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document 1 of 1

# MEXICO/CENTRAL AMERICA: Policies will fail migrants

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## Abstract

Mexico is becoming a buffer zone for thousands of US-bound Central American migrants.

Since a surge of undocumented minors arrived at the US border in 2014, the United States and Mexico have developed a strategy of coordinated containment aimed at stemming migrant flows. However, within four months of President Enrique Peña Nieto's announcement of a Southern Border Programme (PFS) on July 7, 2014, detentions of undocumented Central American migrants in Mexico almost doubled, suggesting that the wave is not ebbing, but is instead being held back in Mexico.

## Full Text

**SUBJECT:**Mexico is becoming a buffer zone for thousands of US-bound Central American migrants.

**SIGNIFICANCE:**Since a surge of undocumented minors arrived at the US border in 2014, the United States and Mexico have developed a strategy of coordinated containment aimed at stemming migrant flows. However, within four months of President Enrique Peña Nieto's announcement of a Southern Border Programme (PFS) on July 7, 2014, detentions of undocumented Central American migrants in Mexico almost doubled, suggesting that the wave is not ebbing, but is instead being held back in Mexico.

**ANALYSIS:** Impacts.

Mexico's strong record of migrant detentions and deportations is unlikely to stem the flow.

The varied causes of the migration tide raise doubts about the viability of US-Mexico containment strategies.

A lack of focus on multilateral migration frameworks will increase the risk of humanitarian crises.

Migration from Central America to the United States is driven by a number of factors including poverty, criminality and violence, family dynamics and the unintended effects of US laws regulating the detention and deportation of undocumented minors.

Push factors .

Migrants from El Salvador, Guatemala and Honduras are driven north by a vicious cycle of underdevelopment, poverty and insecurity.

The legacy of a series of civil wars, and an upsurge of drug-trafficking and transnational crime, have given these so-called 'Northern Triangle' countries some of the highest homicide rates in the world (see EL SALVADOR: Soaring violence prompts security rethink - May 11, 2015).

The damage inflicted by local Central American gangs is compounded by the presence of powerful Mexican and regional criminal organisations, seeking to develop links and bases of operations to run illicit migrant and drug markets. This has resulted in ever more violent criminal competition that has often been met with hardline policies that have exacerbated the suffering.

The governments of the Northern Triangle have called attention to the impact of failed, security-focused, counter-narcotics initiatives, such as Plan Colombia and the Merida Initiative, while paradoxically urging Washington to consider similar plans for Central America.

Although violence is perhaps the principal driver of migrant flows, behind Washington's efforts to emphasise socio-economic factors lies a reluctance to consider asylum and refugee petitions.

Moreover, despite the lack of extreme violence in Cuba, Cuban migrants receive special treatment in the United States, with numbers growing sharply in recent years, as the thaw of Washington-Havana relations has raised questions over the future of the so-called 'wet-foot, dry-foot' policy, that allows Cubans who make it to US soil to stay ( see CUBA: 'Opening' will be gradual and limited - June 1, 2015).

That surge in the number of Cuban migrants -- who usually work their way through Central America and Mexico from Ecuador -- puts even more pressure on Central American governments, and has seen both Costa Rica and Nicaragua temporarily close their borders to Cuban migrants over recent days, as they struggle to deal with the influx.

Containment efforts.

The tide of over 57,000 unaccompanied and undocumented minors arriving at the US border in 2014 took US authorities by surprise and saw Washington turn to Mexico to contain the surge (see CENTRAL AMERICA/US: No quick fix for migration crisis - July 21, 2014).

Terms for bilateral cooperation were agreed in June 2014, under which US authorities have sought to work with Mexico to tackle migration flows. Central American governments have in turn been expected to reintegrate returned migrants, while addressing the root causes of migration.

US authorities have sought to deter migrants through unilateral and bilateral efforts, including:

new detention centres;

increased deportations;

further border controls;

an increase in immigration judges and facilities to deal with minors; and,

increased penalties for people traffickers.

However, tighter regulations have failed to discourage migrants and have instead encouraged traffickers to raise their prices, causing more misery for their victims.

US policy towards Central America.

Over the years, US policy towards Central America has persistently prioritised security over development.

As the migrant crisis hit in 2014, total aid to the region, disbursed through the Foreign Operations Budget increased to nearly 333 million dollars, and on February 2, 2015 President Barack Obama's administration requested a 1-billion-dollar assistance package for Central America from Congress.

At least 80% of that was earmarked to fund economic development, civilian institutions and civil society.

Nevertheless, the prevailing perception among Central American governments is that the Obama administration will continue to prioritise security over multilateral cooperation, with Mexico acting as a containment barrier.

While the United States has praised Mexico's success in controlling its southern border, Central American governments have voiced disquiet regarding Mexico's role in containing and reversing migrant flows, criticising the security logic of the PFS, and calling for a human rights approach to migration controls.

Mexico's role in containing the migrant flow.

Pena Nieto's unveiling of the PFS came amid joint field visits to the southern border involving top US officials.

Publicised partly as an integral economic and social development plan, creating 'Special Economic Zones', the PFS's main goal is to bolster security on the southern border, by coordinating the work of Mexico's federal agencies, modernising the region's infrastructure and better controlling border crossings and migration routes.

While new strategies are intended to balance a humanitarian perspective with a mandate to tackle criminal actors and groups, critics claim that approaches are still too narrow and containment-focused. That view is reflected in the detention and deportation figures reported by the United States and Mexico. While the number of migrants detained by US authorities is expected to drop from 239,000 in 2014 to around 110,000 in 2015, Mexico's annual total could top 260,000.

Changing routes and criminal links.

Human rights activists have pointed to the unintended effects that tightened controls are having in diverting migrant flows, and multiplying and exacerbating the risks that face undocumented migrants. The temporary closure of a notorious train route, for example, has turned what used to be a relatively short -- albeit dangerous -- journey into four-to-five-day trip, exposing migrants to even more challenges. A dozen new migrant routes have since opened up, including a maritime route from Guatemala to Mexico's Pacific coast.

Experience along the US-Mexico and the Mexico-Guatemala border has shown that unilateral tighter controls can easily fuel corruption and exacerbate human rights violations. Migrants have been the targets of serious

human rights abuses, with criminal organisations, increasingly colluding with local police forces.

Mexican immigration authorities now figure prominently in that trend. Mexico's National Human Rights Commission reported that between June 2014 and June 2015 complaints about Mexican authorities increased 39%.

With the waves of migrants showing little sign of easing, the infiltration of immigration authorities by criminal groups could not only exacerbate the very issues that drive migration, but could also see Mexico bearing the brunt of another humanitarian crisis.

**CONCLUSION:** Without a strategy that addresses the complex mix of factors that are pushing migration flows, containment efforts will fail, with the costs of containment being transferred to Mexico. Mexico's inability to cope with that could exacerbate corruption, human rights violations and criminality.

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