



Committee: United Nations High
Commissioner for Refugees
(UNHCR)

Topic: Forced displacement in
Central America

Chair: Sebastián Salinas Cano,
María Paola López Franco

Background

The United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR), the UN Refugee Agency, is a global organization dedicated to saving lives, protecting rights and building a better future for refugees, forcibly displaced communities and stateless people. UNHCR works to ensure that everybody has the right to seek asylum and find safe refuge, having fled violence, persecution, war or disaster at home. Since 1950, UNHCR has faced multiple crises on multiple continents, and provided vital assistance to refugees, asylum-seekers, internally displaced and stateless people, many of whom have nobody left to turn to. UNHCR helps to save lives and build better futures for millions forced from home. (UNHCR, 2019)

Since 2018, there has been a significant increase of violence and people leaving Central America (especially El Salvador, Honduras and Guatemala). This is happening because there is an internal displacement that eventually leads to the emigration. The reason for the internal displacement is the growing violence in these countries that includes murder, extortion, gang violence, threats, internal armed conflicts and natural disasters. In Nicaragua, political turmoil is also a key factor for all the violence experienced.

Organized criminal violence associated with drug trafficking and gang activity has reached epidemic proportions in the Northern Triangle of Central America (NTCA) in recent years. In El Salvador, Guatemala and Honduras, IDMC estimates there were at least 432,000 IDPs as of the end of 2017, many of them driven from, and within, cities suffering the highest homicide rates in the world and levels of violence comparable with a war zone.

Preliminary findings from the El Salvador report reveal that criminal violence is highly targeted and individualized. In the absence of coordinated state support, people rely on their own networks and often do not report their situation for fear of reprisal. This means they have few safe options inside the country, which leads to repeated displacement, severe restrictions on freedom of movement and significant cross border flight.

The research also reveals that, in attempting to combat extremely high levels of violence in El Salvador, repressive state security measures have triggered new displacement, as gangs target police and their families, and security forces target young people in gang-affected areas.

Reframing violence and displacement in Guatemala

Initial findings from the Guatemala report suggest that ‘structural’ violence - a term used to describe social mechanisms, state institutions and cultural norms that prevent people from meeting their basic needs - causes more displacement than direct violence. However, forced evictions, threats from gangs, domestic abuse and the persecution of minority groups also act as displacement triggers.

This new research debunks a popular misconception that people from Central America who cross the border towards the US are eagerly awaiting their chance to access “the American dream”. Patterns of population movement within Guatemala suggest the opposite. The research found that people make substantial efforts to

avoid having to leave their home communities. And violence, crime and displacement combine to trap vulnerable people, particularly the young, in a downward spiral, where committing further violence and crime is their only chance of survival.

UNHCR gives the following data:

- Over 353,000 refugees and asylum-seekers from the North of Central America worldwide. (Government figures to end of 2018)
- Over 31,300 Asylum-seekers in Mexico in 2019 only.
- Over 245,000 internally displaced people in Honduras and El Salvador. (Government figures)
- Over 80,000 asylum-seekers from Nicaragua worldwide. (Government figures)

Guide questions:

- What actions is your country taking to either to help refugees or stop the violence in Central America?
- Is your country able to receive refugees? Why?

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