

Paper in progress

Migrants, Wars and Borders in Central America, México and the US.

Sergio Aguayo (Seminar on Violence and Peace, El Colegio de México) and Manuel Pérez Aguirre (Ph.D. Candidate, Essex University)

University of California, San Francisco.
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In June 2019 the North American Fortress was born. The governments of the United States and Mexico agreed to tighten the controls in their common border and in the border that Mexico share with Guatemala and Belize.

The sequence is well known. On May 19, 2019 Donald Trump informed that “we are now asking that Mexico immediately do its fair share to stop the use of its territory as a conduit for illegal immigration into our country”. If Mexico ignored the request, tariffs would be imposed. Mexico did react and on June 7 the two countries issued a Joint Declaration:

- a) “Mexico will take unprecedented steps to increase enforcement to curb irregular migration, to include the deployment of its National Guard throughout Mexico, giving priority to its southern border”;
- b) “The United States will immediately expand the implementation of the existing Migrant Protection Protocols (MPP) across its entire Southern Border”; and,
- c) “The United States and Mexico welcome the Comprehensive Development Plan launched by the Government of Mexico in concert with the Governments of El Salvador, Guatemala and Honduras to promote these goals”.

It is a logical reaction. Governments want to be sovereign about their borders. It is, however, a policy based on two wrong assumptions: 1) the governments control the borders; and 2) the rights of the migrants are respected because of the MPP – the “Remain in Mexico”.

Reality is different. There is sufficient evidence to argue that organized crime controls the main migrant routes and also parts of the Southern and Northern borders. One consequence is that the migrants have to face government officials and aggressive criminals protected by corrupt state agents.

Today’s events are consequence of a long history in which different wars have influenced migrants and borders.

World War II

When the US entered the war in December 1941 they needed workers to replace those who went into the army. They negotiated with Mexico the Bracero Program that started in 1942 and ended in 1964. It was a migration regulated by governments that created the migratory networks that would transform the demographic composition of the United States.

The Central American Wars and the end of the Cold War

The United States implemented policies that exacerbated the Central American conflicts. Millions were displaced. Millions made the journey to the United States using the routes and infrastructure that have been created by the Mexican braceros. The Central American Exodus created new migratory networks.

Those conflicts overlapped with the War on Drugs declared by president Ronald Reagan in 1986 and the fall of the Berlin Wall in 1989. When the Cold War ended the Pentagon redeployed a very powerful radar system. It was used to seal the Caribbean to the planes transporting cocaine from Colombia. It became operational in 1993 the same year that Pablo Escobar Gaviria –the head of the Medellín Cartel-- died. The cocaine that was sent to the United States through the Caribbean was deviated to Central America and Mexico. The empowerment of the Mexican Cartels was the logical consequence.

During those same years the US reached a bipartisan consensus: the Southern border had to be controlled. It was the beginning of the end of the open borders in North America. In 1994 began the construction of the wall in Tijuana and some other places along the border.

The Narco Wars

In the 21st Century Mexican Cartels have become the most powerful criminal organization in human history. Some concentrate in drugs, some others also trade arms, launder money and take advantage of migrants. CREO QUE SERÍA MÁS CORRECTO DECIR: Some concentrate in drugs, but arms trafficking, kidnapping, money laundering and human trafficking, among others, have gained relevance in the criminal portfolio.

The Seminar on Violence and Peace (coordinated by Sergio Aguayo) will have a better understanding of the Zetas rationale in the treatment of migrants when we finish the analysis of the judicial files of two massacres: San Fernando (72 bodies August 2010) and Cadereyta (49 victims, May 2012). Most of the victims were from Central and South America and some other countries.

The judicial documents of the two massacres are about 45 thousand pages. It is an analysis that we will do in coordination with the Fundación para la Justicia y el Estado Democrático de Derecho coordinated by Ana Lorena Delgadillo (this organization represents legally the families of some of the victims).

So far, we have evidence that migrants are used 1) as hostages to obtain ransom from the families in the US (they are a very important source of income); 2) they are also inputs for different criminal activities: prostitution, organ traffic, “mules” and recruits for the wars; and 3) some of them are selected to be tortured and executed as a lesson for other migrants.

The border in 2019 and beyond

Research confirm the analysis we have done in shelters for unaccompanied minors. It is consistent with reports like the one presented by Human Rights First in December 2018: *Refugee Blockade: The Trump Administration's Obstruction of Asylum Claims at the Border*

The 91 interviews of the research on shelters were done before the two governments reached an understanding in June 2019.

1. 65 % have been threatened in their home countries.
2. They have been mistreated by officers of the two countries.
3. There are important differences in the treatment they received in public and private shelters.
4. The case of the Tijuana YMCA Home. They are protected from organized crime. Lawyers from the US help them to process their asylum.

After the formal agreement between Mexico and the US the situation of the unaccompanied children has deteriorated.

HUMANITARIAN AND RESEARCH CHALLENGES

We need a better understanding of the situation in the border and in the migrant routs. In concrete, which parts of the Southern and Northern borders are controlled by the Governments and by the Cartels? What are the similarities and differences in Soconusco, Petén and Belice? And in El Paso-Juárez and the Northeast and Northwest?

Are migrants treated better or worse in the different localities? What is the situation of migrants in the category of MPP that remain in Mexico?

Do governments, NGOs and international organizations have specific protocols to deal with the presence of organized crime? Is the Mexican National Guard protecting migrants from organized crime?

UNCHR is already promoting a change in the definition of “refugee”. Taking Mexico's Declaration in 2004 as starting point, which did not state criminal organizations or violence as crucial factors, in 2014, the Brazil Declaration openly declared that “new international protection needs” require accepting the possibility that refugees can be created by “transnational organized crime”. This idea has been repeated in the San José Declaration (2016) and the San Pedro Sula Declaration (2017). How is this expansion translating into concrete policies in the border?

These are some of the research questions created by a new situation in the borders. The governments of the two most important countries are imposing severe controls to migration. A working hypothesis is that organized crime has already adapted to the new situation and are finding ways to continue the exploitation and mistreatment of migrants. Among many other things, that leads to a conclusion: any analysis of the borders must take into consideration the presence of organized crime.

There would be concrete benefits of understanding better the role played by organized crime in the borders and routes travelled by migrants.

1. A cartography of the most dangerous spots updated periodically can be very useful for humanitarian organizations and victims;
2. It is possible that an atlas of atrocities –and of the complicities of corrupt officials— could push governments to adopt policies and implement programs to reduce the abuses suffered by migrants. It can also strengthen the importance of paying attention to the root causes in Central America with the development of Central America; and,
3. More clarity about the different practices of the different Cartels can perhaps move some of them to curtail some of the excesses committed.

We are facing a situation without precedent. The North American Fortress is under construction. Migration will continue. The defense of human rights and dignity requires a more detailed knowledge about the role played by organized crime, an actor not present in previous wars.