

The Infamous Caravan 2019

A veracious account of Latinos struggle and façade of US politics

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Abstract

Escaping the brutality of their day to day reality thousands of Latin American people flee from their homelands to find a safe haven in the prospering and ever promising neighbour the United States of America. This article analyses the recent mass movement of immigrants from several Latin American countries like Honduras, El Salvador, and Guatemala to the borders of US-Mexico. It tries to unmask the ground realities of the International Refugee Rights and struggles of these asylum seekers. Under Trump administration policies of 'Zero Tolerances' towards the influx of migrants has significantly affected innocent masses. Since this mass movement involves the lands of Mexico-US border, it has significantly put pressure on Mexico as to how they react to such a situation considering both sides i.e. thousands of helpless migrant families and US administration. Hence, this article tries to convey not just the side of around 7,000 immigrants who travelled 4,000 Km for safety and livelihood but also how it affects the people on the receiving end (citizens of Mexico and USA). Lastly, in light of this humanitarian crisis, it incorporates some policy recommendations that will help in improving the situation for all the actors involved in this matter.

Keywords

Immigration, Crimes, Poverty, Zero tolerance policy, Trump Administration, Latin America.

Introduction

May 2019 recorded the 11- year highest inflow of migrants from Guatemala, Honduras, and El Salvador¹ when around 130,000 migrants were seized at the U.S.-Mexico border² and around 80% of them were families and unaccompanied minors.³ It is significant to note that these three countries have the highest incidence rate of gang violence, poverty, and food insufficiency and they are also referred to as the 'Northern Triangle'.⁴

The recent rise in migrant movement is mainly a result of push factors such as increasing crime rate, growing unemployment, internal instability and frequently occurring droughts. Several studies show that one major factor behind this new wave of the rising immigration issue is climate change and acute food insecurity. A study of Central American migrants by

the World Food Program last year found that nearly half described themselves as food insecure. According to Robert Albro, a researcher at the Center for Latin American and Latino Studies at American University, “The main reason people are moving is because they don’t have anything to eat. This has a strong link to climate change – we are seeing tremendous climate instability that is radically changing food security in the region.” Hence, US will be facing this issue even in coming years as well and thus, they will need caution and thoughtful policy measures instead of the current policy of Zero Tolerance which is rather short-term and like a bandage solution for a fracture.

Migrant Caravan

Immigration being the age-old phenomenon globally, but a recent surge in the mass movement of hundreds of thousands Latin Americans was seen like never before. They travelled in large groups which included men, women, children travelling alone as well as people travelling with their whole families toward US-Mexico border. This all started from a small group of migrants who started their long journey on foot from Honduras, crossing the border of El Salvador then Guatemala other asylum seekers joined the initial group forming a Caravan. These people made this rather impossible journey to escape their harsh realities of extreme poverty, gang violence, insecurity, unemployment, and extreme food insecurity. These people belong from the lower and middle class of the Northern Triangle (Honduras, El Salvador, and Guatemala) -living in rural or suburban settings in their respective countries- where forced by the brutal circumstances to migrate internationally. Most of these people made this decision after first migrating nationally from rural to urban areas in search of livelihood and a better future. But the presence of violence, extortion, and life threats they were forced to then flee from their homeland.

The immigration of Latin Americans to America has always been there but, in last 2018 what the world saw was a new high in the migration trend. The data elucidates several key trends. The record shows that there has been a rapid increase in the migration from the Northern Triangle region to the U.S. since 2011 but a manifold change came in 2017 (Figure 2). Mainly these increased number of migrants came from Honduras and Guatemala. There has been a rise in the number of migrants entering the U.S. from Guatemala by 190% and from Honduras increased by 270% between the periods from October 2017 to June 2019.⁵ Analyzing this event, a migrant activist, Rubén Figueroa, in the Mexican city of Tapachula stated “This is not a normal action. It’s an exodus.”⁶

Current U.S. Immigration Policy

Looking at the current immigration policy of USA we could say that in a nutshell, it aims at reducing the ‘pull factors’ to the US as compared to the previous policy which rather focused on ‘push factors’ causing people to migrate to the US.

The American government has always been empathetic and proactive towards assisting the Northern Triangle countries for crucially combating the smuggling operations, eradicating drug trafficking, and human trafficking. They also granted development aid to help these countries build economic and government resiliency.

The Central America Regional Security Initiative (CARSI) dispensed more than \$1 billion in security assistance to help law enforcement, counter-narcotics, and establish justice reform throughout the Northern Triangle under the Obama administration.⁷

The Trump administration has largely left the policy intact although with some recent cuts. While there are numerous U.S.-sponsored assistance programs, like, a USAID-financed program called Climate, Nature, and Communities of Guatemala, which was launched in 2014 and yielded remarkable positive results in rural areas of Guatemala but in 2017 it was cancelled by the Trump administration.

Now if we look at the response to the surge in migration started from 2017, the Trump administration has enacted a policy of “zero-tolerance,” which charges all migrants with the federal crime of irregular entry along with the following policy pointers-

- Attempting to block asylum for migrants crossing between ports of entry
- Attempting to modify U.S. asylum rules such that migrants could not apply in the U.S. if they had not first applied for asylum in a country through which they travelled and been rejected
- Cutting millions of dollars of aid to Northern Triangle countries
- Deploying U.S. troops to the U.S.-Mexico border
- Diverting billions of dollars appropriated for military preparedness towards a border wall
- Enacting Migrant Protection Protocols (MPP) or “remain in Mexico” policies, forcing migrants to wait in Mexico for the duration of their immigration proceedings

- Enacting “safe third country” agreements to force migrants to first apply for asylum in designated countries
- Revoking Temporary Protected Status for more than 250,000 Northern Triangle immigrants
- Restricting the grounds for asylum claims.
- Separating children from their families
- Standardizing metering at Ports of Entry
- Threatening tariffs against Mexico if it failed to curb migration.⁸

Later in Jan 2019, a congressman from Wisconsin Mr Gorthman praised President Trump for his continuous efforts for successful negotiations with Mexican and Northern Triangle countries in curbing the immigration (according to him) 70-75% during the last 4-5 months. He also mentions that people of America must not forget the “Immigration ball” amid all the fuss about the impeachment proceedings because it's just a tool to distract the focus from congress's incompetence in doing what needs to be done to stop immigrants crossing American borders.⁹

This reflects that how immigration reforms/policy was used cleverly by the bureaucrats in Washington to distract/ to divide the public opinion about the current administration and affected not just foreign policy but also severely affected US domestic politics.

U.S. – Mexico relations

Unlike other Latin American countries, Mexico being the neighbouring country has always been on receiving end of any U.S. foreign policy measures. There have been talks between both the nations regarding the issue of migrant caravans, where USA demanded that Mexico force migrants to stay there and take asylum instead of letting them enter US border but the Mexican authorities have been firm on their stance in refusing this demand as it severely affects their resources and citizens. According to the CBSNEWS report by Camilo Montoya-Galvez, 10 September 2019, the proposal brought in on July 2018 called Safe Third Country Agreement has been rejected by the Mexican President and the migration system is in a state of crisis, and in the cross hairs of American officials. With these crisis prone systems, US-Mexican relations is in state of jeopardy. Given the fact that several American industries like seasonal agriculture and construction etc. are dependent on the immigrant workers especially from Mexico but with the current rate of deportation and Zero Tolerance policy by Trump

administration the immigration to the United States which is counterbalanced by return migration to Mexico will be disturbed. This ongoing clash between these two nations will severally affect their economic relations as well as their economic performance.

Policy recommendations

The issue of mass migration and caravans of Latin American people due to poverty, extortion and life threatening conditions of living will not be deterred by the recently opted immigration reforms by the Trump administration. Given the 2,000-mile border wall, a cornerstone in the Trump administration's immigration policy pledges would cost an estimated \$21.6-\$31.2 billion to build, in addition to the cost of maintaining the wall over time.¹⁰ This will create a socio-economic burden for the coming government to deal with. Thus, the following are some policy recommendations that will improve the scenario not just for the asylum seekers and the migrants but also for the governments involved.

- There is a genuine shortage of officials at the port of entry and US border crossings. There are currently 328 official ports of entry and 48 border crossings overseen by Customs and Border Protection (CBP) Office of Field Operations (OFO). Due to the increased number of immigrants and asylum seekers, there is an urgent need to revamp and revitalize the official border crossings. Because this shortage is leading migrants to choose unofficial and illegal means to enter into US borders. They seek help from smugglers as the official procedure of USA is not efficient enough to cater to such a large immigrant population waiting in overcrowded and unsafe border towns of Mexico.
- According to the Justice Department's Executive Office for Immigration Review as of 28 September 2018 there were only 395 immigration judges in total and with a backlog of nearly 2,000 cases per judge and even a judgment passing a removal order take more than 500 days to process due to insufficient staff and work overload. This very system of asylum lacks critical infrastructure and have severe loophole which needs to be fixed sooner. More judges are needed to reduce caseloads and wait times.
- Any migrant crossing the U.S. border 'improperly' is being criminally prosecuted under current immigration policy brought in by Trump administration which is why the migrants are forced to cross at the official ports of entry. However, the asylum seekers were prevented to reach U.S. soil through deliberate restrictions and control of

migrant flows at the ports of entry. This process is called “metering” and the CBP officers stationed at U.S. ports of entry accept only a limited number of asylum seekers a day. But this practice of metering needs to be reformed as it is encouraging the migrants to choose dangerous, remote areas to enter America and even paying smugglers for finding the safe passage. This money is helping organized crime to grow and has become a problem for the USA.

- The detention centres developed for the incoming migrants from the Northern Triangle are unsanitary, overcrowded and inhumane. They lack basic facilities and they are failing to cater to the needs of people who have faced tremendous struggle reaching there and traumatic experiences of violence. This fault in current US immigration policy has caused a major international outrage as several children had died in US custody. Thus, the administration needs to invest in building and providing better infrastructure at the detention centres. The CBP should make sure that the infrastructure is sanitary and humane for the new migrants.
- Lastly, there should be more development aid for the Northern Triangle countries to help them build a better sustainable economy. Since agriculture is the main source of income for people living there and due to climate change (frequent droughts, late monsoon and primitive agro- tech.) people turn to find new livelihood options. This led them to migrate first from rural areas to urban areas and then internationally. So, by supporting these countries built a sustainable economy through aid and technological support one of the main root causes behind migration can be cured.

Conclusion

If Trump followed through on his current immigration policy and practice rigorous deportation of all immigrants, he would most likely achieve results like those of the increased deportations during the 1990s. At that time, large-scale deportations unsupported by sustainable reintegration programmes helped gangs such as MS-13 and Barrio 18 become transnational criminal organizations. Central American countries were destabilized, and human trafficking increased. This resulted in a boomerang effect because it created a new wave of refugees.¹¹ Also, it will prove to be detrimental for the US bilateral relation with Mexico and it will jeopardize the approach of Monroe Doctrine in the region given that there is an active presence of other nations like China, India, Russia etc. ready to investing in Latin America and expand their influence via diplomacy of the economy in Latin America. The

USA needs to take cautious steps to cure this issue rather sooner than later if they want to save its position of regional hegemon.

¹ Dickerson, Caitlin. 2019. "Border at 'Breaking Point' as More Than 76,000 Unauthorized Migrants Cross in a Month - The New York Times." The New York Times - Breaking News, World News & Multimedia. March 5, 2019. <https://www.nytimes.com/2019/03/05/us/border-crossing-increase.html>.

² Customs and Border Protection. "Southwest Border Migration FY 2019." 07/10/2019. <https://www.cbp.gov/newsroom/stats/sw-border-migration> 09/05/2020.

³ Sigelmann, L. 2019. "The Hidden Driver Climate Change and Migration in Central America's Northern Triangle." *American Security Project* . <https://www.jstor.org/stable/resrep19824>.

⁴Ibid.,3

⁵ Ibid.,3.

⁶ Grillo, Ioan. 2018. "It's an Exodus." October 26, 2018. https://www-nytimes-com.cdn.ampproject.org/v/s/www.nytimes.com/2018/10/26/opinion/sunday/migrant-caravan-immigration-latin-america.amp.html?usqp=mq331AQFKAGwASA%3D&_js_v=0.1#aoh=15905828266324&csi=1&referrer=https%3A%2F%2Fwww.google.com&_tf=From%20%2F

⁷ Ibid.,3.

⁸ Ibid.,3.

⁹ "Congressional Record House Articles | Congress.Gov | Library of Congress." n.d. Congress.Gov | Library of Congress. Accessed June 9, 2020. <https://www.congress.gov/congressional-record/2019/12/5/house-section/article/h9290-1?q=%7B%22search%22%3A%5B%22Immigration+policy%22%5D%7D&s=4&r=2>.

¹⁰ Penichet-Paul, C. n.d. "Border Security Along the Southwest Border: Fact Sheet - National Immigration Forum." National Immigration Forum. Accessed June 9, 2020. <https://immigrationforum.org/article/border-security-along-the-southwest-border-fact-sheet>.

¹¹ S., Scheller. 2017. "Nobody Builds Walls Better than Me — US Policy towards Latin America under Donald Trump ." *Federal Academy for Security Policy* . <https://www.jstor.org/stable/resrep22222>.

Appendix

- ✓ Figure 1 from Sigelmann, L. (2019). "The Hidden Driver Climate Change and Migration in Central America's Northern Triangle" . *American Security Project* . <https://www.jstor.org/stable/resrep19824> reflecting the geographical location of Northern Triangle in Central America.



✓ Figure 1-

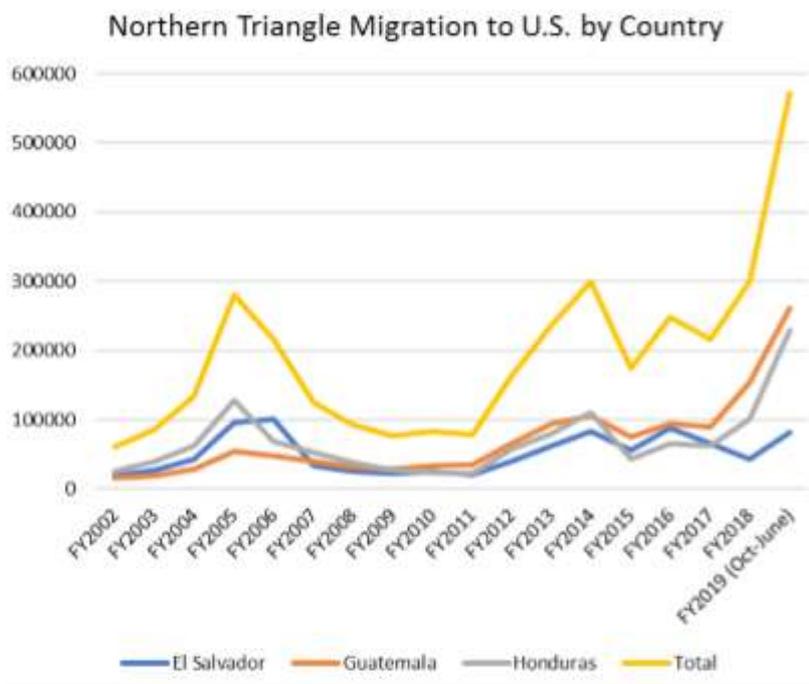


Figure 2 - Data from Central America and Mexico Policy Initiative (Leutert and Spaulding).