

1 Exodus from the Northern 2 Triangle

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

17 There is little reason to doubt these grim accounts of life in the Northern
18 Triangle. Médecins Sans Frontières recently described the region as suffering
19 'unprecedented levels of violence outside a war zone', adding that 'citizens
20 are murdered with impunity' and that 'kidnappings and extortion are daily
21 occurrences. Non-state actors perpetuate insecurity and forcibly recruit
22 individuals into their ranks, and use sexual violence as a tool of intimidation
23 and control.'² Girls as young as 11 are taken as *jainas*, or sex slaves, and boys
24 are forcibly recruited into the gangs.³ In 2017, 1,616 people were violently
25 killed in tiny El Salvador compared with a total of 953 across Spain,
26 Switzerland, Portugal and the Netherlands.⁴ Yet few homicides result in
27 judicial punishments. El Salvador's minister of justice and security, Mauricio
28 Ramírez Landaverde, recently acknowledged that gangs are so prevalent
29 'you don't know where the state ends and the criminal organizations begin.'⁵
30 As Dagoberto Gutiérrez, a former commander of the Marxist FMLN

1 insurgency, lamented in a recent interview: 'We are living in the worst war
2 of our history, but no one wants to acknowledge it as a war.'⁶

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

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

25 Take the case of El Salvador, where two of the largest gangs, Mara
26 Salvatrucha (MS-13) and Barrio 18, had an estimated 72,000 members in
27 2015.⁹ The country's defence ministry, which takes into account gang
28 members' relatives and children who have been forced to commit crimes,
29 estimates that more than 500,000 Salvadorans (in country with a total
30 population of less than 7 million) are involved with gangs.¹⁰ MS-13 is present
31 in 248 of El Salvador's 262 municipalities, and rakes in \$600,000 a month in
32 extortion revenues from bus operators and other small- and medium-sized
33 retail businesses.¹¹ Indeed, MS-13 and Barrio 18 could well be El Salvador's
34 largest employers, besting multinational textile outfits such as Hanesbrands

1 Inc. and Fruit of the Loom. Carlos Argueta, a former gang member who once
2 brought in \$1,000 per month extorting his neighbours, explained to Dube that
3 'one of the main reasons the gangs are so strong [is that] if someone offers
4 you \$25 to sell drugs or do an errand, a lot of times that's the only door you'll
5 find.'¹²

6 **Enter the caravans**

7 A logical response to conditions like these is to flee, as many Central
8 Americans have done, mostly to Mexico and the United States. Each year,
9 around half a million migrants enter Mexico, overwhelmingly from Northern
10 Triangle countries.¹³ (In 2015, Mexico returned nearly 200,000 of them to their
11 home countries, thereby preventing them from potentially reaching the US.¹⁴)
12 As of 2013, there were as many as three million people born in Honduras,
13 Guatemala and El Salvador living in the United States – up from about 1.5m
14 in 2000.¹⁵ In other words, around 10% of the NTCA's 30m citizens have
15 relocated to the US.

16 Of course, violence and criminality are not the only reasons why people
17 leave Central America. Economic underperformance is chronic. Dube spoke
18 to teenager Iván Buezo in Honduras after he had been returned from the US
19 in 2018. He was already planning to make his way back to *el norte*, explaining
20 that 'You can't make any money here.' His daily wage as a farm worker was
21 a paltry \$5.¹⁶ In 2018, a surge in Guatemalan migration was driven by
22 economic hardships and food shortages in the country's majority ethnic-
23 Mayan highland communities.¹⁷ The pull of familial ties is yet another driver:
24 in a single Catholic parish in El Salvador, for example, more than one in two
25 children had a parent living outside the country as of 2016.¹⁸ Young people
26 often arrive at the border by themselves.¹⁹

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

1 When Mexico sends its people, they're not sending their best ... They're sending
2 people that have lots of problems, and they're bringing those problems with us.
3 They're bringing drugs. They're bringing crime. They're rapists. And some, I
4 assume, are good people.²⁰

5 Yet many of the people presenting themselves at the US–Mexico border aren't
6 Mexicans, but rather Central Americans. In 2016, just under half of the
7 individuals arrested near the border were from the Northern Triangle, a jump
8 from 13% in 2010.²¹ Many of these requested asylum from US border
9 authorities. Between 2010 to 2016, asylum pleas from Northern Triangle
10 citizens swelled by 800%,²² and between October 2017 and June 2018, 76% of
11 the 73,000 asylum claimants interviewed by US officials demonstrated a
12 'credible fear' of returning home.²³ While fewer than 1 in 10 are likely to be
13 granted asylum, in most cases asylum claimants are able to live and work
14 legally in the US while awaiting their appearance before an immigration
15 court (the system has a backlog of almost 800,000 cases).²⁴ Some of those that
16 are rejected will be arrested, inducted into gangs in US prisons, and then
17 repatriated, where the cycle will begin anew. Others will have had children
18 who will be American citizens under the United States' citizenship law.

19 Seeking protection from gangs and other predators, and encouraged by
20 indications that asylum seekers can bolster their case by travelling with their
21 families, there has been a surge in the number of families arriving at the US
22 border together, sometimes as part of large migrant 'caravans'. In September
23 2018, US Border Patrol reportedly arrested 16,658 family members travelling
24 together; and the total for fiscal year 2018 broke 100,000 for the first time.²⁵
25 According to the *Washington Post's* Nick Miroff, 'Families are coming in
26 caravans and on their own because it works. Only 1.4% percent of migrant
27 family members from Guatemala, Honduras and El Salvador who crossed
28 the border illegally in 2017 have been deported to their home countries.'²⁶

29 In April 2018, President Trump expressed outrage at reports that a 1,200-
30 strong caravan had set out for Mexico, apparently en route to the United
31 States.²⁷ (In the end, only a few hundred of these migrants managed to make
32 it to the US border.²⁸) Trump is said to have demanded during a meeting at
33 the Oval Office that US border officials 'close the whole thing!'³⁰ It apparently
34 took Trump's aides telling him that such a move would cost billions in lost

1 bilateral trade for the president to back down.³¹ Trump had a similar reaction
2 upon hearing that a caravan originating in Honduras was on the move in
3 October 2018. Over several days, he told his supporters both in person at
4 campaign-style rallies and via Twitter that he would close the US–Mexico
5 border and consider military action to defend it.³² He also threatened to cut
6 off aid to the Northern Triangle governments if they ‘allow their citizens, or
7 others, to journey through their borders and up to the United States, with the
8 intention of entering our country illegally’.³³ Tweeting on 22 October, Trump
9 wrote:

10 Sadly, it looks like Mexico’s Police and Military are unable to stop the Caravan
11 heading to the Southern Border of the United States. Criminals and unknown
12 Middle Easterners are mixed in. I have alerted Border Patrol and Military that
13 this is a National Emerg[ency] ... Every time you see a Caravan ... blame the
14 Democrats for not giving us the votes to change our pathetic Immigration Laws!³⁴

15 In what was dismissed as both a cynical electoral ploy and an
16 inappropriate – even illegal – use of the armed forces in a domestic context,
17 Trump ordered 5,900 active-duty personnel to the borderlands of Texas,
18 California and Arizona just days before the midterm election on 6 November,
19 despite the caravan still being more than 1,000 kilometres away from the
20 border.³⁵ A few weeks later, the Pentagon acknowledged that the deployment
21 had cost \$72 million – and would cost even more should it continue.³⁶

22 There have even been media reports that, goaded by his nationalistic anti-
23 immigration policy adviser Stephen Miller,³⁷ Trump has been toying with the
24 idea of restoring the zero-tolerance immigration policy that resulted in
25 migrant children being separated from their parents at the US border in the
26 first half of 2018 [ok?].³⁸ Leading up to the midterm elections, the president
27 described the vote as a referendum on his immigration policies – ‘an election
28 of the caravan’. Although Trump’s border campaign might have bolstered
29 support in already safe rural areas, the Republican Party lost 40 seats in the
30 House of Representatives, many of them in more moderate suburban and
31 exurban districts.³⁹

32 On 25 November, what had been a slow-moving saga erupted into bedlam
33 and violence when an especially despairing sub-group of the caravan (the
34 first phase of which had arrived in Tijuana, Mexico, a week prior and been

1 consolidated in wretched conditions at a makeshift camp) attempted to walk
2 across the border at San Isidro, a high-traffic land crossing between San Diego
3 and Tijuana.⁴⁰ A few individuals threw rocks at US agents, who responded
4 with tear gas. The San Isidro facility was then closed for several hours.⁴¹

5 In the midst of the chaos, Reuters photographer Kim Hyung-Hoon
6 captured a soon-to-go-viral image of a Honduran girl retching from the gas.
7 Attempting to deflect the impression that his policy had led to the
8 traumatising of defenceless children, Trump insisted that agents had acted
9 in self-defence. He then threatened to 'close the border permanently'.⁴² High-
10 ranking Democrats such as California Governor-elect Gavin Newsom
11 condemned the situation, with Newsom tweeting, 'These children are
12 barefoot. In diapers. Choking on tear gas. Women and children who left their
13 lives behind – seeking peace and asylum – were met with violence and fear.
14 That's not my America. We're a land of refuge. Of hope. Of freedom. And we
15 will not stand for this.'⁴³

16 **A risky experiment**

17 An irony of Trump's bombastic yet politically expedient rhetoric about
18 cutting off aid to Northern Triangle countries is that his own administration
19 has spoken of the need for these countries to heal themselves. During a three-
20 country visit to Central America in June 2018, Vice President Mike Pence
21 reportedly urged his hosts 'to strengthen the rule of law, to publicly
22 discourage their citizens from attempting the journey north, and to
23 strengthen their economies to provide economic opportunity at home'.⁴⁴ He
24 did not explain how cutting off roughly \$200 million in annual development
25 aid to El Salvador, Guatemala and Honduras would help these countries
26 fulfil his plea.

27 After an unprecedented number of unaccompanied youths arrived at the
28 Texas border seeking asylum in summer 2014, the Obama administration
29 responded with the Alliance for Prosperity, a \$750m emergency aid package
30 to help Northern Triangle governments with anti-corruption and economic
31 initiatives. The recipient governments themselves pledged \$8.6 billion to
32 confront the crisis.⁴⁵ Democratic Senator Patrick Leahy, a proponent of the
33 programme, told *New Yorker* reporter Jonathan Blitzer earlier this year that
34 'The whole premise has been that our engagement with these countries, our

1 support for the Alliance for Prosperity, our significant investment are about
2 promoting stability and security and economic opportunities, in the belief
3 that, over time, it will reduce the incentives for people to leave.⁴⁶ Of course,
4 people have continued to attempt the journey to the US despite this
5 assistance. The question is how many more would have made the journey in
6 the absence of the Alliance for Prosperity, and how many more will make it
7 if the funding is cut off.

8 Trump may be willing to run that experiment. Already, his administration
9 has been scaling back a humanitarian programme known as Temporary
10 Protected Status (TPS) that had allowed Salvadorans and Hondurans (among
11 others) to live and work legally in the United States following a pair of
12 earthquakes in El Salvador in 2001 and a hurricane in Honduras in 1998.⁴⁷ By
13 terminating the TPS status of these two countries, the future of 220,000
14 Hondurans and Salvadorans legally resident in the United States has been
15 thrown in doubt. Their return to their home countries seems likely to place
16 additional burdens on states that are already in crisis. The caravans that cause
17 so much upset in the White House may simply become larger and more
18 frequent the more the Trump administration seeks to implement its
19 restrictive agenda.

20 While there is little indication that the Northern Triangle's endemic ills
21 will abate anytime soon, there is plenty of evidence that well-considered
22 social programmes can have some effect by, for example, making a dent in
23 the region's horrifyingly high homicide rates. Yet even dramatic
24 improvements in regional states' civic life and economic prospects would not
25 guarantee that the attraction of a new life in Mexico or the United States
26 would diminish. Trump and his cohort believe that the best way to deter
27 unwanted newcomers – asylum seekers or otherwise – is to ensure that their
28 attempts to cross into the United States fail, as symbolised by the president's
29 ongoing attempts to build his 'big, beautiful wall'. This might make sense
30 from a political perspective given that 90% of Republicans approve of his
31 hardline stance on 'border security'.⁴⁸ Yet the Democratic Party's sizeable
32 midterm-election gains in the House of Representatives demonstrate that
33 Trump's reduction of the complicated issue of Northern Triangle migration
34 into political red meat for his conservative base does not ensure broader

1 electoral success – and could well contribute to his political downfall in 2020
 2 if Sun Belt and Rust Belt suburban voters are swayed by images like Kim
 3 Hyung-Hoon’s or Twitter feed’s like Governor Newsom’s.

4 Notes

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