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Exodus from the Northern Triangle

Russell Crandall

Sometime in 2018, Honduran citizen Manuela Hernández decided she could no longer pay a local gang's \$50-a-month 'war tax'. Her alternative to paying it was a step that countless other Hondurans have made: to migrate with her young daughter to the United States. 'I have to go', she told *Wall Street Journal* correspondent Ryan Dube. 'You can't have a life with the gangs', she said, miming the process of having her throat cut.¹ Fellow San Pedro Sula resident Erasmus Salinas, a 64-year-old street vendor, told Dube a similar story. Gangs killed his brother-in-law a few years ago, but he has little hope authorities will apprehend the perpetrators. 'There is no justice', he said. Legions more desperate people from El Salvador and Guatemala, which together with Honduras make up the so-called Northern Triangle of Central America, have faced a similar choice: to endure terrible conditions at home, or to seek a better life elsewhere.

There is little reason to doubt these grim accounts of life in the Northern Triangle. Médecins Sans Frontières recently described the region as suffering 'unprecedented levels of violence outside a war zone', adding that 'citizens are murdered with impunity' and that 'kidnappings and extortion are daily occurrences. Non-state actors perpetuate insecurity and forcibly recruit individuals into their ranks, and use sexual violence as a tool of intimidation and control.'² Girls as young as 11 are taken as *jainas*, or sex slaves, and boys are forcibly recruited into the gangs.³

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In 2017, 1,616 people were violently killed in tiny El Salvador compared with a total of 953 across Spain, Switzerland, Portugal and the Netherlands.⁴ Yet few homicides result in judicial punishments. El Salvador's minister of justice and security, Mauricio Ramírez Landaverde, recently acknowledged that gangs are so prevalent that 'you don't know where the state ends and the criminal organizations begin'.⁵ As Dagoberto Gutiérrez, a former commander of the Marxist FMLN insurgency, lamented in a recent interview: 'We are living in the worst war of our history, but no one wants to acknowledge it as a war.'⁶

To some extent, the myriad ills afflicting the Northern Triangle are nothing new: the region has been afflicted by corruption, domestic violence, extortion, male underemployment and adolescent recruitment into gangs, among other problems, ever since its constituent countries came into being in the first half of the nineteenth century.⁷ In the twentieth century, seeking to emulate Fidel Castro's spectacular revolutionary triumph in Cuba in 1959, Marxist guerrillas in all three countries (though far less so in Honduras) picked up arms to topple military juntas or civilian governments. The Guatemalan revolution lasted from 1960 to 1996, while the Salvadoran revolution raged from 1980 to 1992.

Although the end of the Cold War bolstered the role of the ballot box in these previously war-torn nations, this was not enough to yield adequate state institutions or to confer sufficient legitimacy on democratic governments. Making matters worse, drug traffickers began shifting their transit routes for cocaine through Central America as their once-preferred maritime routes came under pressure during the US-led 'war on drugs'. The still-festering wounds of the Cold War era and the weaknesses of the quasi-democratic era that followed have been exploited by gangs and other malignant actors to further destabilise the Northern Triangle in what has become a vicious downward cycle: civilian insecurity delegitimises vulnerable public institutions, while ineffective public institutions produce civilian insecurity.

Take the case of El Salvador, where two of the largest gangs, Mara Salvatrucha (MS-13) and Barrio 18, had an estimated 72,000 members in 2015.⁸ The country's defence ministry, which takes into account gang

members' relatives and children who have been forced to commit crimes, estimates that more than 500,000 Salvadorans (in a country with a total population of less than seven million) are involved with gangs.⁹ MS-13 is present in 248 of El Salvador's 262 municipalities, and rakes in \$600,000 a month in extortion revenues from bus operators and other small- and medium-sized retail businesses.¹⁰ Indeed, MS-13 and Barrio 18 could well be El Salvador's largest employers, besting multinational textile outfits such as Hanesbrands Inc. and Fruit of the Loom. Carlos Argueta, a former gang member who once brought in \$1,000 per month extorting his neighbours, explained to Dube that 'one of the main reasons the gangs are so strong [is that] if someone offers you \$25 to sell drugs or do an errand, a lot of times that's the only door you'll find'.¹¹

Enter the caravans

A logical response to conditions like these is to flee, as many Central Americans have done, mostly to Mexico and the United States. Each year, around half a million migrants enter Mexico, overwhelmingly from Northern Triangle countries.¹² (In 2015, Mexico returned nearly 200,000 of them to their home countries, thereby preventing them from potentially reaching the US.¹³) As of 2013, there were as many as three million people born in Honduras, Guatemala and El Salvador living in the United States – up from about 1.5m in 2000.¹⁴ In other words, around 10% of the Northern Triangle's 30m citizens have relocated to the US.

Of course, violence and criminality are not the only reasons why people leave Central America. Economic underperformance is chronic. Dube spoke to teenager Iván Buezo in Honduras after he had been returned from the US in 2018. He was already planning to make his way back to *el norte*, explaining that 'You can't make any money here'. His daily wage as a farm worker was a paltry \$5.¹⁵ In 2018, a surge in Guatemalan migration was driven by economic hardships and food shortages in the country's majority ethnic-Mayan highland communities.¹⁶ The pull of familial ties is yet another driver: in a single Catholic parish in El Salvador, for example, more than one in two children had a parent living outside the country as of 2016.¹⁷ Young people often arrive at the border by themselves.¹⁸

Compared to the political furore surrounding the resettlement of Middle Eastern refugees in the United States, the influx of Northern Triangle migrants had been strangely absent from the American domestic political debate. Donald Trump made much of migration flows from Mexico during his election campaign in 2015, infamously saying when announcing his candidacy that:

When Mexico sends its people, they're not sending their best ... They're sending people that have lots of problems, and they're bringing those problems with us. They're bringing drugs. They're bringing crime. They're rapists. And some, I assume, are good people.¹⁹

Yet many of the people presenting themselves at the US–Mexico border aren't Mexicans, but rather Central Americans. In 2016, just under half of the individuals arrested near the border were from the Northern Triangle, a jump from 13% in 2010.²⁰ Many of these requested asylum from US border authorities. Between 2010 and 2016, asylum pleas from Northern Triangle citizens swelled by 800%,²¹ and between October 2017 and June 2018, 76% of the 73,000 asylum claimants interviewed by US officials demonstrated a 'credible fear' of returning home.²² While fewer than one in ten are likely to be granted asylum, in most cases claimants are able to live and work legally in the US while awaiting their appearance before an immigration court (the system has a backlog of almost 800,000 cases).²³ Some of those that are rejected will be arrested, inducted into gangs in US prisons and then repatriated, where the cycle will begin anew. Others will have had children who will be American citizens under the United States' citizenship law.

Seeking protection from gangs and other predators, and encouraged by indications that asylum seekers can bolster their case by travelling with their families, there has been a surge in the number of families arriving at the US border together, sometimes as part of large migrant 'caravans'. In September 2018, US Border Patrol reportedly arrested 16,658 family members travelling together; and the total for fiscal year 2018 broke 100,000 for the first time.²⁴ According to the *Washington Post's* Nick Miroff, 'Families are coming in caravans and on their own because it works. Only 1.4% percent of migrant

family members from Guatemala, Honduras and El Salvador who crossed the border illegally in 2017 have been deported to their home countries.²⁵

In April 2018, President Trump expressed outrage at reports that a 1,200-strong caravan had set out for Mexico, apparently en route to the United States.²⁶ (In the end, only a few hundred of these migrants managed to make it to the US border.²⁷) Trump is said to have demanded during a meeting at the Oval Office that US border officials ‘close the whole thing!’²⁸ It apparently took Trump’s aides telling him that such a move would cost billions in lost bilateral trade for the president to back down.²⁹ Trump had a similar reaction upon hearing that a caravan originating in Honduras was on the move in October 2018. Over several days, he told his supporters both in person at campaign-style rallies and via Twitter that he would close the US–Mexico border and consider military action to defend it.³⁰ He also threatened to cut off aid to the Northern Triangle governments if they ‘allow their citizens, or others, to journey through their borders and up to the United States, with the intention of entering our country illegally’.³¹ Tweeting on 22 October, Trump wrote:

Sadly, it looks like Mexico’s Police and Military are unable to stop the Caravan heading to the Southern Border of the United States. Criminals and unknown Middle Easterners are mixed in. I have alerted Border Patrol and Military that this is a National Emerg[ency] ... Every time you see a Caravan ... blame the Democrats for not giving us the votes to change our pathetic Immigration Laws!³²

In what was dismissed as both a cynical electoral ploy and an inappropriate – even illegal – use of the armed forces in a domestic context, Trump ordered 5,900 active-duty personnel to the borderlands of Texas, California and Arizona just days before the midterm election on 6 November, despite the caravan still being more than 1,000 kilometres away from the border.³³ A few weeks later, the Pentagon acknowledged that the deployment had cost \$72m – and would cost even more should it continue.³⁴

There have even been media reports that, goaded by his nationalistic anti-immigration policy adviser Stephen Miller,³⁵ Trump has been toying with

the idea of restoring the zero-tolerance immigration policy that resulted in migrant children being separated from their parents at the US border in the first half of 2018.³⁶ Leading up to the midterm elections, the president described the vote as a referendum on his immigration policies – ‘an election of the caravan’. Although Trump’s border campaign might have bolstered support in already safe rural areas, the Republican Party lost 40 seats in the House of Representatives, many of them in more moderate suburban and exurban districts.³⁷

On 25 November, what had been a slow-moving saga erupted into bedlam and violence when an especially despairing subgroup of the caravan (the first phase of which had arrived in Tijuana, Mexico, a week prior and been consolidated in wretched conditions at a makeshift camp) attempted to walk across the border at San Ysidro, a high-traffic land crossing between San Diego and Tijuana.³⁸ A few individuals threw rocks at US agents, who responded with tear gas. The San Ysidro facility was then closed for several hours.³⁹

In the midst of the chaos, Reuters photographer Kim Hyung-Hoon captured a soon-to-go-viral image of a Honduran girl retching from the gas. Attempting to deflect the impression that his policy had led to the traumatising of defenceless children, Trump insisted that agents had acted in self-defence. He then threatened to ‘close the border permanently’.⁴⁰ High-ranking Democrats such as California Governor-elect Gavin Newsom condemned the situation, with Newsom tweeting, ‘These children are bare-foot. In diapers. Choking on tear gas. Women and children who left their lives behind – seeking peace and asylum – were met with violence and fear. That’s not my America. We’re a land of refuge. Of hope. Of freedom. And we will not stand for this.’⁴¹

A risky experiment

An irony of Trump’s bombastic yet politically expedient rhetoric about cutting off aid to Northern Triangle countries is that his own administration has spoken of the need for these countries to heal themselves. During a three-country visit to Central America in June 2018, Vice President Mike Pence reportedly urged his hosts ‘to strengthen the rule of law, to publicly

discourage their citizens from attempting the journey north, and to strengthen their economies to provide economic opportunity at home'.⁴² He did not explain how cutting off roughly \$200m in annual development aid to El Salvador, Guatemala and Honduras would help these countries fulfil his plea.

After an unprecedented number of unaccompanied youths arrived at the Texas border seeking asylum in summer 2014, the Obama administration responded with the Alliance for Prosperity, a \$750m emergency aid package to help Northern Triangle governments with anti-corruption and economic initiatives. The recipient governments themselves pledged \$8.6 billion to confront the crisis.⁴³ Democratic Senator Patrick Leahy, a proponent of the programme, told *New Yorker* reporter Jonathan Blitzer earlier this year that 'The whole premise has been that our engagement with these countries, our support for the Alliance for Prosperity, our significant investment are about promoting stability and security and economic opportunities, in the belief that, over time, it will reduce the incentives for people to leave.'⁴⁴ Of course, people have continued to attempt the journey to the US despite this assistance. The question is how many more would have made the journey in the absence of the Alliance for Prosperity, and how many more will make it if the funding is cut off.

Trump may be willing to run that experiment. Already, his administration has been scaling back a humanitarian programme known as Temporary Protected Status (TPS) that had allowed Hondurans and Salvadorans (among others) to live and work legally in the United States following a hurricane in Honduras in 1998 and a pair of earthquakes in El Salvador in 2001.⁴⁵ By terminating the TPS of these two countries, the future of 220,000 Hondurans and Salvadorans legally resident in the US has been thrown into doubt. Their return to their home countries seems likely to place additional burdens on states that are already in crisis. The caravans that cause so much upset in the White House may simply become larger and more frequent the more the Trump administration seeks to implement its restrictive agenda.

While there is little indication that the Northern Triangle's endemic ills will abate anytime soon, there is plenty of evidence that well-considered social, public-security and military programmes can have some effect by,

for example, making a dent in the region's horrifyingly high homicide rates. Some of the innovative and necessary reforms that are already under way, such as the modernisation of El Salvador's sole forensics lab and the building of new prosecutors' quarters, are funded by Washington. Yet even dramatic improvements in regional states' civic life and economic prospects would not guarantee that the attraction of a new life in Mexico or the United States would diminish. Trump and his cohort believe that the best way to deter unwanted newcomers – asylum seekers or otherwise – is to ensure that their attempts to cross into the United States fail, as symbolised by the president's ongoing attempts to build his 'big, beautiful wall'. This might make sense from a political perspective given that 90% of Republicans approve of his hardline stance on 'border security'.⁴⁶ Yet the Democratic Party's sizeable midterm-election gains in the House of Representatives demonstrate that Trump's reduction of the complicated issue of Northern Triangle migration to political red meat for his conservative base does not ensure broader electoral success – and could well contribute to his political downfall in 2020 if Sun Belt and Rust Belt suburban voters are swayed by images like Kim Hyung-Hoon's or Twitter feeds like Newsom's.

Notes

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