



New humanitarian frontiers

Addressing criminal violence in Mexico and Central America

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Cover photo: After an irregular entry into Mexico near Ciudad Hidalgo, many Central and South American migrants begin their journey in Arriaga, Chiapas, Mexico, to move north through the country to the US border. They climb atop the rail cars of the freight train known as 'La Bestia' (The Beast), risking exposure to the elements, danger and extortion of criminal gangs lying in wait along the route. Photo: IOM, April 2014. <https://flic.kr/p/oc4U5Y>



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Executive Summary

Parts of Central America and Mexico are suffering a humanitarian crisis which stems directly from expanding criminal violence. In vulnerable communities in the region there are mass casualties on a par with conflicts elsewhere in the world – rape, kidnapping, human trafficking, extortion, forced displacement (both internally and across borders), migration of unaccompanied minors from crime-ravaged communities and exploitation and murder of those en route to the United States on the world's largest North-South migration corridor.

The levels of displacement are staggering. In El Salvador some five per cent of the population were displaced by criminal violence and threats in 2014. Most of the 566,700 internally displaced persons (IDPs) in El Salvador, Guatemala and Honduras have been forced to flee as a result of organised crime and gang violence. Each year criminal gangs engaged in narcotics, human trafficking, land expropriation and illicit natural resource extraction are responsible for thousands of civilian deaths and kidnappings, terrorising local populations, extortion rackets and corruption and intimidation, all of which lead to displacement. Gangs use violence in the pursuit of profit, to achieve territorial control over trafficking routes and to neutralise competing organisations, often in collaboration with agents of the state.

Heavy-handed responses to criminal violence by state security forces continue in Guatemala, Honduras and El Salvador (a zone known as the Northern Triangle) and in Mexico. Crackdowns by military police in Honduras and military operations in Mexico have been accompanied by human rights violations, extra-judicial executions, targeted killings, forced disappearances, torture and arbitrary detentions.

There is reason to believe that much of the displacement induced by criminal violence and responses to it has not been documented. Mexico does not address the impact of cartel violence, and does not officially acknowledge internal displacement. Guatemala is also unwilling to accept that its citizens are being forcibly displaced. None of the Northern Triangle countries has yet adopted a national law on displacement.

Policies to counter drug trafficking have generally dispersed, not eliminated criminal organisations, rewarding the most violent actors, criminalising marginalised populations and failing to sever links between drug cartels, business and politics. Because anti-drug policy focuses on security, interdictions and capturing and punishing

perpetrators, the humanitarian impacts of the violence continue to remain in the background.

Humanitarian organisations and donors increasingly recognise the need to develop new approaches and more robust interventions in the region. They acknowledge that addressing criminal violence challenges many of the precepts and traditional working practices of humanitarians, and will require considerable time.

Violence is deeply rooted in transnational illicit trafficking and social and political structures in a region characterised by the world's most extreme wealth disparities. Humanitarian interventions must strike a balance between reducing suffering and broader developmental objectives to address structural challenges and facilitate broader change. Without this awareness, humanitarian interventions are likely to address little more than the symptoms of a system of violence that is durable and self-replicating.

Understanding when violence will arise, and communicating with the criminal groups responsible, are arduous and perilous tasks. Affected states are reluctant to cede control over internal security, a domain central to asserting sovereignty. Powerful states in the region, notably the US and Mexico, reinforce security and border policies that tend to exacerbate humanitarian risks, rather than reduce them. International organisations devoted to law enforcement, peace-building, capacity-building and economic development are also mandated to deal with criminal violence. Challenges facing a joined-up approach, in coordination with other actors sharing commitment to humanitarian principles, are acutely familiar from other crises.

This study draws on extensive background research of the latest academic, policy and media publications on criminal violence in Mexico and the Northern Triangle, with a particular emphasis on the issue of forced displacement and extortion. A total of 40 interviews, all with guarantees of anonymity, were conducted with representatives of the regional offices of humanitarian organisations and UN bodies in Panama and also by Skype or phone with representatives of humanitarian organisations, UN agencies and international and local NGOs in all four of the countries studied.

The report pinpoints three structural challenges to a stronger humanitarian agenda in response to criminal violence in the region:

- the features and characteristics of criminal violence
- the presence of self-sustaining regional mixed migra-



A demonstration against government's and drug cartels' violence in Mexico City. Photo: Ruy Sánchez, May 2011. <https://flic.kr/p/gSqDrT>

- tion and the flow of narcotics
- the extremely fragile nature of Central American states.

The report traces linkages between communities, criminal actors and local state agents, the constraints of humanitarian work and the contested status of humanitarian operations, including within humanitarian agencies.

The case for a reinvigorated humanitarian approach to criminal violence is stronger than ever. There are notable opportunities. The existing strengths of humanitarian organisations in addressing criminal violence could be responsibly enhanced. These strengths include their:

- intimate understanding of the way crime affects communities
- numerous links with state and non-state bodies
- understanding of how vulnerable and marginalised people are targeted by criminal actors
- knowledge, derived from protecting civilians in protracted and deeply entrenched conflicts elsewhere, about how populations cope with recurring violence and how to best augment their own coping strategies
- reputations as neutral or apolitical bodies whose sole agenda is to reduce human suffering.

The global preoccupation with mass mixed migration flows, not least across the Mediterranean, provides an exceptional opportunity for humanitarian organisations to engage in a more systemic approach to migration through Mexico and forced displacement processes across the region. This should be based on understanding of the

forced migration continuum – from internal displacement to a country of first asylum to a transit country, to the United States or Europe as a destination – and also of policy and programming responses to mass criminal assaults on migrants and the effects of stronger border controls.

2014 marked the 30th anniversary of the landmark 1984 *Cartagena Declaration on Refugees in Latin America*. During the Cartagena+30 process there were a series of meetings to discuss displacement challenges in the region. The resulting *Brazil Declaration and Plan of Action*, endorsed by 28 Latin American and Caribbean states, recognised the importance of tackling internal displacement caused by criminal violence in the Northern Triangle.

Criminal violence is deep-rooted but there are opportunities to act. Humanitarian and development organisations should:

- raise greater awareness of the extent of displacement caused by criminal violence
- maintain contacts with criminal groups in order to access vulnerable populations
- support child-protection interventions
- offer greater support to enable states to provide basic services in areas where they are jeopardised by criminal violence
- do more to raise awareness of the need for holistic responses to criminal violence and state collusion
- contribute to a systematic review of existing national normative frameworks
- strengthen legal mechanisms to ensure the protection of people affected by violence and displacement.

There is incontrovertible evidence that parts of Central America and Mexico are suffering a humanitarian crisis, with a number of basic human needs unmet and human rights systematically abused as a result of the spread of criminal violence. The impacts of this violence go to the heart of global humanitarian concerns.

Some of the most visible and publicised effects include mass casualties on a par with conflicts elsewhere in the world. Homicide rates in the Northern Triangle countries (El Salvador, Honduras and Guatemala) are among the world's highest. Central America is the most violent sub-region in the world according to a global ranking of countries based on their rates of violent death – including deaths caused by armed conflict and homicide. Honduras is in 2nd place (behind Syria), El Salvador 6th, Guatemala 11th and Mexico 23rd.¹ Most of the cities reported to be the world's most violent are in Latin America. Four are in Central America and ten in Mexico.² As a result of criminal violence the Honduran city of San Pedro Sula has the highest homicide rate in the world, 171 per 100,000 inhabitants per annum.³ In 2012, one in five residents of Northern Triangle states reported being a victim of a crime.⁴

Violence and displacement tend to affect the most vulnerable and poorest.⁵ The proportion of people forced to leave violent municipalities is four to five times higher than that of people leaving non-violent municipalities with similar socio-economic conditions.⁶ There are grave crimes such as rape, kidnapping or extortion in vulnerable communities or in territories considered to be of strategic interest by criminal groups (notably in border areas or urban areas).⁷ Additionally, there is forced displacement of populations, both internally⁸ and across borders⁹ and migration of unaccompanied minors.¹⁰

Criminal violence is causing mass displacement. According to the Internal Displacement Monitoring Centre (IDMC), the majority of the 566,700 IDPs in El Salvador, Guatemala and Honduras have been displaced as a result of organised crime and gang violence. In El Salvador alone as many as 288,900 people – some five per cent of the population – were displaced by criminal violence and threats in 2014.¹¹ In El Salvador and Guatemala, sweeping political transitions that took place at the end of their civil wars have been followed by waves of crime and insecurity. Violence has damaged the ability to provide relief to victims of violence and displacement due to the weakening of essential public services. Health and education provision is affected in a number of different ways by illicit

activities. These include restricted access to healthcare, exposure to criminal influences or fear of being targeted for forced gang recruitment at school.¹²

Array of criminal actors

Honduras provides an example of just how many groups can be involved in criminal violence. They include:

- drug-trafficking organisations – of which the Cachiros and the Valles are the most prominent
- extrajudicial death squads
- so-called *clikas* which represent the two main Central America gang formations (Mara Salvatrucha and Barrio 18)
- various other local gangs, such as the Chirizos, or its predecessor, Gato Negro.

The powerful and growing body of evidence regarding the region's urgent humanitarian needs deriving from criminal violence has not yet generated a unified, coherent or comprehensive response from key national and international actors. The difficulties of framing a joined-up approach, in coordination with other actors who similarly adhere to humanitarian principles, are acutely familiar from other crises.¹³

In the course of research for this paper, most informants indicated a degree of frustration and a readiness to consider new approaches for humanitarian responses. In numerous interviews they listed challenges for humanitarian action – limited resources, unreliable mechanisms of institutional co-operation, the indifference or negligence of state authorities, complicated or worsening access to crime-affected communities, expanding illicit activity and the harmful influence of some aspects of US and Mexican border-control policies.

While a number of new humanitarian initiatives, including from the European Union (EU), faith-based charities, the UN Refugee Agency (UNHCR) and the International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC), have made some headway, the nature of the “chronic violence”¹⁴ of the region poses enormous challenges for humanitarian responses. It has to be recognised that criminal violence, and its effects, might not diminish for generations.

2

Structural challenges for humanitarian space and action

The severity of criminal violence affecting the region is well-established. Numerous articles and reports detail the phenomenon and the diversity of criminalised zones, corridors and micro-territories. The perilous trafficking zones of migrants in Mexican states such as Oaxaca or Tabasco,¹⁵ extortion rackets in marginalised areas of El Salvador,¹⁶ criminal turf wars in urban Honduras¹⁷ and feuds between drug cartels on the frontiers of Guatemala¹⁸ are among the outstanding examples of large-scale criminal violence. Violence appears to be shifting towards more extractive and predatory activities at the local level, with a less obtrusive and more fragmented presence of major transnational criminal organisations.

Changes in the nature of criminal violence, although far from definitive, point to a larger role for humanitarian actors. Insofar as communities are targeted and exploited by criminal groups while state authorities are co-opted or absent, it is imperative for humanitarian bodies and partner organisations to provide protection, above all when the lives and basic needs of the vulnerable are at risk.

It is apparent that the humanitarian as well as the broader development community face numerous obstacles, challenges and threats to their activities. Many of these are encountered in their everyday work and planning. There are also deeper challenges which constrain the

very possibility of establishing a humanitarian agenda or space in which to address criminal violence.

Structural impediments to the consolidation of a humanitarian agenda were frequently raised by informants. Often they are depicted as a reality which humanitarian or other actors must necessarily deal with and over which they may have little or no influence. To borrow the words of the anthropologist Michael Taussig in his work on the Latin American rubber boom, these are seen to be a “fact of nature... a thing-in-itself, gray, shut off from fancy, yet really very big.”²³

The characteristics of criminal violence

Organised crime in the Northern Triangle is best understood within a post-conflict context that makes these countries particularly vulnerable to criminal activity.²⁴ There is a multiplicity and fluidity of criminal violence. For each country, and within each country, different causes and triggers have resulted in diverse systems of violence. Causes include deep social inequities, the legacy of protracted civil wars in the 1970s and 1980s, flawed application of post-conflict settlements, proliferation of weapons, weaknesses in the state, erratic and draconian law enforcement policies and displacement of nar-

Addressing child migration

Since 2011 the number of Central American children arriving at the U.S.-Mexico border has increased rapidly. A study by the UN Refugee Agency (UNHCR) found that almost half of young people interviewed at the border had personally suffered from violence by organised criminal actors.¹⁹ Inadequate US judicial and legal resources to address the mixed migration flow of humanitarian and irregular migrants has, in effect, provided an incentive for families living in crime-ravaged communities or those in which children are at risk of recruitment by criminal gangs. Many hope that unaccompanied children might be permitted to live with relatives already residing in the US. By mid-2014 the number of unaccompanied children from the Northern Triangle reaching the US border rose to 10,000 per month.²⁰

Responding to this surge in arrivals, in July 2014 President Obama declared an “urgent humanitarian situation” and called on Congress to fund border control efforts and processing facilities.²¹ This declaration has helped increase recognition of forced migration in some of the states of the region and placed criminal violence clearly within the remit of humanitarian organisations.

There are fears, however, that the focus on deterrence and enforcement at the US border and along migrant transit routes cannot advance longer-term solutions, which should include viable alternatives to illegal and humanitarian migration, timely and fair adjudication of protection claims and successful integration of child migrants in the US or reintegration in the Northern Triangle states from which almost all originate.²²

co-trafficking routes and the consequent reconfiguration of power within the drug supply market.²⁵ Deportation from the mid-1990s of Central American gang members living legally or illegally in the United States proved a crucial spur to urban violence.²⁶ As a result, the region displays extremely high levels of non-conventional armed violence – violence that is not the result of an armed conflict between two or more parties, but of causes that are primarily criminal or predatory.²⁷

The characteristics of this violence constitute a major structural challenge to relief efforts. Levels of violence are far from being consistent and uniform. Instead, they are extremely variegated, depending on whether the lead actors responsible for the violence are gangs, criminal trafficking organisations, security forces and/or complicit political or judicial authorities, private sector actors, vigilante groups or a combination of some or all of these.

In certain cases, notably in Mexico, there are even reasons to question whether certain acts of criminal violence are not fundamentally shaped by a politicised agenda to secure quiescent communities or to help local politicians promote criminal interests.

The violence that results from this coterie of different groups is distributed extremely unevenly within countries. It can flare and decline sharply in a given locality and shift from visible physical violence to invisible coercion imposed on fearful communities (or in which communities are to a degree complicit). “Narco-controlled neighbourhoods are calm, and seem calm,” write the journalist Oscar Martinez of northern Mexico. “Until they’re not, and then they explode.”²⁹

This fluidity and volatility in the degree of violence meted out to civilians reflects, in large part, the competition and strategic rivalry between diverse criminal groups, whose ability to control or cap violence at times appears to be immense. These conditions pose great stresses for humanitarian organisations who wish both to protect civilians and their own staff, without knowing when or for what reason armed violence may be unleashed. Programming for humanitarian interventions is thus, as an interviewee remarked, risky, with no certainty when or how exit might be possible nor time to execute a properly planned intervention. The head of a humanitarian organisation noted “the lack of real information is monumental.”

It may be argued that this trend can be observed in many armed conflicts now characterised by “rapidly mutating non-state actors, the availability of small weapons, the fragility and fragmentation of many affected states.”³⁰

Criminal violence can arise without warning. The new characteristics of criminal violence in the region raise

the question of what precisely has been achieved – and what price must be paid – when violence is apparently reduced in a community but where criminal control goes unchallenged or has been consolidated despite apparent perceptions it has been contained.

El Salvador’s gang truce

A substantial proportion of criminal violence in the Northern Triangle is attributed to two bitterly-opposed transnational criminal gangs, both of which originated in Los Angeles:

Mara Salvatrucha (often abbreviated as MS-13) whose members are primarily Salvadorans.³¹

Barrio 18 whose activities expanded greatly in the Northern Triangle following US deportation of gang members to countries of origin.

Both are involved in narcotics, arms-dealing, human trafficking, prostitution and extortion rackets. Taking advantage of El Salvador’s weak institutions and high levels of corruption, they have helped transform El Salvador into an important staging post for illegal drugs heading north to the US.

In 2012, the government of El Salvador with support from the Catholic Church, agreed a truce with the two gangs who are believed to have 60,000 members in the country. For a while murder rates plummeted, but the truce had little effect on practices of extortion, forced recruitment or the migration of unaccompanied minors. The truce was effectively abandoned in 2014, leading to a rise in homicides, extortion and the recruitment of children. Extreme violence has returned. In March 2015 an average of 16 people were murdered each day, a 52 per cent rise over the same period in 2014.³²

Directly negotiating violence reduction with gangs has so far not proved sustainable in the region. Gang truces of the sort witnessed in various Brazilian cities, Jamaica or Trinidad and Tobago rarely hold over the medium to long term.³³ The return of relative peace to the Mexican border city of Ciudad Juárez has been attributed to the triumph of the jail-breaking crime boss Joaquín Guzmán and his cartel, helped by the army and police, against rival gangs.³⁴

An informant from a Honduran NGO explained that in peri-urban Tegucigalpa it has been possible to maintain regular access to one gang-controlled community, al-

though extortion has extinguished all attempts to support micro-businesses for recently returned migrants. Clearly, the humanitarian gains of violence reduction must be measured against the more intangible effects of structural violence within such communities.

Self-sustaining regional flows

Two of the most important ways in which violence is transmitted and distributed remain extremely hard to address by humanitarians. Both the mixed migration flows to the United States and the transit of narcotics in the same direction highlight the urgent need for protection. These two flows have been shaped over decades by economic motives and family mobility, considerations of national and border security and regional and US policies towards drug trafficking.

Humanitarian work in war zones is largely unable to address grievances that drive any given armed conflict. But the expectation remains that rational armed actors will eventually find sufficient reason to end hostilities. In the case of the mixed migration flows and drugs flows through Central America and Mexico, criminal violence is superimposed on economic and security needs of both state and non-state actors, that are, to a large extent, not negotiable. These are, in short, systemic processes whereby violence is constantly reproduced.

The route through Mexico to the United States is the world's largest North-South migration corridor: migrants moving through Mexico account for approximately six per cent of the total stock of migrants worldwide.³⁵ These flows have been underway for decades, largely on the basis of a quest for economic opportunities in the North and reunification with family members already installed there.

Increasingly, violence targeting communities has added forced migrants to historic migration flows. Migrants and forced migrants face extreme protection threats as they move north.³⁶ In many ways, the plight of migrants and forced migrants through Mexico resembles the struggles of migrants crossing the Mediterranean to Europe by boat: in both cases, migrants feel forced to flee for complex reasons, only to find themselves vulnerable to multiple risks and a grave failure of protection systems while en route.³⁷ While migrants and forced migrants in the Mediterranean face the insecurity of precarious, overloaded vessels, migrants and forced migrants travelling through Central America and Mexico face the threats of criminal groups, acting often in collusion with state agents.

For example, they are forced to pay more cash for guides (known as coyotes or polleros) in locations increasing-

ly dominated by organised crime.³⁸ Abuses have risen, whether assault, extortion, kidnapping, massacres, rape, or employment in the sex trade (notably in the Mexican-Guatemala border town of Tapachula). Increasing flows of children are subject to these same threats,³⁹ particularly by human trafficking networks: "in many cases children and adolescent enter a system of human trafficking where they are passed along from guide to guide and perceived as 'merchandise'."⁴⁰

In spite of the extremely unsafe conditions for migration, it is universally acknowledged that the migrant flow from the region will continue, especially with violence levels in Central America leading to forced migration in addition to historic economic migration. Central and South Americans remain absolutely determined to reach the United States, and repeatedly try to do so: according to an informant, of the 4,200 child migrants deported from Mexico to El Salvador in 2014, for instance, at least 30 have since attained their goal of reaching the US based on an informal count.

Shortcomings of drug control policies

The other transnational flow that creates a structural challenge to humanitarian responses in the region is that of narcotics, and above all cocaine. Human rights and humanitarian considerations have rarely been considered when developing narcotic control and security policies. Prioritisation of detentions and interdictions has become embedded in drug policy enforcement in spite of the evident diversification and displacement of trafficking routes over the past three decades.⁴¹ This system remains almost entirely in the hands of law enforcement officials and organisations, affording very little influence to UN bodies mandated to focus on health, development or human rights.⁴² Counter-narcotics operations often take precedence over professionalising the police or justice sector, especially when such objectives are not backed by host governments.⁴³

An emphasis on security in policy on drug trafficking has been apparent across Latin America, and particularly Colombia and Mexico. The multiple failures of this policy – notably the ways it disperses rather than eliminates criminal organisations – rewards the most violent actors, criminalises marginalised populations, and fails to sever illicit links to business and politics.⁴⁴ Policy failures fundamentally shape the patterns of victimisation and community vulnerability with which humanitarian actors have to contend.

As a result of this predominant focus on security, interdictions and capturing and punishing perpetrators, the humanitarian impacts of the violence continue to remain

in the background. Giving them the same level of importance will require profound changes.

Affected states

The ways in which official state responses to major transnational flows have not taken into account human rights or humanitarian considerations reflects another fundamental structural challenge to stronger humanitarian responses. The origins and recent history of Northern Triangle states help explain the ways in which policy initiatives, particularly on matters of social protection, have been disappointing and incomplete. Economic elites continue to exercise power,⁴⁵ content to perpetuate highly unequal income distributions and access to economic opportunities. These are among the world's most unequal countries measured by the Gini coefficient – the world's most commonly used measure of inequality.⁴⁶

Elite influence over political systems makes it extremely difficult to increase the state's fiscal revenues and thereby to improve funding for public services or build capacity of public institutions. General lack of resources results in social and child protection systems, or interventions to manage forced displacement, that do not manage to carry out any effective monitoring or which are largely handed over to NGOs and religious bodies to provide from their own resources.⁴⁷

“ **Central American migrants in Mexico have become the leading victims of various forms of criminal assault** ”

Despite El Salvador's progressive approach to child protection, including the creation in 2012 of the Consejo Nacional para la Protección y Desarrollo de la Persona Migrante y su Familia, the country has no system for tracking child deportees, nor programmes to cater for their post-repatriation educational or livelihoods requirements.⁴⁸ A similar situation can be found in Honduras where a crisis over migration in 2014 spurred the establishment of a new child-protection body – la Dirección Nacional de la Niñez y la Familia (DINAF). However, an informant reported that DINAF is chronically short of funds and largely relies on goodwill to cover operating expenses of five new child migrant shelters.

Across the region, public services are impacted by some of the lowest levels of tax contributions in Latin America. None of the states generates revenues in excess of 20 per cent of GDP.⁴⁹ Recent UN figures indicate that the spending patterns of governments have shifted in recent years towards a more substantial outlay on security and justice systems, reportedly on average 25 per cent of

state expenditure.⁵⁰ Social programmes are among those to have been most affected.

Limited economic resources are only one facet of state weakness. The deepening presence of organised crime, above all drug trafficking, has been closely associated with illicit infiltration of official state and security bodies in all of the countries studied. Polls and other opinion surveys on state corruption,⁵¹ judicial investigations into serious crimes (including pioneering work carried out by the Comisión Internacional contra la Impunidad en Guatemala, which in May 2015 led to the resignation of the vice-president)⁵² and media reports into the gestation and operation of criminal networks⁵³ testify to a problem that is recurrent throughout Latin America, but which particularly affects the Northern Triangle and Mexico.

Analysis suggests that these criminal configurations are becoming more flexible, opportunistic and sophisticated.⁵⁴ Whereas armed criminal groups may establish coercive control over municipalities with high strategic value – or consolidate control through creating local hybrid political-criminal elites or co-opting local police⁵⁵ – the alignment of strategic interests between political elite and criminal actors at the level of central government may be relatively harmonious. Illicit financing of election campaigns, lax controls by tax, finance and customs authorities and systemic judicial impunity for serious crimes are among the features of pliable and weak states for which both sets of groups, criminal and political, can find common cause. In Honduras, for instance, the regular rotation of prosecutors – not to mention the grave under-funding of the prosecution service – results in closing or neglecting vital criminal investigations.⁵⁶

Illicit networks are evidently a critical structural obstacle to any humanitarian response to criminal violence. The trustworthiness of local state partners is brought into question. Core parts of the state's criminal justice system, notably the police and prison services, may have the perverse effect of worsening levels of violence and thereby increasing internal displacement. When it comes to vulnerable communities, above all those living in marginalised and poorly serviced urban areas, public officials may exploit a general lack of state vigilance and the absence of any credible or accessible legal support system to engage in a joint criminal enterprise of intimidation and extortion.

An overpowering sense of entrapment results from the combination of criminal powers and an ineffective or complicit state. The asphyxiation felt by many in such criminal enclosures, where gangs and their associates extract the so-called impuesto de guerra (war tax), is extreme, and drives constant internal displacement. Seventy nine per cent of Honduran companies belonging to the National Council of Small Business report that they pay extortion



After an irregular entry into Mexico near Ciudad Hidalgo, many Central and South American migrants begin their journey in Arriaga, Chiapas, Mexico, to move north through the country to the US border. They climb atop the rail cars of the freight train known as 'La Bestia' (The Beast), risking exposure to the elements, danger and extortion of criminal gangs lying in wait along the route. IOM and UNHCR representatives advise a couple of Honduran migrants before the train leaves the Arriaga station. Photo: IOM, April 2014. <https://flic.kr/p/oc4U5Y>

money.⁵⁷ Three to five tax drivers are being murdered each month in Honduras for failing to pay.⁵⁸ One interviewee from a Honduran NGO reported that in Tegucigalpa “certain groups even control what women wear, what colour their hair should be, to be able to differentiate them from women that cooperate with another group.” In both Honduras and El Salvador targeting of school pupils by gangs for recruitment and intimidation is common, causing attendance and enrolment rates to fall.⁵⁹

Central American migrants in Mexico have become the leading victims of various forms of criminal assault in which, according to a wide variety of human rights bodies and migrant organisations, state officials are thoroughly complicit. Activists in Tenosique, a key migrant crossroads in the Mexican state of Tabasco, have denounced a symbiosis in extortion and trafficking rackets between organised crime and officials from the local Instituto Nacional de Migración (INM) – the body charged with providing protection to migrants on Mexican soil under the terms of the 2011 Immigration Law.⁶⁰ The border area between Guatemala and Tabasco has become one of the focal points for the Mexican border control programme, Programa Frontera Sur, yet the presence of numerous justice and security agencies has reportedly gone hand-in-hand with chronic extortion of migrants.⁶¹

Interviewees pointed to joint state and criminal involvement in kidnapping ventures – eight per cent of kidnapping cases of migrants were reported in 2011 to have involved state officials⁶² – routine extortion in detention centres (including the biggest of its kind in Mexico, Siglo XXI in Tapachula), and collusion of police stations on the Mexican–US border with coyotes in exchange for a cut in the fees paid for the crossing, which now reach up to \$11,000.⁶³ A 2015 investigation by the Mexican magazine *Animal Político* found that INM officials were allowing migrants to board cargo trains carrying them north at certain points, contrary to recent government policy, only for allied criminal groups to intimidate and extort the victims once on board.⁶⁴

3

Policy and operational challenges for humanitarian actors

It is against a backdrop in which great protection needs coincide with entrenched obstacles that humanitarian action must be conceived and designed. This entails hard choices as to how to preserve humanitarian principles, bring genuine relief, navigate trade-offs and adapt responses to violence caused by entrenched structural failures.

The region's chronic vulnerability to natural disasters means there are long-established humanitarian organisations which, despite restrictive conditions, have taken steps towards recognising and responding to the phenomenon of criminal violence. Since around 2007 there has been acknowledgment by organisations dealing with refugees – notably UNHCR and certain prominent religious charities – of the critical role played by violence in causing forced migration. In recent years, UNHCR and IDMC have assumed a prominent role in reporting on this issue of violence and displacement, while NRC and ACAPS have examined the humanitarian impacts of the violence more generally. UNHCR has established offices in Guatemala, Honduras and El Salvador as a result. The EU's humanitarian office has given strong support to including criminal violence in the humanitarian agenda for the region, and supported efforts by the ICRC, UNHCR and Médecins Sans Frontières (MSF), among others.

Advocacy for humanitarian organisations to assume a wider role responding to criminal violence has come from a number of quarters. This reflects new understanding that complex emergencies (such as in Haiti after the 2010 earthquake)⁶⁵ may give rise to “crisis migration.”⁶⁶ Also significant is the response to the ICRC's mandate to tackle “other situations of violence”⁶⁷ and address the wider global phenomenon of non-conventional armed violence.⁶⁸

Threats posed by criminal violence, and above all those linked to extortion rackets practised against vulnerable communities with limited recourse to state support, form a natural part of the wider issues that a humanitarian agenda geared towards protection of civilians or community resilience must address.⁶⁹ Unfortunately it is apparent that various governments in the region, and in Latin America as a whole, are resistant to any broadening of the humanitarian agenda to include responses to criminal violence.

Within humanitarian organisations there are clear divisions of opinion on how to approach the issue. Interviews

with various officials within one leading humanitarian organisation revealed divergences. Whereas some interviewees defended humanitarian aid as non-political emergency support for those whose lives are at risk, a senior official argued that the sole viable route for humanitarian aid in the country where he is based is to support weak state systems so as to enhance respect for basic human rights. Importantly, these two perspectives, which were reflected in numerous interviews and which are both valid from a humanitarian perspective, may in practice have major consequences for the perceived neutrality, impartiality and independence of humanitarian interventions.

Complex linkages: communities and the state

Humanitarian organisations are obliged to broker and navigate extremely difficult and volatile partnerships within communities and with law enforcement and security forces. These problematic linkages are some of the most common dilemmas for humanitarians in the region.

Unlike in armed conflicts, direct access to the parties chiefly responsible for violent acts – the criminal organisations themselves – is extremely difficult to initiate and maintain. Knowing the identity and location of criminal leaders entails serious risks, especially if the criminal group senses that this information could be leaked to the police or rivals.⁷⁰ Prevailing public antagonism to violent gangs and criminals, as well as legal restrictions on support or dialogue with them (as in El Salvador under the 2010 Gang Prohibition Law), further restricts space for contact and communication.

Even so, a number of church-based groups, such as the Scalabrinian Nuns in Honduras as well as the Red Cross Movement across the region are present in violence-affected communities and have working relationships with community members who themselves are knowledgeable of the local “codes” that criminal or gang members have imposed. The ICRC has played a crucial role in preserving humanitarian access to zones controlled by the Fuerzas Armadas Revolucionarias de Colombia guerrilla group, and operates in zones of urban violence across Latin America. Its presence in prisons across the region focuses on improving living conditions and ensuring respect for due legal process.⁷¹

However, for most other organisations contact with criminal groups is extremely hard to broker. In order to establish agreed rules and limits for operating in a community, the sole option tends to be a triangular relationship, mediated by community leaders, with the criminal organisations, whose willingness to tolerate the proposed activities is essential. Several strategies are used to minimise rejection by these groups, or reduce dangers to staff and community members involved in programmes. Emphasis is placed on activities such as healthcare that bring clear benefits to community members and do not endanger criminal authority or income flows.

NGOs operating in El Salvador and Honduras reported that their programmes, largely targeted at children and young adults, are implemented outside the territorial boundaries of communities. Meeting times are often restricted by curfews imposed by criminal groups. Murders of programme beneficiaries and implementers have forced the withdrawal of several activities. An informant described programmes in one of the two countries in which his agency operates as “hanging by a thread.”

Informants did not rule out negotiations with criminal groups. Echoing recent work on how to mediate with criminal groups,⁷² various possibilities for contact and

dialogue were raised. A humanitarian worker in Honduras observed that MS-13 – whose identity is rooted in a sense of collective stigmatisation – was a more reliable potential partner than Barrio 18, a less structured gang with a reputation for providing the killers-for-hire used by drug trafficking cartels. Furthermore, it is now reported that MS-13 in Honduras is committed to not carrying out extortion in the communities where it is based, unlike Barrio 18.⁷³

The head of a regional body deeply involved in many of the areas most affected by crime and trafficking in the region stressed that humanitarian access has improved in areas which have fallen under the hegemonic control of professionalised drug cartels, such as the Petén region in Guatemala, due to greater confidence felt by the dominant criminal organisation.

Details of how access to people in need of protection or assistance are negotiated in such contexts, where local political authorities also tend to be part of the illicit enterprise, are tightly guarded. An informant from one humanitarian organisation reported that when his agency published in 2015 a code of practice for its staff, the final version omitted draft text on how to manage corrupt and criminal local authorities. Another UN official observed



The United States received the second-highest number of asylum applications among industrialized nations in 2014. UNHCR staff in Tapachula, Mexico, brief Latin American children and youth travelling alone on mixed migration routes about Mexican asylum procedures. Many are fleeing gang violence in their home countries and pass through Tapachula towards the United States. Photo: UNHCR, April 2013. <https://flic.kr/p/rwNAdA>

that his agency commonly came into contact with local authorities active in both municipal and illicit activities. It was important, he noted, to formally interact with such post-holders while remaining aware of the illicit interests at stake.

This recognition of the hybrid political-criminal interests of public authorities provokes divergent responses. One international official admitted that “a lot of the senior security officials with whom I have to work are in charge of cartels.” The representative of a major humanitarian organisation insisted that relief programmes need not always secure the approval of the central state, especially where this is infiltrated by illicit networks. Instead, certain humanitarian bodies may be able to focus activities on the municipal level, or select for partnership, on a case-by-case basis, those parts of the state or local communities with which co-operation is possible.

“ ***Within humanitarian organisations there are clear divisions of opinion on how to approach the issue*** ”

Honduras is an interesting example of these complex considerations. Suffering chronic levels of extreme violence, it has introduced increasingly militarised responses to its crime wave. These include the integrated security strategy led by the Fuerza de Seguridad Interinstitucional (FUSINA) created in 2014 – as well as the Military Police created by President Juan Orlando Hernández. It has also initiated a number of reforms in recent years, thus expanding space for state coordination with humanitarian bodies. In 2013 it created a Comisión Interinstitucional para la Protección de las Personas Desplazadas. In 2014 it declared a humanitarian emergency for six months and reformed the system for returning child migrants. The cooperative approach of a number of ministries has been cautiously welcomed by humanitarians. UNHCR and the ICRC have recently established offices in Honduras and the Office of the UN High Commissioner for Human Rights is set to do so.

However, these agencies remain marginal, outside the centres of political and economic power and are all severely underfunded.

The character of humanitarian work

Criminal violence in the Northern Triangle and Mexico challenges many of the assumptions about humanitarian operations. The absence of war or of any clearly defined parties to the armed conflict, the chronic and self-reproducing nature of violence, the deep flaws in states and societies that this violence reflects and enhances, and the

complications of respecting the integrity of communities governed by criminal groups make up a series of acute working dilemmas.

Understanding these dilemmas, and the responses that are being adopted to address them, are relevant to countries far beyond the region. Across the globe in protracted conflicts there is a clear trend of fragmentation of armed groups and entrenchment of transnational illicit activity – dynamics crucial to the perpetuation of organised violence.⁷⁴

A major initial challenge arising from this violence is the way in which it has become embedded in interpersonal relations. Although the origins of criminal violence in Central America derive from patterns of exclusion and recent transnational shifts in illicit trafficking and gang culture, its reproduction over time and within communities depends on its entrenchment in the norms of public and private life. In short, violence has overwhelmed judicial capacities and reshaped social relations. Much of the homicide in the region is not directly related to criminal strategy, but instead expresses a broad public willingness to resort to physical violence as a solution to disagreement and difference.⁷⁵ Coping strategies with violence have emphasised the circumscription of social networks to immediate family and friends⁷⁶ and the use of survival strategies that tend to emphasise strategic silence and avoidance, stigmatisation of outsiders and generalised mistrust.⁷⁷

Humanitarian, development and peace-building organisations working in the region recognise this reality, although their efforts to respond have been limited and tentative. Efforts at community development and violence reduction in criminalised zones are hampered by gang control. An informant reported, however, successes in reclaiming such public spaces as urban parks.

The culture of violence draws continued sustenance from numerous sources. According to one representative of a child protection NGO, hopes for a sustained reduction in violence should be based on a three to four generation time frame. Another child protection specialist suggested that the only solution to violent communities in El Salvador is constant support and counselling over years, in the form of “community trauma programmes.” It has to be acknowledged that high rates of domestic abuse, sexual violence, and weak family and household structures force children to fend for themselves and to often find relative safety in membership of a criminal gang.⁷⁸

Another operational challenge is the fact that criminal violence represents the effects of flaws and inequities in the development process or in the formation of modern states. This raises concerns whether humanitarian programmes will serve to enhance protection of vulnerable

communities, or merely substitute for an absent state and thus reinforce the status quo of poor public service provision. Such dilemmas obviously face humanitarian organisations in many other contexts but have assumed acute importance in the Northern Triangle and Mexico. For example, humanitarian organisations are naturally compelled to provide essential services along the migrant route through Mexico. These include safe return for deportees, safe haven for those under threat of violence, migrant shelters and protection on the road and advocacy for a broader policy agenda to forced displacement across the region.⁷⁹

In pursuing this approach of basic protection, two issues come to the fore. One is the concern that states from which migrants leave and through which they travel absolve themselves of further responsibilities. The other is that these actions take place in a context where the imperative of tighter border control is simultaneously being imposed by national governments.

This is apparent in reinforced US border surveillance, Mexico's Programa Frontera Sur (an initiative intended to protect migrants who enter Mexico and to manage the ports of entry in a way that promotes the security and prosperity of the region), and an increase in deportations and intensified border efforts implemented by Central American states. Such controls tend to be indiscriminate and are thus unable to filter out adults and children in genuine need of refugee status. They are often subject to abuses by officials. More broadly, they serve to funnel both migrant routes and criminal trafficking into remote zones that become extremely dangerous, and where coyotes and cartels can charge high fees for 'protecting' migrants and asylum seekers.

Humanitarian action at deportee return points – including providing food and water, first aid and a free phone call to a relative of the kind provided by the ICRC at the Corinto border crossing for deportees from Mexico to Honduras – is undoubtedly essential. However, it falls far short of real protection. The estimated 400 to 600 children deported from Mexico to Honduras each month⁸² are eligible to stay for up to 24 hours in a shelter in San Pedro Sula, called El Edén. This is conditional on family members failing to collect them or the family living far away. If their needs are acute, they may be eligible for a place in one of the five existing children's shelters. However, these shelters are not available to male youths aged between 12 and 17, the group most at risk of forced recruitment by gangs.⁸³ Experts in the field of child protection in El Salvador and Honduras concurred that medium to long-term protection of deported children was largely non-existent, with high on-going risks that children would be murdered or embark on a fresh effort to cross to the United States.⁸⁴

The Alliance for Prosperity in the Northern Triangle

The latest in a series of US-funded security interventions in the region, the Alliance is an initiative developed by El Salvador, Guatemala, Honduras, the Inter-American Development Bank and the United States, which was announced in November 2014. It is primarily intended to address the flow of Central American immigrants to the US. The US is set to contribute around \$1 billion.⁸⁰

The Alliance for Prosperity in the Northern Triangle appears to offer a means to reshape development priorities. Discussions around the plan have helped expose structural maladies, as well the root causes of forced displacement.

However, there are doubts as to its eventual focus and fears the plan will exacerbate poverty and violence. In April 2015, 75 human rights, environmental, women's, labour, faith and community organisations sent a joint letter to the Presidents of the United States, Guatemala, Honduras and El Salvador. They expressed concerns that the Alliance will perpetuate economic policies that have already exacerbated inequality and deplored the proposed militarisation of borders between states of the region. They argued the plan's focus on infrastructure and mining risks reinforcing a recurrent pattern of forced displacement as communities organise to defend lands and livelihoods under threat from the expansion of extractive industries.⁸¹

Another acute operational challenge derives from the way violence is increasingly rooted in the communities that are exposed to a form of criminal coercion. A number of humanitarian officials interviewed questioned whether it is possible to combine respect for community participation and integrity in the way programmes are managed while remaining sensitive to the acute perils faced by potential victims, such as IDPs.

In the absence of holistic programmes of violence reduction, a humanitarian emergency response may depend on removing vulnerable children or adults from their home communities or protecting the unaccompanied and providing them with institutional care or other forms of shelter.

The contested status of humanitarian operations

There is growing consensus around the notion that core humanitarian objectives, such as treating the seriously wounded or providing protection to vulnerable populations, apply in contexts of extreme urban or non-conventional armed violence. A broader set of preventive and protective activities focused on vulnerable populations such as children and women is considered by many states and organisations to apply in these contexts, above all when populations are exposed to forced displacement and recruitment.

However, there is also no doubt that the invocation of humanitarian principles faces multiple sources of resistance. Some humanitarians are reluctant to embrace linkages with broader goals of equitable or community development. Not all donor countries appear to have been entirely convinced of the humanitarian needs of the region, despite publicity around the recent child migration crisis. Most importantly, the states exposed to these threats of criminal violence differ as to the wisdom of declaring the problem to be a humanitarian emergency, rather than a sovereign matter of internal security.

It was acknowledged in many interviews that neither Guatemala nor Mexico has been willing to accept that forced displacement is occurring in their countries. Honduras and El Salvador, on the other hand, have proved much more responsive, as evidenced by their decision to welcome permanent representations of the ICRC and various NGOs. However, this recognition is accompanied by state policies that continue to emphasise strong security measures with a sovereign prerogative.

Lastly, there are major differences of opinion within international organisations and local NGOs regarding the appropriate deployment of resources to address criminal violence. Both the ICRC and the Catholic Church are recognised to be playing key roles liaising with violent groups and vulnerable communities. The ICRC's custodianship of the Geneva Conventions, as well as its privileged exemption from testifying in international criminal cases,⁸⁵ offer it a unique status as a neutral and trustworthy partner. Religious bodies are, with very rare exceptions, spared from the violence of criminal groups. On the migrant trail through Mexico faith-based bodies are able to withstand great pressure and maintain a frontline presence while publicly denouncing the complicity of organised crime and state officials in attacks on migrants and forced migrants.⁸⁶

There was somewhat less agreement in interviews on how humanitarian activity should be coordinated with other state and non-state actors. A representative from a

UN body suggested that stronger connections with state authorities would increase humanitarians' local access. Human rights bodies in Mexico insisted that humanitarians' knowledge of the abuses of migrants' rights should be shared with other NGOs to improve understanding of the needs of vulnerable groups. A representative of a major humanitarian organisation insisted it was important to act "with full independence" in the region, given the need to "establish a mass of humanitarian experience and knowledge." Other humanitarian actors were far more amenable to structured co-operation with development organisations and host states. A senior humanitarian official interviewed in a Northern Triangle country said there is currently no assurance that access to violent armed groups could generate any added value and that for now the priority should be to improve state services, for instance in prisons and hospitals.

“ Humanitarian responses to criminal violence in the region are still relatively modest and generally under-funded

Importantly, these different perspectives do not always reflect the official policy of institutions. Since humanitarian responses to criminal violence in the region are still relatively modest and generally under-funded, the stance of individual leaders remains crucial in determining scope for collaboration. An informant argued that some of the tensions that have emerged in certain humanitarian responses were due to individual preferences, affinities and dislikes and that these may have more influence than official strategies.

4

Conclusions: opportunities, risks and a new agenda

Humanitarian actors in the Northern Triangle and Mexico are addressing the effects of a phenomenon of criminal violence deeply rooted in social and political structures, development strategies and the influence of transnational illicit trafficking. Affected states are reluctant to cede control over internal security. International organisations, especially those promoting law enforcement, peace-building, capacity-building and economic development, have also identified their role in dealing with the issue of criminal violence.

It is imperative to develop some form of negotiated arrangement or division of tasks. The difficulties of framing a joined-up approach that respects humanitarian principles are acutely familiar from other contexts.

Developments in the region point to a set of opportunities and risks for the humanitarian agenda. Mexico remains apparently unable to halt the evolution of new forms of criminality, many of them rooted in extortion and criminal coercion of communities and which particularly affect vulnerable groups such as migrants.

Continued internal displacement in Central America as well as migrant outflows come against a backdrop of significant political and social turbulence in the Northern Triangle. Extreme violence has returned to El Salvador following abandonment of the gang truce. Murder and extortion rates remain extraordinarily high in Honduras, though small signs of progress on issues of humanitarian protection can be detected. Guatemala has undergone a major political crisis triggered by corruption and mass public protests, whose systemic consequences may help revision of state policy.

Mexico's willingness to accept UN criticism of its security record, or an international humanitarian role within its borders, remains extremely low. In addition, competing demands for humanitarian funds from donors make it difficult to envisage – unless there is a major natural disaster – a surge of funding for Mexico and Central America in the immediate future.

2014 marked the 30th anniversary of the landmark 1984 *Cartagena Declaration on Refugees in Latin America*.⁸⁷



Lack of trust in local institutions and limited access to clinics and hospitals deters women from reporting crimes and getting the medical attention they need. Mery Medina from the Butterflies support group in the dangerous city of Buenaventura, Colombia, helps women step by step through what can be an agonizing process. Mery believes that talking about sexual violence in conflict is the only way to stop it. Photo: UNHCR/J. Arredondo, August 2014.

During the Cartagena+30 process there were a series of meetings to discuss displacement challenges in the region. The resultant *Brazil Declaration and Plan of Action*⁸⁸, endorsed by 28 Latin American and Caribbean states, recognised the importance of tackling internal displacement caused by criminal violence in the Northern Triangle.

In this context, there are a number of pointers for future humanitarian policy and operations.

1. The humanitarian community should understand its strengths and highlight its comparative advantages

These include:

- *Understanding different local contexts:* The norms, configurations and strategies of criminal violence in different, highly localised contexts must be assessed and understood so as to enable appropriate and feasible responses by a range of state and non-state actors. Humanitarian actors are in a strong position to undertake this sort of ground-level analysis, and thereby contribute to the essential task of better data-gathering and analysis in fragile urban spaces
- *Reviewing security.* The community and protection-based perspective of humanitarian bodies could be an essential component of any holistic review of responses to criminal violence.
- *Capacity to respond to new forms of violence:* Humanitarian organisations are well-placed to advocate that their expertise in provision of services and protecting vulnerable civilians be applied far more rigorously.

2. Concrete options for strategy and programming:

- *Raise greater awareness* of the extent of displacement resulting from criminal violence
- *Preparedness for contacts with armed groups:* The failure of the El Salvadorean gang truce does not mean that dialogue with criminal groups should not be considered. However difficult contacts are, they should continue until they can form the basis for some form of negotiation. It is essential that humanitarian organisations remain close enough to retain channels of communication in order to access vulnerable populations.
- *Stronger protection systems:* Humanitarian organisations must be ready to play a crucial role in supporting and extending these support systems, ensuring that wherever possible the protection of children extends into giving them the chance of shelter, as well as the prospect of further education or job training. It is, of course, highly desirable that similar support systems

be also introduced for the returning adult population.

- *A firmer voice on forced migration:* There is an exceptional opportunity for humanitarian organisations to engage in a more systemic approach to migration through Mexico, raising awareness and advocating for responses to mass criminal assaults, state collusion and stronger border control, as well as the issue of refugee status for certain migrants. It is essential that the humanitarian approach move on from provision of shelters towards a holistic set of policies for migrant protection. The Brazil Plan of Action provides one potentially relevant framework to help to do so.
- *Working with states to provide basic services.* Many public services are jeopardised by criminal violence. A strong humanitarian assessment of potential areas for intervention and programming – above all in health, education, and protection – would help develop a broader and better-coordinated agenda for institutional improvement and civilian protection.
- *Systematic strengthening of normative systems.* Contribute to a systematic review of existing national normative frameworks and strengthen regional and national mechanisms which can ensure the protection of people affected by violence and displacement.

Notes

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 48. Interview with IDMC, June 2015.
 49. This figure includes citizens' social security contributions. In Northern Triangle countries, the tax burden in Guatemala is the lowest (13.6 per cent in 2011, including social security). See Economic Commission of Latin America and the Caribbean. 2013. *Fiscal Panorama of Latin America and the Caribbean*. Santiago de Chile: ECLAC, p.10. <http://www.cepal.org/en/publications/fiscal-panorama-latin-america-and-caribbean-tax-reform-and-renewal-fiscal-covenant>
 50. Interview with IDMC April 2015. Details of spending on security sector for states in Central America can be found in RESDAL. 2013. *Índice de Seguridad Pública Centroamérica: Costa Rica, El Salvador, Guatemala, Honduras, Nicaragua y Panamá*. Buenos Aires: RESDAL. <http://www.resdal.org/libro-seg-2013/indice-seguridad-publica-2013.html>
 51. According to the Latin American Public Opinion Project (LAPOP), 80 per cent of those surveyed across Latin America in 2014 believe state corruption to be common or very common. These figures are largely unchanged over the past decade. See LAPOP-Vanderbilt University. *The Political Culture of Democracy in the Americas 2014*, chapter 5. http://www.vanderbilt.edu/lapop/ab2014/AB2014_Comparative_Report_English_V3_revised_011315_W.pdf. Pew Research also reports higher rates of perception of crime and corruption in state and security bodies in Latin America compared to other regions (see Pew Research Center. 2014. *Crime and Corruption Are Top Problems in Emerging and Developing Countries*. 06/11/14) <http://bal.org/2014/11/06/crime-and-corruption-top-problems-in-emerging-and-developing-countries/country-issues-report-08/>. On worsening corruption in Mexico, see Amparo Casar, María. 2015. *México: Anatomía de la Corrupción*. Mexico City: CIDE. http://imco.org.mx/politica_buen_gobierno/mexico-anatomia-de-la-corrupcion/
 52. *The Guardian*. 2015. "Guatemala vice-president stands down amid customs corruption scandal." 09/05/15. [http://www.theguardian.com/world/2015/may/09/guatemala-vice-president-steps-down-amid-](http://www.theguardian.com/world/2015/may/09/guatemala-vice-president-steps-down-amid-customs-corruption-scandal)
[customs-corruption-scandal](http://www.theguardian.com/world/2015/may/09/guatemala-vice-president-steps-down-amid-customs-corruption-scandal)
 53. Many of these are mentioned in Briscoe, Ivan, Perdomo, Catalina and Uribe, Catalina (eds). 2014. *Illicit Networks and Politics in Latin America*. Stockholm: International IDEA <http://www.idea.int/publications/illegal-networks-and-politics-in-latin-america/en.cfm>
 54. *Ibid*, particularly pp.34-38.
 55. This concept of hybrid political-criminal elites stems from analysis of the phenomenon of parapólitica (parapolitics) in Colombia (see, for example, López, Claudia (ed). 2010. *Y refundaron la patria*. Bogotá: Corporación Nuevo Arco Iris). The relevance of the concept in the Northern Triangle and Mexico has risen following the criminal 'capture' of various municipalities. Cases include the Mosquito Coast of Honduras and Nicaragua; the Guatemalan departments of Zacapa and Chiquimula bordering Honduras, as well as Petén in the north-east of the country (see, for instance, International Crisis Group, *op. cit.*). Criminal capture of municipalities occurred in various regions of Mexico: between 2007 and 2014, 82 local mayors were killed (see Trejo, Guillermo and Ley, Sandra. 2015. "Municipios bajo fuego (1995-2014)." *Nexos* 01/02/15. <http://www.nexos.com.mx/?p=24024>
 56. Arce, Alberto, *op. cit.*, p.46.
 57. ACAPS. 2014. *Other Situations of Violence in the Northern Triangle of Central America. Humanitarian Impact*, p.25. <http://www.acaps.org/img/documents/o-2014-07-31-osv-hum-impact.pdf>
 58. *El Tiempo*. 2015. "Taxistas, una carrera entre la extorsión y la muerte en Honduras." 06/05/15. For similar reasons, bus drivers have the most dangerous profession in Guatemala.
 59. Rivera, Ruelas, Herrera Cuello, Flores and Flores Pino, "Chapter 2: Honduras," in *The Center for Gender and Refugee Studies, op. cit.*
 60. Interview with IDMC May 2015. According to Oscar Martínez, Tenosique has fallen effectively under the control of local criminal groups allied to the Zetas cartel (Martínez, Oscar, *op. cit.* chapter 6). For more on the 2011 law and its limits, see Albuja, Sebastián, *op. cit.*, pp.128-129.
 61. Isacson, A., Meyer, M. and Morales, G. 2014. *Mexico's Other Border: Security, Migration and the Humanitarian Crisis at the Line with Central America*. Washington Office on Latin America. <http://www.wola.org/files/mxgt/report/>
 62. Comisión Nacional de Derechos Humanos. 2011. *Informe Especial sobre Secuestro de Migrantes en México*. Mexico City: CNDH, p. 27. http://www.cndh.org.mx/sites/all/doc/Informes/Especiales/2011_secigrantes.pdf
 63. Interviews with IDMC and Martínez, Oscar, *op. cit.*, pp.3-6, 32.
 64. *Una Cacería de Migrantes*, three-part video report

- by Animal Político: <http://www.animalpolitico.com/caceriademigrantes/index.html>. According to this report, agents working for Grupo Beta – a Mexican organisation tasked with providing basic humanitarian aid to migrants – tip off INM authorities so that undocumented migrants can be arrested.
65. Keen, David. 2008. *Complex Emergencies*. Cambridge: Polity Press.
 66. Martin, Susan *et al.* (eds). 2014. *Crisis Migration*. London: Routledge.
 67. See papers in the series, Humanitarian Action in Situations Other than War : <http://www.hasow.org/>
 68. See papers in Clingendael/NOREF series: <http://www.clingendael.nl/publication/non-conventional-armed-violence-new-challenges-and-responses>
 69. On resilience see the International Federation of the Red Cross. 2012. *The road to resilience: bridging relief and development for a more sustainable future*. Geneva: IFRC. <http://www.ifrc.org/PageFiles/g6178/1224500-Road%20to%20resilience-EN-LowRes%20%282%29.pdf>
 70. This was the pretext for the murder of Christian Poveda, director of the 2009 film *La Vida Loca* about the Mara gangs of El Salvador, who was shot after the film's release. Carroll, Rory. 2011. "Killers of filmmaker Christian Poveda jailed." *The Guardian* 11/03/11. <http://www.theguardian.com/world/2011/mar/11/christian-poveda-murders-jailed>
 71. See <https://www.icrc.org/en/document/mexico-and-central-america-people-deprived-their-freedom>
 72. For example, Wennmann, Achim. 2014. "Negotiated Exits from Organized Crime? Building Peace in Conflicts and Crime-affected Contexts." *Negotiation Journal*, Vol. 30. Issue 3, pp.255-273.
 73. However, MS-13 does practice extortion in its home communities in El Salvador.
 74. Von Einsiedel, Sebastian. 2014. *Major Recent Trends in Violent Conflicts*. United Nations University Centre for Policy Research. <http://i.unu.edu/media/cpr.unu.edu/post/468/MajorRecentTrendsInViolentConflict-Dec2014.pdf>
 75. This understanding lies behind the strategy adopted by Cure Violence, a US NGO, which aims to reduce the violence that occurs within communities as a result of interpersonal disputes in a context of easy available firearms and exposure to criminal activity. Cure Violence is currently active in San Pedro Sula, Honduras.
 76. "In Honduras there is no longer a concept of community beyond very private circles of family members or work colleagues, in which everyone already knows one another." Arce, Alberto, *op. cit.*, p.99.
 77. Adams, Tani, *op. cit.*
 78. Olson, 2015. *op. cit.* p. 2.
 79. These were all interventions mentioned by an informant from an international NGO specialising in child protection.
 80. For more information, see; <http://www.state.gov/r/pa/prs/ps/2015/03/238138.htm> and <https://www.whitehouse.gov/the-press-office/2015/03/03/fact-sheet-support-alliance-prosperity-northern-triangle>
 81. See: <http://www.cispes.org/programs/supporting-social-movements/press-release-civil-society-organizations-express-urgent-concerns-proposed-alliance-prosperity-plan-northern-triangle-summit-americas/>
 82. A figure provided by an interviewed UN representative.
 83. Rivera, L. G. *et al*, p.112. Boys of this age are eligible for shelter provided by the Casa Alianza NGO.
 84. It was reported in both countries that studies are needed into the violent death of deported migrant children. One such study is now underway in Honduras.
 85. For more information on the IRCS's exempt status see; <https://www.icrc.org/eng/resources/documents/article/other/5wsd9g.htm>
 86. IDMC interviews. See also Misión de Observación Civil, *op. cit.*, p.3.
 87. See: <http://www.unhcr.org/45dc19084.html>
 88. See: <http://www.acnur.org/cartagena30/en/brazil-declaration-and-plan-of-action/>

About IDMC

The Internal Displacement Monitoring Centre (IDMC) is the leading source of information and analysis on internal displacement. For the millions of people worldwide displaced within their own country, IDMC plays a unique role as a global monitor and evidence-based advocate to influence policy and action by governments, UN agencies, donors, international organisations and NGOs.

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