogota. “They’re unwilling to do so because of resource constraints or because some elements of the state itself actually benefit from criminal governance,” which can bring a form of stability.

In Brazil, under newly sworn-in President Jair Bolsonaro, the government is attempting to reassert the state’s monopoly on violence amid [a sharp rise in crime](#). The new governor of the state of Rio de Janeiro has said he will implement shoot-to-kill policing tactics, and troops have been deployed to tackle a spike in gang violence in the northeastern city of Fortaleza.

In Colombia, a new presidential decree plans to relax gun laws and allow civilians to bear arms, if they have the permission of the military. This is a highly controversial proposal; armed self-defense groups that were briefly legalized in the 1990s ended up committing tens of thousands of murders—many of them against communities accused of supporting the FARC guerrillas—in just a decade.



Across Central America, where as many as 95 percent of crimes go unpunished in some areas, so-called *mano dura* or *iron fist policing* has been pursued since the early 2000s in an attempt to curb rampant gang-fueled violence. The iron fist includes expanding police powers and enacting harsher punishments. In El Salvador, anyone can be arrested and charged with belonging to a gang, just for having a tattoo, and in Honduras, carrying more than the equivalent of \$15 can lead to charges of extortion. This approach has been widely criticized for human rights abuses and for failing to achieve what it set out to: reduce murders and other violent crime.

“By dismantling organized criminal groups, the state is not necessarily protecting its population,” says Kyle Johnson, a senior analyst in Colombia for the International Crisis Group. “If it continues to see organized crime as a purely economic and security issue, then it will never win the battle against it.”

## ***Hard-liners continue to support militarization and tougher punitive measures, while those on the political left favor a softer approach.***

There are alternatives to the iron fist. In Argentina, a community policing program and improved data collection contributed to the dismantling of one of the country’s most violent criminal groups, known as Los Monos. Similarly, in the Colombian city of Cali, authorities have started to map homicide data to establish which neighborhoods are most affected by violence. Young people considered to be at risk are then given individual caseworkers. This new program resulted in a 41 percent reduction in murders in 2018, according to local authorities. On Jan. 3, the city celebrated its first ever 24-hour period without a single murder since records began. Strategies like those adopted in Cali are known as “tertiary prevention.”

“They target for intervention those who are already engaged in violence and work to transform the way they are punished for using violence, the way they think about and regulate their behavior, and the way they find and retain work and achieve community reintegration,” says Weintraub.

Of course, much of Latin America’s urban violence is fueled by the illicit drug trade, and in Colombia, more cocaine is being produced than ever before.

Figures from the United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime published last September showed an increase in cocaine production of 17 percent, totaling an estimated 1,400 metric tons, a historic high.

“The policy prescription we have used for years, based mainly on punitive repression, has not solved the problem,” outgoing Colombian President Juan Manuel Santos admitted in [an article for America’s Quarterly](#) last year, just before he left office.

The United States has also admitted failure in the so-called war on drugs. The U.S. government’s chief watchdog agency, the Government Accountability Office, concluded in [a report last month](#) that despite a \$10 billion U.S. investment in Colombia since 1999 for counternarcotics and security efforts, there has been no “comprehensive review of the U.S. counternarcotics approach” to determine what, if anything, actually works. Cocaine production, it noted, “has more than tripled from 2013 through 2017.”

In the runup to the United Nations General Assembly last year, the Trump administration’s four-pronged “call to action” on drugs went largely unanswered by Latin American states, a sign of shifting dynamics on the continent and dwindling U.S. influence under President Donald Trump.

In Mexico, for example, newly elected President Andres Manuel Lopez Obrador is considering a radical departure from the law-and-order approach promoted by the Trump administration, and now favored by Bolsonaro in Brazil. The moves Lopez Obrador is mulling include pardoning low-level drug trade offenders and decriminalizing drugs as part of a move toward treating drug use as a public health issue rather than a criminal one.

This coming year will test Latin American policymakers as much of the continent struggles to contain record levels of violence. Hard-liners will continue to support militarizing what remain problems of crime and public security, especially with tougher punitive measures, while those on the political left will favor a softer approach focused on rehabilitation, reintegration and decriminalization. But amid this zero-sum approach, hybrid strategies have emerged.

“If you ask me what works, if it’s the iron fist or social policies? You have to have both,” says Andres Villamizar, the security secretary for Cali. “It’s naïve to think that just one of these will work alone.”

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# El Salvador's 'Iron Fist' Crackdown on Gangs: A Lethal Policy With U.S. Origins



*A man is detained on suspicion of having links to a gang, San Juan Opico, El Salvador, April 1, 2015 (AP photo by Salvador Melendez).*

Danielle Mackey | Feb. 6, 2018

SAN SALVADOR—Late one morning in the fall of 2016, police officers handcuffed a group of middle school-aged boys on a street in a neighborhood on the outskirts of El Salvador's capital. The boys were serving as lookouts for members of MS-13, or Mara Salvatrucha, the violent street gang that originated in Los Angeles and expanded over two decades ago to this small Central American country, which had just ended a brutal civil war. MS-13 and other



gangs have since multiplied across El Salvador, becoming a main source of violence in the postwar era. There are now an estimated 60,000 gang members in a country of 6.5 million people. Serving as lookouts, as the boys were doing, is an early step toward full gang membership.

After handcuffing them, the police officers commandeered a nearby home, forcing the family out, then took the boys inside and onto the back patio. The officers proceeded to torture and kill them; it took several hours. The coroner's report notes that one boy's body featured a trail of bullet wounds leading from his left wrist to his forehead. Neighbors later said they could hear the boys pleading for their lives as the officers laughed.

Yet the internal police report, which I've reviewed, lays out a different scenario. It says a confidential informant called the police to report that MS-13 members were gathered on a corner, and that when the police arrived, a shoot-out ensued. It describes the operation as an "achievement obtained" and states—falsely, according to witnesses—that the boys were killed in the exchange of gunfire.

Such incidents are all too common in El Salvador, where there is an alarming pattern of escalating police violence. The Salvadoran National Civil Police, known by its Spanish initials, PNC, often uses the term *enfrentamiento*, meaning "shoot-out," to explain police killings of young people suspected of gang membership. The number of so-called *enfrentamientos* jumped from 39 in 2013 to 591 in 2016, after Mauricio Landaverde, the director of the PNC at the time, announced that officers would face no consequences for shooting suspected gang members. But as was true in the case of the boys' killings, these often aren't shoot-outs at all.

Police violence also occurs in other, equally grisly, forms. Local press outlets have managed to infiltrate WhatsApp networks the police use to plan murders, torture and rapes. Salvadoran journalists have also proven multiple cases of extrajudicial killings that were originally reported as shoot-outs.

When confronted with these cases, the PNC disputes their details, but it makes no apologies for its zero-tolerance policy toward gangs. Like MS-13 itself, this policy, known as *mano dura*, or iron fist, has roots in the United States, having been modeled on crime-fighting tactics championed by American politicians and law-enforcement officials. The policy was first introduced in El Salvador in 2003 and has since evolved, taking a particularly gruesome turn after 2015, in

the wake of Landaverde's announcement. This trend was reinforced by the current government's adoption in April 2016 of a security policy known as Extraordinary Measures, which keeps prisons holding suspected gang members on lockdown.

In 2016 and again in 2017, the Washington-based Inter-American Commission on Human Rights said the available evidence suggested that *enfrentamientos* amounted to systematic extrajudicial killings. In 2017, the United Nations asked the Salvadoran government, which has been controlled by the leftist Farabundo Marti National Liberation Front, or FMLN, since 2009, to **discontinue Extraordinary Measures**—a recommendation that Landaverde, now the minister of justice and security, says was “**based on falsehoods.**” Also last year, in its first report on El Salvador, the International Crisis Group declared that *mano dura* had been a failure. Yet the government is doubling down, and now seeks to renew Extraordinary Measures for another year.

## ***For the families of Salvadorans killed by the police, what comes next can be just as terrifying.***

For the families of those killed, what comes after a police killing can be just as terrifying. Last fall, I sat with the parents of the boys who had been tortured and killed a year earlier. They spoke to me on condition of anonymity, in near whispers, hunched together in plastic chairs in a one-room cinderblock house owned by one of the mothers. Following alleged *enfrentamientos*, they told me, police officers regularly invade the homes of the dead. The PNC had already stormed the house we were sitting in on multiple occasions, overturning furniture, cursing the boys' memory and, when the parents protested, declaring that they were “the law” and threatening to murder the parents, too. Families don't typically report either the police killings or their harrowing aftermath to judicial officials, fearing reprisals if word were to get out that they were talking. Instead, they lay low, besieged by grief, bitterness and terror. “We don't go out anymore,” one mother told me. “We've completely cut ourselves off from society.”

### **'Where Did You All Lose Your Way?'**

*Mano dura* was adopted in 2003 under El Salvador's then-president, Francisco Flores, who came to power in 1999. More than a decade had passed since the end of the Salvadoran Civil War, a 12-year conflict in which more than 75,000 people died. The policy was adopted even though the murder rate had steadily fallen throughout the postwar years, from 6,792 murders in 1996 to 2,388 murders in 2003.

At first, *mano dura* wasn't even a formal policy; it was a memo to the police. The memo instructed them to use any means at their disposal to incarcerate and disband the nascent gangs, and to work with the army and attorney general in doing so, according to an [October 2017 report](#) by analyst Veronica Reyna for the German political foundation Friedrich Ebert Stiftung.

Public policies usually feature concrete goals, defined timelines and ways to measure success. *Mano dura* had none of these, Reyna's report notes. After sending off the memo, the Flores administration began successfully lobbying for anti-gang laws to grant *mano dura* judicial legitimacy. These laws defined gang members by their clothing or tattoos, allowed for mass arrests, reduced police oversight and made combating gang activity a top judicial and police priority.

Another crucial element of *mano dura*'s implementation was generating media coverage that would prime Salvadorans for the crackdown to come. The goal seemed to be to convince the population that gangs posed a singular threat to security. This coverage had the added benefit of distracting from economic and social problems and other types of crime.

In the first 13 months that *mano dura* was in effect, the police arrested 19,275 people for alleged gang membership, according to Reyna's report. Of those, 17,540 were almost immediately freed for lack of evidence. Many of them weren't gang members; they simply came from poor communities where the authorities suspected that gangs existed. But once arrested, they were cycled through holding cells with actual gang members, and some chose to join gangs as a result.



*A woman holds up photos of inmates who were confirmed dead by authorities during a gathering of relatives demanding information outside the prison where they were killed, Quezaltepeque, El Salvador, Aug. 23, 2015 (AP photo by Salvador Melendez).*

These mass arrests were carried out in lieu of tactics that would actually address the systemic causes of persistent violence in El Salvador—a problem that was much bigger than the gangs. The police force even called attention to this fact early on. A November 2004 report from the PNC’s Division of Youth and Family Services defined violence as a matter of public health, and took issue with the idea that the police should be the sole institution in charge of public security. It also identified additional drivers of violence in El Salvador, none of which *mano dura* did anything to combat: the widespread availability of guns, drug and alcohol abuse, the legacy of the war years and social problems like family disintegration.

“I look at this and I think, Where did you all lose your way?” a Salvadoran police officer told me last August during an interview at a café in San Salvador. The officer, who insisted on anonymity so he could speak freely about the policy, said he was especially disturbed by the similarities between tactics employed by police implementing *mano dura* and those of state security forces during



the civil war, which sponsored death squads and were notorious for their widespread use of torture.

Confronted with evidence of abuses, El Salvador's government has denied them. Last September, when civil society groups presented statistics on extrajudicial killings before the Inter-American Commission on Human Rights, Landaverde, the justice and security minister, responded that there **was no evidence** that the state was "permitting, tolerating or making policies of extrajudicial assassinations or human rights violations."

### **Constructing a Common Enemy**

Given both *mano dura*'s ineffectiveness and the social harm it caused, the government's commitment to it was puzzling, perhaps. But shortly after the policy was put in place, the leak of an internal memo from the leadership of Flores' political party, the right-wing Nationalist Republican Alliance, or ARENA, shed some light on officials' motivations.

The purpose of *mano dura*, the memo stated, was simple: to win the upcoming 2004 presidential elections. Since assuming office in 1999, Flores hadn't made significant strides on his proposed economic improvements, so the party didn't have much to rally around. It had also suffered a poor showing in mid-term legislative elections in 2003, underscoring the need for a visible win.

As a political tool, *mano dura* was wildly successful. It worked by constructing the image of a common enemy—gangs—that both the government and the public could rally against. And it convinced voters that ARENA was the one force capable of vanquishing that enemy.

Media coverage was instrumental in selling this argument. In her 2017 book "*Mano Dura: The Politics of Gang Control in El Salvador*," Sonja Wolf, a political scientist and researcher at the Center for Research and Teaching in Economics in Mexico, describes how media coverage presented gang members "as deviant outsiders and a danger to society" and "defined the gang problem as stemming from individual character deficiencies rather than from social conditions." The coverage also presented *mano dura* as successful and paid little attention to its shortcomings. Ultimately, Wolf writes, "the Salvadoran press acted as willing amplifiers of a moral panic driven by the government and law enforcement."

ARENA won the 2004 presidential elections, allowing Antonio Saca to succeed Flores, who was not able to run for re-election because Salvadoran presidents cannot serve consecutive terms. Shortly after taking office, Saca introduced a new security policy known as “*Super Mano Dura*.” It was the first sign that a pattern was emerging: Every administration since Flores’ has embraced some form of *mano dura*, in substance if not in name.

### **MS-13: An American Export**

The rhetoric that took root in El Salvador around suspected gang members harkens back to moral panics around crime in the United States. The obsessive focus on the gangs as the focal point of societal ills recalls alarm over “squeegee men” in New York City under former Mayor Rudolph Giuliani or the “super-predators” that Hillary Clinton infamously warned about as first lady in the 1990s.

***Aided by the media, Salvadoran authorities have convinced much of the country that gangs are the biggest threat it faces.***

Identifying particular groups as representing a paramount threat, and then arguing that special policing and judicial policies are necessary to protect the public from them, is the same approach that led the U.S. to adopt zero-tolerance policies and “broken windows” policing more than a decade before they appeared in El Salvador. Whereas zero-tolerance policies involved frequent arrests and long prison sentences, “broken windows” referred to the aggressive prosecution of minor infractions that were believed to be gateways to violent crimes. Both ruined relationships between communities and the state and resulted in overcrowded prisons.

Over the years, various journalists and researchers have established more explicit links between American and Salvadoran approaches to fighting crime. For example, Jose Miguel Cruz, a Salvadoran political scientist who has been tracking approaches to gang violence in both countries for more than two decades, has written that El Salvador’s anti-gang laws were “inspired by the zero tolerance policy—oriented more toward penalizing wrong than preventing

it—that had been implemented in several North American Cities” like New York and Los Angeles.

Those who lived in Los Angeles during the heyday of America’s embrace of zero tolerance and broken windows policing know its harmful effects all too well. Carmelo Alvarez, an L.A. native, saw how the policies contributed both directly and indirectly to the problems El Salvador faces today. In the early 1980s, Alvarez **founded Radiotron**, one of the first hip-hop clubs on the West Coast. He grew Radiotron into an ad-hoc community center that taught breakdancing, graffiti, rapping and a host of other undeniably cool, competitive group pastimes that kept kids from joining gangs, and even got some who had already joined to leave. About half of his kids were Salvadoran war refugees, he estimates. Alvarez also taught a course on human rights and cultural sensitivity to officers from the Los Angeles Police Department.

In the 1990s, Alvarez watched as LAPD officers conducted mass sweeps in areas of the city where gangs held territory, often interrupting his programming to line up, interrogate and beat his kids. “The story was: Salvadoran kids fled war to get beat up by cops,” he told me when we met at an IHOP in L.A. Sometimes Alvarez himself was forced to his knees and searched after officers stormed Radiotron.

Public panic at the time around anything even tangentially related to gangs drove much of this aggressive policing, he says. The abuses were compounded by the fact that police officers saw things like graffiti as inherently criminal rather than as vehicles for self-expression. “It’s a self-portrait in letter form,” Alvarez says. “They’re not in the business of getting that. They’re in the business of arresting people. There’s that history of the criminalization of youth.”

By the mid-1990s, his kids started to get deported. Alvarez said he watched patrols drive by and point out suspected Salvadoran gang members to immigration officials, who would detain them. Some of these youths did have ties to MS-13, and would continue gang activity after they arrived in El Salvador. “The LAPD exported MS to El Salvador,” he says, referring to MS-13. “When I say that, I mean I witnessed it. It happened.”

The LAPD today recognizes that zero tolerance was a failure. “The war on gangs gave us exactly the opposite of what we wanted,” says Michael Downing, who was a young cop in L.A. when zero-tolerance policies were at their most

popular and rose to become deputy chief of the department. “It was awful. It isolated communities. It broke down any trust we had with communities. We were seen as an occupying army. If you’re always in the role of warrior, everything is a state of fear, and that’s not what democratic societies should represent.”

Yet some American policymakers continue to tout zero-tolerance policing. One of its most visible advocates, Giuliani, who built his political career on it, also helped legitimize the approach in El Salvador. The year after completing his final term as New York’s mayor in 2001, he founded a global security consulting firm, Giuliani Partners LLC. In 2015, after being hired as a consultant by a conservative alliance of private firms in El Salvador, he **came to the country** and announced that he had a recipe to keep its citizens safe. “These two gangs need to be annihilated,” he said, referring to MS-13 and the two factions that make up its main rival, Barrio 18 Sureños and Barrio 18 Revolucionarios.



*U.S. Attorney General Jeff Sessions walks past a cell during a tour of a local police station, San Salvador, El Salvador, July 27, 2017 (AP photo by Pablo Martinez Monsivais).*

Salvadoran journalist Gabriel Labrador **noted at the time** that Giuliani made statements and offered ideas that echoed the security plans and strategies that were already being implemented. One of the architects of *mano dura* in El Salvador, Francisco Bertrand Galindo, who was the minister of security when it was first implemented, told Labrador that Giuliani had come to bolster support for what was in place.

With Donald Trump in the White House, Salvadoran authorities are receiving even more encouragement from the U.S. to continue with *mano dura*. “Let me state this clearly,” Attorney General Jeff Sessions said last April. “Under President Trump, the Justice Department has zero tolerance for gang violence.” Three months later, Sessions traveled to El Salvador to applaud the anti-gang work of his Salvadoran counterparts, calling a recent mass raid of suspected gang members an “inspiration.” In meetings with President Salvador Sanchez Ceren and Attorney General Douglas Melendez, Sessions reportedly asked the leaders to “place an emphasis” on combating gangs.

While Sessions was in El Salvador, Trump went to Long Island, New York, where he proclaimed in a speech that members of MS-13 are “animals” and that the gang is fed by undocumented migrants who come to the U.S. fleeing violence in Central America, an argument he later repeated in his 2018 State of the Union speech. Salvadoran journalist Oscar Martinez, who went to Long Island shortly after Trump did, said **history is repeating itself**: Zero-tolerance policies in America are criminalizing young Salvadoran immigrants, resulting in deportations and a repressive atmosphere that fuels gang recruitment. The Trump administration is implementing the same tactics that gave rise to the gang problem in El Salvador in the first place.

### ***Mano Dura's Political Power***

Since the implementation of *mano dura*, violence in El Salvador has skyrocketed, and the country has become the homicide capital of the world. In 2015, according to Reyna’s report, the total number of murders reached a high of 6,657; in 2016, it fell slightly, to 5,278. Gangs are also targeting police officers and their families with increasing frequency. In 2014, more than 30 police officers were killed. That number doubled in 2015, and 20 soldiers, who patrol the streets alongside police officers, were also killed.

Yet few politicians in El Salvador have taken a public stance against *mano dura*. Parties on both the right and the left continue to profess faith in zero tolerance. These statements, however, are insincere, as these same politicians have also



used the gangs as machines to get votes. Court testimony and leaked audio and video have implicated both ARENA and the FMLN in arrangements in which they promise gang leaders favors in exchange for their support. Gangs, after all, hold sway over thousands of citizens, and winning gang support can be an effective political strategy.

As political parties fine-tune their messaging ahead of the 2018 legislative and 2019 presidential elections, the demonization of gangs will play a prominent role. While the FMLN touts its security policies and doubles down on Extraordinary Measures, ARENA and other parties on the right are promising basically the same thing. Billboards for the conservative party Grand Alliance for National Unity, for example, promise to declare a “state of emergency and the death penalty to finish off the gangs.”

## ***Those who denounce the dark side of mano dura are frequently accused of supporting gangs.***

Those who denounce the dark side of *mano dura* and keep records of extrajudicial murders are frequently accused of supporting gangs. The few lawyers, journalists and human rights advocates in the country willing to document government abuse strongly suspect they are the targets of unauthorized electronic surveillance by the intelligence services, which sometimes they are able to prove.

In a society that has been sold the benefits of *mano dura* for more than a decade, many Salvadorans equate police brutality with public safety. A 2017 study on citizen confidence in the police, published by the University of Central America in San Salvador and Florida International University, found that 40 percent of respondents supported torture against people involved in organized crime, and 40 percent also approved of police breaking the law if necessary when capturing criminals.

But El Salvador’s gangs are arguably stronger than ever. According to a 2017 study published by Florida International University, young people say they join gangs for the same reasons they did more than 20 years ago: domestic violence, lack of education, limited employment opportunities and rundown



neighborhoods, among other economic and social problems. *Mano dura* ignores all of that.

The situation will persist until the political beneficiaries of *mano dura* are willing to recognize its defects. Until then, civilians, especially those who suffer, shoulder the task of resistance. Adonis Ramos is a 23-year-old university student whose father, a police officer, was killed by MS-13 in the rural region of Bajo Lempa, where the family lived, in 2015. “My dad was my superhero,” he said in an interview over Skype from a country in Europe, where the family has fled as refugees. “I wanted the gang members who killed my dad to die. But killing them isn’t a solution,” he says. “These structures exist because of an unjust economic order. The kids in my community who joined—they weren’t born violent. The whole environment they live in is violent. It’s sick.”

He understands, though, why it’s hard for many people to look past vengeance when they’re grieving a death at the hands of a gang. Policy is the last thing on their minds. “It’s not easy to maintain your reason,” he says, “when you’re emotional because they’ve killed your dad.”

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# Bukele's Election Represents a New Era in El Salvador—and a Chance for Trump



*El Salvador's president-elect, Nayib Bukele, at a press conference in San Salvador, El Salvador, Feb. 3, 2019 (AP photo by Moises Castillo).*

Frida Ghitis | Feb. 14, 2019

Is there any chance that President Donald Trump would see the recent election in tiny El Salvador as an opportunity to take a different, more humane approach to his campaign against the influx of migrants and asylum-seekers from Central America? That seems

like a very long shot, but Trump would do well to consider the possibility.

In the presidential election earlier this month, Salvadorans sent a powerful message to their own leaders—one that may also just hold a key to reversing the stream of desperate families pouring out of their country toward the United States. At the very least, El Salvador has an opportunity to ease the human suffering that propels impoverished families to leave it all behind and risk the dangerous trek north. And in an unlikely turn, the election has created an opening for Trump.

Salvadoran voters broke sharply with tradition on Feb. 3 and chose 37-year-old Nayib Bukele as **their next president**. In doing so, they cracked the 30-year-old monopoly held by the two main parties, relics of the brutal civil war of the 1980s, which have dominated politics as the heirs to the Cold War-era combatants. The National Republican Alliance, or ARENA, inherited the rightist mantle of the militias allied with the U.S. during the civil war. The Farabundo Marti National Liberation Front, or FMLN, became the party of the left, transforming a Marxist guerrilla movement into a socialist political one.

But voters lost interest in the ideological combat. Instead, they saw what the parties had in common: **corruption and incompetence**. That's why Bukele, the former mayor of the capital, took El Salvador by storm. He promised a pragmatic assault on the country's problems. He will take office in June, when he'll immediately face a mountain of daunting, urgent problems. He has not been thoroughly tested, and he is hardly the first to win an election by vowing to bring clean government, security and prosperity. But his ideas so far are encouraging, and they need international support to have a chance.

If Trump is genuinely concerned with the flow of asylum-seekers into the U.S., he should provide support to Bukele and the Salvadoran people to help test the president-elect's plans and give them a chance to succeed. By electing Bukele in a surprising landslide, El Salvador has unexpectedly given Trump an opportunity to show he is capable of a sensible, compassionate policy toward Central American immigration, rather than a policy focused exclusively on the U.S. border, separating families and promising a wall.

The strongest message from voters in this nation of 6 million is that the old ideological divisions of left versus right no longer reflect the concerns of the people. Salvadorans, like their neighbors in Guatemala and Honduras, suffer from some of the **highest murder rates** in the world. That violence adds a crippling dose of fear to their grinding poverty, made worse by the knowledge that so many of the leaders meant to be working to solve the crises are stealing from the country.

Bukele is a newcomer to national politics with a very vague ideological track record. He ran under the banner of the Grand National Alliance, or GANA, a spinoff of ARENA. But not long ago, he belonged to the leftist FMLN. He is a product of the new era, which transcends the old divisions.

***Salvadorans sent a powerful message to their own leaders—one that may also hold a key to reversing the stream of desperate families pouring out of their country.***

A former public relations executive, Bukele is a master of branding. In a leather jacket and blue jeans, slicked back hair and thick beard, he

stayed away from the presidential debates and campaigned vigorously on social media. His slogan— “There’s enough money when no one is stealing”—rang true with voters disillusioned after seeing presidents from both parties prosecuted for corruption.

To be sure, his anti-corruption campaign is reminiscent of others who have disappointed. A few years ago, the television comedian Jimmy Morales won the presidency in Guatemala with his own catchy slogan against graft: “Neither corrupt nor a thief.” Now, he and his family are under investigation for various corruption allegations, and he’s trying to shut down the international commission that made anti-corruption investigations possible in Guatemala.

There’s no way to know how Bukele will govern, but his proposals so far deserve support. Most notable among them is his call to create a Salvadoran version of the U.N.-backed anti-corruption commission in Guatemala. Known as CICIG, that panel of jurists helped Guatemala improve the rule of law, uncover corruption and prosecute powerful figures, even bringing indictments, prosecutions and jail terms for top officials, including a sitting president. Little wonder, perhaps, that Morales [wants to shut it down](#).

Bukele wants an [International Commission Against Impunity](#) in El Salvador that would look for graft in both ARENA and FMLN governments. Those who stole, he vowed, will have to return what they took. The ultimate goal is to strengthen Salvadoran institutions so they can eventually function effectively on their own.

On the urgent matter of security, Bukele wants to launch programs to tackle rampant gang violence. The high murder rate—one of the reasons so many people are fleeing the country—is the result of [brutal gangs](#) that were established in the United States and, following mass deportations, set up operations in Central America.

Bukele wants to improve policing and boost salaries to curtail bribes. He proposes youth programs to help former gang members reintegrate in society. And he promises to boost economic growth by launching infrastructure projects to create jobs, investment and economic activity.

He also wants better relations with the United States. This is a golden opportunity for El Salvador—and Washington. If the Trump administration offers support to Bukele early on, it could encourage him to keep to his plans, instead of straying in the direction of his corrupt predecessors. Bukele has rejected autocracy of all stripes, calling out the presidents of Venezuela, Nicaragua and Honduras, and refusing to recognize Nicolas Maduro's presidency. "A dictator is a dictator," [he tweeted](#), "From the 'right' or the 'left.'"

There's no guarantee that this seemingly hip new president will solve El Salvador's complex and deeply rooted problems. But by breaking with the parties that squandered three decades and managed only to enrich themselves, Salvadoran voters have declared themselves ready to give Bukele a chance. They've also given the Trump administration a chance to prove it really wants to do what it takes to help Central Americans live safely at home, so they don't need to escape just to stay alive.

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# After Honduras' Election Crisis, Protesters Are Still in the State's Crosshairs

Heather Gies | March 2, 2018

Eduardo Enrique Urbina Ayala was shocked to see his face and name making the rounds on social media, in posts that framed him as the person responsible for setting fire to a military truck during a protest at the height of Honduras' post-election crisis in December. The 22-year-old activist had left the country five days before the vehicle went up in flames.



*A demonstrator kicks a tear gas canister during the swearing-in of Honduran President Juan Orlando Hernandez, Tegucigalpa, Honduras, Jan. 27, 2018 (AP photo by Eduardo Verdugo).*

“I was already in Costa Rica,” Urbina told me over Skype from an undisclosed Costa Rican city. “I have everything documented in my passport ... It’s proof from the state itself.”

Nineteen days after Honduras’ contested Nov. 26. election, with no official results but plenty of suspicions of fraud, a young man **set fire to a military vehicle** during opposition protests in the capital city Tegucigalpa. It came as thousands took to the streets for the third consecutive week of mostly peaceful protests across the country to reject what they said was a stolen election to consolidate a creeping dictatorship under President Juan Orlando Hernandez. The same day, state forces opened fire on protesters, killing two in the industrial capital of San Pedro Sula and nearby Villanueva.

Despite the rising death toll, tipping over 20 at the time and **now at least 38**, authorities and local corporate media focused on the image of the flame-licked truck.

The online smear campaign—widely suspected to be the work of the state or its supporters—included Urbina’s photo, full name, home address, state identification number, telephone number, political affiliations and date of birth. Authorities **issued a warrant** for Urbina’s arrest on Dec. 19 on charges of aggravated arson and use of explosives. Although the Committee of Relatives of the Disappeared in Honduras, a human rights organization known as COFADEH, **debunked the accusations** by documenting Urbina’s Dec. 10 exit from the country, it remains unclear whether the warrant will be rescinded.

“The Honduran enemy suddenly had a face,” Urbina says of the smear campaign. “I fear for my life if I return to Honduras.”

He is hardly alone. According to local human rights groups, more than 60 activists and protesters are at risk nationwide after their names and faces **circulated on social media** or in pamphlets during the post-election crisis accusing them of links to organized crime, violence and other offenses. There are also reports of police and other security forces entering communities with lists and profiles of activists to detain or intimidate.

Human rights organizations say this is all part of a broader campaign, coordinated with Honduran state intelligence, aimed at discrediting anti-government activists and criminalizing their movements. “What we are seeing is political persecution,” says Bertha Oliva, the coordinator of COFADEH.

Campaigns like the one that targeted Urbina are not without precedent. They have tended to single out prominent leaders with national profiles, like the outspoken Jesuit priest Ismael Moreno, better known as Padre Melo, who [was accused of drug-trafficking links in January](#). But now, local activists are being targeted more.

“We are in extremely dangerous times,” Oliva says. “The pamphlets don’t only have the purpose of creating fear, but of creating confusion and taking action.”

Such action could be fatal. In the early hours of Jan. 1, gunmen [shot dead Wilmer Paredes](#), who had demonstrated against electoral fraud in the northern town of San Juan Pueblo, where repression of protests was particularly brutal. Paredes had reportedly been cast as a protest leader.

Bertha Zuniga, the daughter of Berta Caceres, the renowned indigenous leader whose March 2016 murder put Honduras’ human rights situation in the international spotlight, says that although many of accusations against activists are “absurd,” the dangers are real. “What worries us is that this is always an antecedent to direct attacks, like [what happened to my mom](#),” she adds.

## ***The creation, with U.S. support, of new military and elite police forces in Honduras has fueled fears of a return to the era of death squads.***

In [an interview in late January](#) with Radio Progreso, a former Honduran army captain, Santos Orellana Rodriguez, said that Honduras’ military intelligence is behind the campaigns to disparage protesters and opposition leaders. “It’s no secret.”

The tactics are all too reminiscent of Honduras’ Cold War-era “national security doctrine,” used to justify a broad military crackdown on anyone deemed a peril to national security, including students, trade unionists, campesino leaders and suspected sympathizers of armed insurgencies in neighboring countries. As Honduras, backed by millions of dollars in U.S. assistance, served as the staging

ground for American counterinsurgency strategy in Central America, the secret military unit Battalion 3-16—jointly trained by the CIA and forces from Argentina and Pinochet’s Chile—killed or “disappeared” at least 184 people from 1980 to 1988 and tortured many more.

For Oliva, whose husband was disappeared in 1981, the human rights situation today isn’t only a reminder of those death squads. It may be worse, since there is more state coordination today. The concentration of executive power over public institutions since the 2009 coup, she said, has enabled the government to disguise injustices in carefully crafted discourses of democracy, human rights and the rule of law.

Battalion 3-16 terrorized Hondurans in the name of a war against the alleged threat of communism. Now, similar forms of militarized state terror are rolled out under the guise of battling gangs and violence that proliferated under conditions of generalized impunity brought on with the coup. The creation, with U.S. support, of a slew of new military and elite police forces, recently deployed to clamp down on protests, has added to fears of a return to the era of death squads.

Oliva’s organization describes the elite U.S.-funded and trained TIGRES police force, created in 2013, as a “crude resurrection” of Battalion 3-16. The interagency task force FUSINA, launched in 2014, has raised alarms for bringing multiple police and government functions under direct military control with U.S.-enhanced intelligence capabilities. Opacity around military spending, enshrined in the 2014 Secrecy Law that restricts access to budget information, has exacerbated these concerns.

Meanwhile, Hernandez’s allies in Congress have built an institutional framework to silence dissent, including the 2017 Anti-Terrorism Law that criminalizes protest as a terrorist act. “All they are missing is the death sentence,” Oliva says.

Among the more than 60 activists targeted in state smear campaigns, Urbina was one of the lucky ones, since he got out of the country. Most are like Edwin Espinal, who was detained on Jan. 19 hours ahead of a nationwide protest against election fraud. Accused of masterminding vandalism to the Marriott Hotel in Tegucigalpa during an opposition march that was met with harsh repression, he is awaiting trial in a maximum-security prison, charged with arson and property destruction.

Government critics believe infiltrators are to blame for such incidents. Orellana Rodriguez, the former army captain, admitted that military intelligence and counterintelligence are routinely used to provoke chaos, vandalism and confrontations with police in order to discredit demonstrators.

Zuniga, who has suffered harassment and threats as the coordinator of the Council of Popular and Indigenous Organizations of Honduras, which her mother co-founded more than two decades ago, calls the resistance in the face of repression “daring.” And she is still optimistic: “This electoral crisis could be the door to generate deeper institutional change.”

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# Why Guatemala's Anti-Corruption Commission Faces a New Wave of Efforts to Derail It



*A protest against Guatemalan President Jimmy Morales at Constitution Square, Guatemala City, April 21, 2018 (AP photo by Moises Castillo).*

Kate Doyle, Elizabeth Oglesby | May 23, 2018

A new attorney general **took office** in Guatemala last week amid sharp tensions over the role of a United Nations-backed anti-corruption commission that has helped bring high-profile charges against some of the country's most powerful politicians. Maria Consuelo Porras, a former substitute judge for Guatemala's Constitutional Court, will run the country's Public Ministry and



direct its criminal, human rights and anti-corruption investigations. The outgoing attorney general, Thelma Aldana, and her predecessor, Claudia Paz y Paz Bailey, showed impressive leadership and independence in investigating and prosecuting these sorts of cases. Now their enemies want those advances reversed.

Across Central America, public prosecutors are **taking on a key role** in investigating and dismantling deeply rooted organized criminal networks. But Guatemala's widening corruption probe, which **brought down a sitting president**, Otto Perez Molina, in 2015 and threatens to implicate the current president, Jimmy Morales, as well as scores of others, has **triggered a backlash** from entrenched economic and political elites who want to protect themselves from future investigations.

Foes of the U.N. anti-impunity commission, known as CICIG for its initials in Spanish, seemed to score a hit in early May, when U.S. Senator Marco Rubio announced he would seek to **freeze \$6 million** in U.S. funding for CICIG. The United States provides about 40 percent of the commission's funding. Rubio's announcement came days after the U.S. Helsinki Commission, a federal agency, **held a hearing** on CICIG's alleged malfeasance in a case in Guatemala involving the wealthy Bitkov family.

The Bitkovs are self-proclaimed Russian exiles **convicted in Guatemala** in January 2018 of identity fraud as part of a broader probe against a criminal ring within the Guatemalan immigration office that is accused of selling false passports. In April, a higher court in Guatemala overturned the Bitkovs' conviction. Despite accusations raised during the recent congressional hearing in Washington, there is no evidence of Russian government influence over CICIG in the Bitkov case or any other case in Guatemala. CICIG does not receive funding from Russia.

The Bitkov controversy is really just a sideshow, a piece of a much larger lobbying effort spearheaded by conservative political and economic sectors within Guatemala to discredit and weaken the anti-corruption commission. Why do these sectors oppose CICIG, and how have they won a U.S. senator's support? Will Guatemala's new attorney general **cooperate with CICIG** even when it means pursuing politically sensitive cases?

CICIG was created in 2006 at the request of the Guatemalan government and with the support of the United Nations. Its **mandate** is to help investigate and

bring to justice cases of corruption and criminality, including drug-trafficking, graft, money-laundering, tax evasion and other financial crimes. CICIG provides technical assistance to the Guatemalan Public Ministry and can serve as an “adjunct prosecutor” in select cases.

## ***Marco Rubio’s intervention against Guatemala’s U.N.-backed anti-corruption commission may further destabilize the political situation in the country.***

Many of CICIG’s early cases focused on Guatemala’s so-called “**hidden powers**,” shadowy criminal networks that gained influence during the decades of military dictatorship and counterinsurgency warfare in Guatemala. Active and retired military personnel, particularly those linked to army intelligence, used their government connections to expand their illicit activities, such as moving contraband and illegal drugs, facilitating illegal adoptions and human smuggling, issuing false government documents, and skimming hundreds of millions of dollars from public coffers. CICIG’s work **accelerated after 2013** under the direction of Ivan Velasquez, a veteran prosecutor from Colombia who is now the target of attacks by those threatened by the commission.

The lobbying effort to discredit CICIG got serious in December 2016 after Donald Trump was elected U.S. president, and CICIG’s foes within Guatemala thought they had an opening. A group of right-wing businesspeople **went to Washington** for meetings in Congress to call for the removal of then-U.S. Ambassador Todd Robinson, whom they saw as overstepping his diplomatic role by vigorously defending CICIG. One of them was Betty Marroquin, a conservative columnist and political analyst, who has since played a leading role in the anti-CICIG campaign. The lobbying escalated during Trump’s first year in office, as four Guatemalan congressmen **hired the law firm Barnes & Thornburg**—already under contract to represent President Morales, who faces corruption charges of his own—for \$80,000 a month to help them lobby U.S. lawmakers.

Last August, Morales **tried to expel Velasquez**, after CICIG and the Public Ministry linked him to illicit campaign financing and sought impeachment

proceedings. The president's maneuver was **blocked by the Constitutional Court** and **condemned internationally**, including by bipartisan congressional leaders in the United States. In February, Guatemalan Foreign Minister Sandra Jovel tried—and failed—to convince U.N. Secretary-General Antonio Guterres to issue a statement condemning Velasquez's leadership of CICIG. Velasquez has been widely praised by Guatemalan civil society and by the international community.

Although some news outlets **reported**, erroneously, that Rubio had succeeded in suspending U.S. funding for CICIG this month, in fact, American support for the commission remains intact. Rubio's "hold" on funding is just a request that is not likely to go anywhere in Congress. The anti-graft commission continues to be praised by U.S. lawmakers, the State Department and the new U.S. ambassador in Guatemala City. Guterres offered his continued support for Velasquez shortly after last month's misguided and sparsely attended hearing in Congress.

CICIG is seen as a model for anti-corruption efforts elsewhere in Central America and even Mexico. A bipartisan bloc of U.S. lawmakers consider these anti-corruption measures key to addressing perceived American security threats in Central America, such as transnational crime and migration. Public opinion in Guatemala is also strongly in favor of CICIG; a recent survey by the respected pollster Latinobarometro found that CICIG is the **most trusted institution in Guatemala**.

Rubio's intervention is not likely to make a dent in U.S. support for CICIG. But it may further destabilize the political situation in Guatemala. Less than a week after Rubio's announcement, the Guatemalan government demanded that Sweden **withdraw its ambassador** to Guatemala, Anders Kompass, after Kompass announced a new round of Swedish financial support for CICIG and praised the anti-corruption efforts.

Guatemala's new attorney general is entering a volatile political scene. Just days before Porras took office, prosecutors in Guatemala **presented new evidence** against Morales.

Porras' **prior career**, during which she held several positions within the Public Ministry before becoming an appellate judge, does not mark her as a crusader. She was named to her post by Morales from a slate of other candidates. Certainly, she will face intense pressure from entrenched elites to slow or even

reverse the gains made in prosecuting organized crime in Guatemala. Then again, human rights groups had the same doubts about Porras' predecessor, Thelma Aldana, who nonetheless unleashed a wave of high-level cases.

The reactionary forces of the status quo in Guatemala are well-heeled and accustomed to winning. But Guatemala's citizens are increasingly emboldened to demand justice and an end to impunity for crimes and corruption. They deserve the support of Americans, and their elected representatives.

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# What Life Is Really Like on Mexico's Migrant Trail

Joseph Sorrentino | Nov. 29, 2018

MEXICO CITY—Geovanni Martinez Hernandez fled Honduras after being threatened by one of the most vicious gangs in the Americas: Mara Salvatrucha, also known as MS-13. “It was because of my sexual orientation,” said Martinez Hernandez, who is gay. “I just want a place where I can live without being abused, where I can walk without discrimination or fear.” He had hoped to find that in Mexico. But, while traveling alone in late May through Tapachula, a city in far southwestern Mexico bordering Guatemala that is one of the first stops for Central American migrants and asylum-seekers making the trek north to the U.S. border, he was attacked and raped by four men.





*Central Americans riding atop a freight train in Ixtepec, Mexico, in 2012. Since a Mexican government crackdown, scenes like this are rare (Photo by Joseph Sorrentino).*

In the run-up to the U.S. midterm elections, President Donald Trump whipped up fear about migrant caravans hundreds of miles from the U.S. border, calling Central Americans seeking asylum in the United States an “invasion.” Much of the American media went along, devoting extensive and often breathless coverage to the caravans, even though they are only a small portion of the estimated 400,000 Central Americans who enter Mexico “irregularly” each year. The majority of these migrants and asylum-seekers are still traveling alone or in small groups through Mexico, just as Trump has turned his attention back to the southern border, where American troops have been mobilized and border patrol agents this week **fired tear gas** on a crowd of migrants, many of them children and women, approaching a border crossing in Tijuana.

While there aren’t specific figures about attacks against LGBT persons, either from the Mexican government or NGOs, it’s estimated that some 70 percent of migrants will be **assaulted** during their trip through Mexico, and a **staggering 80 percent** of women **will be raped**. Amnesty International **estimates** that 20,000 migrants are kidnapped every year in Mexico, generating \$50 million dollars for criminal gangs. The journey is horrific and people undertaking it are under no illusions about the dangers they’ll face. But they take the risk because conditions in their home countries are such that, as one human rights advocate **told me** in 2015, “They think, ‘If I stay [in my country], I will die, if I go I may die.’ They choose between certain and possible death.”

The countries they’re fleeing, primarily Guatemala, Honduras and El Salvador, are among the most violent in the world. MS-13 and another gang, Barrio 18 or the 18th Street gang, murder, kidnap and rape with impunity. “If you report something to the police,” Santos Molina Campos, a Salvadoran traveling through Mexico recently, told me, “I don’t know how a gang knows, but they make you disappear. Or they hurt your family.” Gangs also collect extortion money.

Alan Cristobal Garcia and Sandra Patricia Velasquez, a Honduran couple staying in a shelter in Tapachula, were paying almost half of their income to MS-13 just to live in their home when a gang member told Garcia he had to start selling drugs for the gang. The couple fled. When asked what would happen if they stayed after he refused to sell drugs, Garcia slowly drew a finger across his neck.



*Central Americans crossing the Rio Suchiate on a raft, to avoid the official entry point just a short walk away, in Ciudad Hidalgo, Mexico, June 22, 2016 (Photo by Joseph Sorrentino).*

A river, the Rio Suchiate, marks the border between Guatemala and Mexico, and most migrants cross it on rafts, avoiding official entry points. The trip costs 20 pesos, or about \$1. Garcia and Velasquez didn't have the money, so they swam across—in July, during the rainy season, when the river is deep and the current strong.

“It takes about 15 or 20 minutes,” Garcia told me. “It is dangerous, but we did it out of necessity because we cannot stay in our country.” They also did it despite Velasquez being pregnant. Shortly after they reached the Mexican side of the river, they were robbed by several men carrying machetes. “They took our backpacks and clothes,” Velasquez said.

Until recently, after entering Mexico, the majority of migrants and asylum-seekers would then ride the freight trains north that they collectively call La Bestia, or The Beast. Riding the trains is dangerous—people are assaulted, others fall off, and many go for days without food or water. But the presence of

hundreds of people on the trains has provided some protection, in terms of safety in numbers.

In August 2014, Mexico enacted the Southern Border Program, which the government claimed would protect migrants. What it has actually done is prevented many of them from riding La Bestia. Police and immigration agents stop migrants from boarding trains or forcibly remove them. As part of the program, roadblocks have also been set up along migrant routes. Police stop buses and look for migrants to either deport or extort. Train companies have hired private security, known as *custodios*, to ride the trains; they also assault migrants.

## ***Central Americans know that Trump’s policies have made it virtually impossible to obtain asylum in the U.S., and many are now applying for asylum in Mexico.***

“*Custodios* made us get off the train,” Ronnie Serrato, who fled Honduras to escape MS-13, told me last year. I met him in the Sagrada Familia shelter in Apizaco, outside Mexico City. “They made us kneel,” he explained, and “had guns on us. If anyone had money, they took it.” Police, immigration agents and private security have also been implicated in a number of murders of migrants and asylum-seekers. Their presence on or around the freight trains has forced many Central Americans to walk much of the way through Mexico.

Alex Serrano Murcic, a Honduran staying in a shelter in Mexico City, said he walked up to 10 hours a day. “I often saw Mexican immigration [agents] and if you are traveling irregularly, they want money,” he said. “So when I saw them, I ran.” Others, like Martinez Hernandez—who, despite the attack in Tapachula, continued north—both walk and travel by bus.

“There were times I had to get off the bus because there was an *operativo* ahead,” he said, referring to roadblocks where police check for migrants. “Once, all the migrants had to get off the bus and walk around a mountain. We walked for three hours or so.” On two occasions, he paid police so he could continue on his way.



Shelters set up for migrants in Mexico's capital and other cities initially housed them for a short time, and most only stayed a day or two. But Central Americans know that Trump's policies have made it virtually impossible to obtain asylum in the U.S., and many are now applying for asylum in Mexico. They often stay in shelters during the application process, which takes at least six months. Longer stays can strain nerves. "It's the waiting," said Oscar Fernandez, a Guatemalan in a shelter in Ixtepec, a small city in Oaxaca. "You don't eat what you want to eat. It's like you're locked up. Some days I'm stressed out, I want to go back home."



*Private security guards known as custodios ride atop a train car to keep migrants and asylum-seekers from boarding it, Apizaco, Mexico, February 5, 2015 (Photo by Joseph Sorrentino).*

Larger shelters usually have enough resources but smaller ones may not. In a small shelter in the city of Oaxaca, there were days recently when meals were skipped, but residents took it in stride. As Marcos, a young Salvadoran, told me **last year**, "I'd rather be hungry here, than there where they will kill me."

Rather than a Trojan Horse for criminals and even terrorists, as the Trump administration has bogusly claimed, the caravans have been a way for Central Americans seeking asylum or a better life to protect each other while making the journey north. “When there are fewer people traveling, they are more vulnerable,” said Gabriela Hernandez, the director of Tochan, a shelter in Mexico City. “It is very dangerous for migrants. The caravans are guaranteeing security.”

Human rights advocates believe migrants and asylum-seekers will continue to travel in caravans, but they are not as welcome in Mexico as they were initially. The caravan currently stuck in Tijuana is facing backlash, and not just in the form of **tear gas**. Another caravan was stopped by Mexican police and immigration agents in Chiapas on Nov. 21. Its members are expected to be deported.

If this continues, Central Americans will almost certainly start traveling alone again, with all the risks that entails. But a young Honduran man in Ixtepec, who was only just embarking on this dangerous journey, shrugged them off. “We all know we are going to die,” he said. “Here or there, it does not matter.”

*Editor’s Note: The names of some interviewees have been changed to protect their identities.*

*Joseph Sorrentino is a freelance journalist and photographer currently based in Mexico City. Funding for this article has been made possible by the Puffin Foundation.*

# Shut Out of the U.S., Central American Asylum-Seekers See Mexico as a Last Resort



*An asylum-seeker at the Hermanos en el Camino shelter studies a map of Mexico, Ixtepec, Oaxaca, June 17, 2016 (Photo by Joseph Sorrentino).*

Joseph Sorrentino | Dec. 21, 2018

Mexico, once viewed mainly as a country of transit for Central Americans fleeing violence in Guatemala, Honduras and El Salvador, has increasingly become a destination, according to the United Nations. The number of Central Americans applying for asylum in Mexico **increased** from 3,400 in 2015 to 14,600 in 2017. Francesca Fontanini, the regional spokesperson for the United Nations refugee agency, UNHCR, said that there were 14,000 applications in



the first six months of 2018 alone. But for most Central Americans, Mexico really isn't a country of destination. It's a country of last resort.

Between 400,000 and 500,000 Central Americans enter Mexico "irregularly" each year—that is, without passing through an official point of entry. The majority are from Central America's Northern Triangle of Guatemala, Honduras and El Salvador; until recently, they were hoping to reach the United States. But President Donald Trump's draconian immigration and refugee policies have made it virtually impossible to even enter the U.S., let alone to qualify for asylum. For many Central Americans, returning home could be a death sentence.

"It is like I am forced to stay," Vicente Olivares, a Honduran living in Mexico City, told me recently. "All Central Americans are. You cannot cross into the U.S., cannot go home. I have no other choice." But applying for asylum in Mexico is another ordeal entirely.

Because the majority of Central Americans are fleeing generalized violence, they should qualify for asylum, according to the UNHCR. But few know they have that right. If a Central American is stopped by Mexican immigration agents, the agent is supposed to inform them they have the right to apply for asylum. But an Amnesty International investigation found that 75 percent of people detained by Mexican immigration agents weren't told that.

"We found that within detention centers, immigration agents were telling people not to apply for asylum because they would have to stay in detention longer," says Claudia Leon Ang, the advocacy coordinator at the Service of Jesuits to Migrants in Mexico City. Those who don't apply for asylum are deported, and few people want to stay longer in the centers, where families are separated. "They are worse than prisons," Ang adds. "Bad food, dirty rooms, worms in food, cockroaches in rooms, mattresses on the floor."

Victor Manuel Torres, a Salvadoran, was in Siglo XXI, a detention center in Tapachula, Chiapas, with his wife and four children when they initially applied for asylum. "We were locked up for five months," Torres told me when I interviewed him as he waited for his asylum application to be processed in Tapachula. "We were separated. My kids, they did not want to eat. I had to decide: my kids' health or go back to Salvador." Despite the risks, they returned to El Salvador briefly, and then, like many Central Americans, re-entered Mexico but avoided immigration agents. The family went directly to a Commission

Apoyo a Migrantes, or COMAR, office in Tapachula where they re-applied for asylum.



*Central American asylum-seekers waiting outside a COMAR office in the early morning, Tapachula, Chiapas, June 26, 2016 (Photo by Joseph Sorrentino).*

Applying for asylum in Mexico is supposed to take 45 working days, but now, because of the number of applicants, “it takes about a year,” says Gabriela Hernandez, the director of Tochan, a shelter for migrants in Mexico City. Because of the long wait and abysmal conditions for many awaiting asylum in Mexico, some ask to be deported.

All asylum-seekers must sign in weekly at a COMAR office, proving they’re still in the country. There are only four COMAR offices in Mexico, so some people must take a two-hour trip to reach one. The wait at the COMAR office in Mexico City may only be an hour, but it can stretch for several hours in Tapachula, a steep hurdle for a migrant seeking work in Mexico. “It is hard to get a job because I have to miss Mondays,” his sign-in day, Torres explains. “I went to an interview and he said, ‘If you want a job, forget about COMAR.’ So now I have to find another job.”

Many Central American asylum-seekers end up working in the informal economy, where the pay is low and the work sporadic. Orlin Leonel Nunez Rojas, a 32-year-old Honduran, was applying for asylum while staying in a shelter in Ixtepec, in Oaxaca, and sometimes worked loading and unloading vegetable trucks. He says he would make 200 pesos, about \$10, for one night's work, usually five or six hours. One day, friends convinced him to go to Juchitan, a larger city about 30 minutes away, to beg. After subtracting 40 pesos for the bus ride, he cleared 100 pesos for a few hours work. "Not bad," he called it.



*Manuel Armando Camaja de la Cruz, a Guatemalan asylum-seeker living at the La 72 shelter and planning to try and enter the U.S., etches the U.S.-Mexico border on concrete, Tenosique, Tabasco, Dec. 25, 2017 (Photo by Joseph Sorrentino).*

There aren't many jobs in smaller cities, so most asylum-seekers head to places like Monterrey or, more often, Mexico City. Miguel Benetiz sat at the worn-out kitchen table in the small apartment he shares with five other Salvadorans in Mexico City. The apartment is divided into three tiny rooms, two men per room. Each room is just large enough to fit two mattresses, one of which was on the floor, and a small desk. Benetiz works in a factory making plastic containers. "I make 1,500 pesos—about \$75—a week," he told me, adding that it was much

less than he made in El Salvador where he worked as a carpenter. “I do not think I can improve my life here in Mexico, [but] I cannot return to Salvador, cannot cross to the U.S., so I stay here.” Fauricio Ramos, one of his roommates, worked at a beer factory and earned the same as Benetiz—“only enough to survive.”

Central Americans in Mexico also face widespread discrimination. “One works and when it is time to be paid, they pay you less,” says Jose Carlos Mendoza, who fled El Salvador. Others have a difficult time even finding work. Marisa Rodriguez worked at a call center in El Salvador and hoped to find the same job in Mexico City. “I went to an interview and it went well,” she said, until she was asked where she was from. “When I said Salvador, he said, ‘How awful! Everyone from there is a criminal.’ I did not get hired.”

The majority of Central Americans seeking asylum in Mexico just want a chance at a slightly better life. “This is our goal,” says Raul Garcia Romero, a Honduran. “Not to be rich. If I sleep on the floor—to have a bed. If I have food—a stove to cook it. Slowly to improve our lives and the life of our family.” Even attaining that goal in Mexico won’t be easy.

Freddie Cruz, a 17-year-old Honduran, has worked in a fruit and vegetable warehouse in Oaxaca, earning 150 pesos, or about \$8, for 15 hours of work. Some nights, he slept in the warehouse, saving a few pesos by not taking the bus to the shelter where he was staying. “Mexicans are paid more,” he said. “The whole world mistreats Central Americans.”

*Editor’s Note: The names of some interviewees have been changed to protect their identities.*

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