

Dangerous Passage: Central America in Crisis and the Exodus of Unaccompanied Minors

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Chairman Menendez, Senator Corker, Members of the Senate Foreign Relations Committee, thank you for this opportunity to testify on the conditions in Central America that are driving out minors as well as adults. Meager employment prospects, high rates of violent crime, and limited state capacity to guarantee services and apply the rule of law in the northern triangle countries of El Salvador, Guatemala and Honduras—factors triggering continued migration to the United States—have been and will continue to have an impact on the well-being of Central America and Mexico, as well as ourselves.

IRI in Central America

The [International Republican Institute](#) (IRI) is a non-profit, non-partisan organization and one of the four core institutes of the [National Endowment for Democracy](#). Our mission is to encourage democracy in places where it is absent, help democracy become more effective where it is in danger, and share best practices in democratic processes and governance where it is flourishing. While the future of the northern triangle countries is up to the people who live there to decide, the United States can have a pivotal role in helping these societies find tools and solutions that will bring down the level of violence and increase prospects for personal economic advancement—two key elements in reducing the outflow of migrants.

Central America has long been a part of IRI's programs. In carrying out our mission to support more democratic, accountable government, we have striven to enhance civic participation at the sub-national level by increasing civil society organizations' capacity and linkages to civic and political leaders of all parties and levels of government. Moreover, we have encouraged officials at all levels to reach out to citizens to listen to their ideas and become more aware of their concerns. In this vein, we have specialized in the development of citizen security mechanisms that bridge the gap between citizens, municipalities and nationally-administered police programs. We have worked with public security officials at the national level, as well as municipal authorities, to adopt best practices that will make neighborhoods and communities safer. However, the amount of work to be done is huge and it cannot be done overnight.

Overview

Among the issues that most challenge neighboring governments and citizens are economics and safety. Poverty and violence are conditions that push people out. Behind these factors are conflicts, demographic trends and governance issues that determine whether these conditions will improve or get worse. Where people go depends on finding conditions nearby that are better than the ones they are leaving. In that regard, the United States has witnessed two broad migration trends. For almost a century, movements from Mexico have been accompanied by economic downturns and lagging reforms at home and better job prospects in the United States. Migration from Central America has taken place mostly within the last 30 years, triggered at first by internal conflicts and later by drug trafficking, high crime levels and gang violence.

Migration from Mexico has been much more massive, judging by U.S. border apprehensions that peaked in 2000 at almost 1.6 million.¹ Since economic conditions have improved, accompanied by internal reforms and Mexico's embrace of free trade, its migrant outflows have begun to subside. Central American flows were probably greatest during the period of internal conflicts during the 1980s when an estimated one million Salvadorans and Guatemalans came to the United States. There was a lull during the 1990s when peace accords were signed, then migration began to pick up, evidenced by 30,000 border apprehensions in 2000 to 142,000 in 2012.²

At the time when significant migration started, Central American countries (with the exception of Costa Rica) were making the difficult transition from military rule to democracy. Over time, the United States offered security and development assistance, political advice and trade benefits. For certain countries like El Salvador, Guatemala and Honduras (known as the "northern triangle"), the challenges were deeper and thus reforms have been halting and have taken longer. By their own accounts, they still have progress to make, largely in establishing rule of law, enhancing economic opportunity and improving governing processes.

Challenges to Governance

On the supply side, it would seem that the governments of El Salvador, Guatemala and Honduras should be more capable of stemming violent crime, which generally takes the form of murder, robbery, kidnappings, and extortion by street gangs. Yet for the past half-century, forces that continually tested their capacity to manage have challenged these three countries. In all cases, barriers to further progress suggest the need to improve the effectiveness of governance.

In the late 1970s, the large agricultural plantations on which these economies depended began to mechanize, a shift that drove increasing numbers of rural farmworkers (*campesinos*) out of the fields and into cities to find work for which they were barely educated and largely unprepared. Growing populations overwhelmed rudimentary school systems that could hardly educate average citizens beyond primary grades. The military governments at the time could neither deliver services nor deal with social changes taking place. Hostilities escalated between radicals and military governments in El Salvador and Guatemala that brought in huge numbers of weapons. The resulting turmoil left an opening for criminal networks to enter just as increasing drug consumption in the United States began to fuel them. Colombian drug trafficking operations sprang up where police—all part of the military at the time and dedicated mostly to military tasks—were absent. Clandestine airports began to dot the Caribbean coast of Honduras.

¹ *Yearbook of Immigration Statistics: 2012*, U.S. Department of Homeland Security at <http://www.dhs.gov/yearbook-immigration-statistics-2012-enforcement-actions>.

² *Ibid.*

Elections that brought in civilian governments in Honduras (1981), El Salvador (1984) and Guatemala (1984) were encouraging but created new sets of problems. Some were basic like setting up functioning government agencies led by civilian politicians who had little previous administrative experience. Others were more complex such as reducing corrupt practices in politics and business. Another was separating the police from the armed forces and establishing the rule of law. The United States also began deporting undocumented Central American juveniles that had arrived in the 1980s and fallen into the U.S. corrections system. Some took what they learned from U.S. gang culture and transferred it to their new home.

Gangs grew quickly, affiliating with U.S. groups, while taking in new deportees and unemployed youth from broken homes and informal farmworker families. In Guatemala's main cities, some clashed with Mexican drug mafias competing for territory. Not only were new, civilian police forces having trouble keeping up with existing criminal threats, they were under-resourced and, in the cases of Guatemala and Honduras, experienced several rounds of leadership changes.³ Lawmakers enacted new so-called "Hard Fist" (*Mano Dura*) laws intending to crack down, but weak courts and porous jails were unable to deal with the rising number of arrests. In Guatemala and Honduras, no social programs existed to supplant delinquent activity, as they did in neighboring Nicaragua—programs restructured from Sandinista youth indoctrination efforts of the 1980s.

Another, often overlooked obstacle to improved citizen security has been the prevailing model of governance in much of Latin America, in which power is heavily concentrated in the executive branch of the national government. El Salvador, Guatemala and Honduras have national ministries administering local schools, supplying most government services and controlling local police. In colonial times, central authorities appointed mayors and rarely delegated authority. In recent times, elected municipal governments have not enjoyed much more authority nor have mayors and councilmen had the administrative skills and experience to transparently manage public finances. Thus in today's complex world, centralization ensures that only a few politically connected communities and neighborhoods get meaningful attention and opportunities for citizen involvement at the community are slim. The bureaucratic bottlenecks centralization creates hampers development, contributes to economic stagnation and lagging improvements to neighborhoods that then become subject to criminal predation.

Building Capacity and Citizen Participation

While many Central American citizens and leaders would like to see these conditions change, progress is not always possible without some encouragement. In IRI's efforts to build governing capacity, IRI partners with citizens, civil society, and national and local authorities. Especially at the local level, where citizens have the most contact with

³ Stephen Johnson, Johanna Mendelson Forman, and Katherine Bliss, *Police Reform in Latin America—Implications for U.S. Policy*, Center for Strategic and International Studies, Washington, DC, February 2012, pp. 27-32.

governing officials, IRI programs in El Salvador, Guatemala and Honduras help strengthen the ability of municipalities to respond to citizen needs through a variety of best practices. These include opening budgets to public scrutiny, holding regular town hall meetings in each neighborhood or *barrio* to record and discuss citizen concerns, establishing community development offices to help start small businesses, and using digital media to increase contact with ordinary citizens as well as solicit feedback on policies and programs. All of this helps build citizen awareness of what public officials are doing and what they are supposed to do, as well as establish trust.

Regarding citizen security, IRI works at both national and local levels. In Guatemala, the national government has established a countrywide network of municipal security councils (MSCs) comprised of citizens and local government representatives charged to devise public safety recommendations under the national prevention strategy and serve as a bridge between citizens, municipal government and national police components. IRI runs workshops for these MSCs to help identify community safety problems and develop collaborative solutions. Peer exchanges encourage dialogue at the global level. As part of the IRI Rising Stars program, Guatemalan mayors have traveled to cities in Chile and Colombia to learn about innovative municipal security practices and ways to enhance citizen services.

In Puerto Cortés, Honduras, IRI has coordinated with the municipal government to train neighborhood leaders called *patronatos* in promoting community safety in coordination with local authorities and the police. Puerto Cortés is renowned for building its own command center staffed by local citizens who receive emergency calls and then dispatch national police units where they are needed. In the “Together for our CommUNITY” program, the local *patronatos* learn negotiation, trust-building and communication techniques to obtain more effective cooperation and information from citizens. IRI is hoping to replicate this practice in other Central American municipalities to help local authorities limit opportunities for criminal activities to flourish.

Conclusion

That Central America is experiencing a security crisis is nothing new. But as this issue has grabbed U.S. attention again with the arrival of unaccompanied minors, it seems more urgent. In Central America, the United States has been working with willing societies to establish stable governments ruled by popular will and economies open to citizen participation for more than 30 years. Ongoing challenges suggest that progress will depend on long-term strategies and a commitment to partner in reform.

Progress is being made. The U.S. Department of State’s Bureau of International Narcotics and Law Enforcement Affairs’ Model Precincts approach that was introduced in 2004 has helped lift standards in community policing and coincides with IRI’s focus on citizen inputs to local public safety plans. Coupled with municipality-by-municipality governance reform initiatives like IRI’s to build links of cooperation between citizens, local authorities and nationally administered police units, territory can be slowly recovered from criminal organizations and gangs. Beyond improving public safety, these efforts may have economic

value. Not long ago, the World Bank published estimates of the economic cost of crime and violence in Central America in 2011 as a percentage of gross domestic product (GDP). For El Salvador, the total costs amounted to nearly 11 percentage points. For Honduras, it was almost 10 percent and for Guatemala, it amounted to nearly 8 percent of GDP. If each country could reduce its homicide rate by 10 percent, the Bank estimated that GDP could potentially rise by almost a percentage point⁴ —an economic boost that could facilitate a rise in employment prospects, perhaps further reducing migration incentives.

Mr. Chairman, whatever actions the U.S. government decides, it should take into account the partnership it entered into with Central American countries 30 years ago to turn dictatorship into democratic rule. Most of the heavy lifting has been done by our partners. But when it comes to governance, there is much work left to be done.

Thank you.

⁴ “Crime and Violence in Central America-A Development Challenge,” The World Bank, 2011, pp. 7, 9.