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### **Ahead of Presidential Elections, Mexico Should Re-evaluate its Southern Border Policy**

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At a roadside security checkpoint near the Mexican-Guatemala border, two agents from Mexico's National Institute for Migration (INM) board the bus. Scanning the passengers, their gaze lands on four men sitting in the back who pretend not to notice.

"Where are you from?" the INM officer asks one man in his late twenties, who is staring out the window. He slouches in his seat and shakes his head.

"Honduras," he admits. The officer orders the man out of his seat, and grabbing him by the seat of his pants, marshals him off the bus and into a white INM van.

The interchange is a common sight along Mexico's southern border. Since 2014, the Mexican government has deployed security forces, resources, and funding to the region in an attempt to quell the flow of migrants and contraband traveling through the country.

Today, military checkpoints dot the highway every fifty kilometers along the frontier, and armed soldiers in fatigues open luggage, search for drugs, and question travelers shuttling up and down the highway.

But even though the Mexican Government markedly increased the presence of security forces, migration through the border zone has not dropped significantly since the program—known as Programa Frontera Sur—began in 2014.

In 2015 almost 200,000 migrants were apprehended in Mexico, a nearly 79 percent increase from the previous year, according to Mexico's Unidad de Política Migratoria, a branch of Mexico's Interior Ministry, (SEGOB).<sup>1</sup> Although analysts expected immigration to subside as Mexico turned its immigration lens south, migrant flows have remained relatively stable.<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> "Boletines Estadísticos - Secretaría de Gobernación," accessed May 3, 2018, [http://www.politicamigratoria.gob.mx/es\\_mx/SEGOB/Boletines\\_Estadisticos](http://www.politicamigratoria.gob.mx/es_mx/SEGOB/Boletines_Estadisticos).

<sup>2</sup> There has been one exception to this trend: after Donald Trump won the 2016 Presidential election, migration at the US-Mexico border dropped dramatically. Analysts chalked it up to candidate Trump's hardline anti-immigration rhetoric. But the so-called "Trump Effect" may be short-lived, and migrant arrivals in the Southwestern United States are again on the rise. Since April 2017, apprehensions of unaccompanied migrant children have risen sharply, and US immigration officials detained over 4,000 unaccompanied child migrants in 2017 alone. See "Southwest Border Migration FY2017," U.S. Customs and Border Protection, December 15, 2017, <https://www.cbp.gov/newsroom/stats/sw-border-migration-fy2017>. Alejandra Castillo, "Programa Frontera Sur: The Mexican

Yet, the policy has come with adverse effects. To avoid the influx of security forces, Central American migrants traveling through Mexico have been forced into more clandestine routes that are more often controlled by gangs and criminal groups, placing them in greater danger of violence, extortion, and kidnapping.

Ahead of Mexico's presidential elections this Sunday, tackling immigration from Central America will continue to be a major issue. Indeed, presidential frontrunner Andrés Manuel López Obrador and Ricardo Anaya, who is polling at a distant second, have both pledged to work more closely with Central American countries to address the problem.

Yet with high levels of violence wracking Honduras and El Salvador, Central Americans are continuing to flee their homes in record numbers. Now that more migrants are both getting stuck and voluntarily staying in Mexico rather than passing through to the United States, there's never been a better time to re-evaluate Mexico's Southern Border strategy to focus on policies that better protect high-risk migrants.

### **The Perils of Policing Mexico's Porous Perimeter**

Trudging ahead through the undergrowth, Ezekiel Ramírez, 59, would be hard to spot if it weren't for his blue T-shirt standing out against the dense green foliage. Ramírez is looking for an old cabaña that once housed staff at the Ixcan Forestry Station, a now-abandoned research outpost that studied deforestation in the Lacandon Jungle, just half a kilometer from the Guatemalan border.



Ezekiel Ramírez looks for howler monkeys in the canopy of the Lacandon Jungle — the dense, but quickly shrinking rainforest located along the Mexico-Guatemala border.

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Government's Faulty Immigration Policy," Council on Hemispheric Affairs, accessed February 12, 2018, <http://www.coha.org/programa-frontera-sur-the-mexican-governments-faulty-immigration-policy/>.

Ramírez finds the ramshackle casita, and inside, cobwebs cling to the walls. A bare mattress lies in the corner, and the plaster walls are riddled with bullet holes.

“Whose guns?” I ask.

“Who knows?” Ramírez replies. “Could be anybody’s.”

The shelter, he explains, now operates as a clandestine safe house for smugglers and traffickers moving through the region, although it’s unclear what groups may be using it.

Kilometers from the nearest town, hidden jungle outposts like this one demonstrate the challenges of policing the country’s porous 540 mile-long border with Guatemala. In many places, the rainforest is so dense that it could conceal anyone moving through the area, making efforts to monitor migrant or drug smuggling routes extremely difficult.

There are only twelve official border crossings between Guatemala and southern Mexico. In some towns along the border, the international line was designated by little more than a road sign that simply reads “Guatemala.”

The Mexican government has invested resources into the official border crossings, and those twelve checkpoints are equipped with high-tech biometric tracking kiosks—courtesy of the U.S. State Department’s Bureau of International Narcotics Control and Law Enforcement (INL). The kiosks collect fingerprints, physical descriptions and photographs of individuals in an effort to build a database of migrants shared between U.S. and Mexican immigration officials.<sup>3</sup>

But the kiosks are little more than a finger in the dike of a much larger issue.

For one, *Programa Frontera Sur* has been wracked with funding challenges, and support from U.S. government coffers has trickled in slower than expected. Although the United States promised at least \$100 million for the program, only about \$24 million had been delivered from State Department Accounts, as of June 2017.<sup>4</sup> It’s hardly enough to fortify the country’s southern border.

Further complicating policing efforts, the region is also home to diverse indigenous Maya populations, many of whom cross the international border daily for work or to visit family. For many members of those communities, their Mexican or Guatemalan nationality is secondary to their indigenous identity.

A strong sense of that identity and a desire for self-determination has long bred distrust among local groups toward policymakers in Mexico City. Those dynamics have presented problems for Mexican officials trying to secure a border that is largely seen as an imaginary line that has hewn the Maya diaspora in two.

Today, those feelings are openly advertised in Chiapas’ border towns. Anti-government slogans scrawled in graffiti read “¡Fuera Narcogobierno!” (“Get out, narco-government!”), issued as invectives against governmental corruption.

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<sup>3</sup> “Mexico’s Recent Immigration Efforts,” In Focus (Congressional Research Service, March 21, 2016), <https://www.documentcloud.org/documents/2842650-CRS-Report-US-Assistance-Mexico-Southern-Border.html>.

<sup>4</sup> Adam Isacson, Maureen Meyer, and Hannah Smith, “Mexico’s Southern Border” (Washington Office on Latin America, June 2017), [https://www.wola.org/wp-content/uploads/2017/06/WOLA\\_Mexicos-Southern-Border-2017.pdf](https://www.wola.org/wp-content/uploads/2017/06/WOLA_Mexicos-Southern-Border-2017.pdf).





Anti-Government graffiti in San Cristobal de Las Casas reads “Arm yourself!” With a revolutionary history, indigenous communities sympathetic to the Zapatista movement have been historically hostile toward policymakers in Mexico City.

Such embers of distrust toward policymakers in Mexico City have long simmered in Chiapas. In 1994, the indigenous Zapatista army staged a rebellion against the Mexican government. Although the fighting lasted for little over a week, the Zapatistas—who were motivated to rebellion after they viewed their lands to be threatened by NAFTA—are still a political force in the region. Indeed, the Zapatistas still enjoy immense popularity for their promotion of indigenous autonomy and self-determination.

The lack of funding, difficult terrain, and hostile or uncooperative communities all contribute to a difficult situation for Mexican officials. Precisely because it would not be feasible to build a border fence or to police every inch of Mexico’s southern border, Mexican policymakers need to re-imagine the issue as a challenge to bring stronger rule of law, and with it, better functioning social service institutions to a historically tumultuous part of the country.

### **Changing Routes, changing problems**

Three hundred and fifty miles away from the jungle, the streets in Arriaga are empty, even at 11 a.m. on a Tuesday. Formerly a major rail and transport hub on Chiapas’ southwestern coast, Arriaga became known as the starting line for many migrants traveling atop La Bestia—the freight train that carries Central American migrants northward through Mexico toward the United States.

But after the Mexican government implemented Programa Frontera Sur, the groups of migrants riding La Bestia came to a screeching halt. On this particular morning in June 2015, Arriaga’s train tracks were abandoned, storefronts were shuttered, and market stalls were empty.

Today, only between 10 and 20 percent of migrants traveling to the United States still ride the country's freight trains. As Mexican officials increasingly began cracking down on those train routes, many more migrants have begun traveling in private vehicles, paying smugglers to travel in cars, or hitching rides in commercial vehicles.<sup>5</sup>



A mototaxi driver sleeps as he waits for a fare in the village of Tziscão, near one of the twelve official border crossings along the Mexico-Guatemala frontier.

These new routes have come with their own perils. For example, migrants in trailers can face extreme temperatures. In July 2017, ten people died from heat exposure and suffocation in the back of a cargo truck in San Antonio, Texas.<sup>6</sup>

The policies have also forced migrants into more dangerous routes patrolled by gangs. There has been an uptick in reported robberies, rapes, and extortions of migrants by criminal actors who are known to operate in southern Mexico. A total of 2,566 crimes against migrants were recorded in Chiapas from 2014 to 2016, and over half of those occurred in 2016 alone, according to data from Migración y Transparencia, a migration and transparency watchdog group.<sup>7</sup>

Corruption at border checkpoints only exacerbates the issue, and police at immigration stops have been accused of working in concert with criminals to extort money from migrants.<sup>8</sup> Mexico's National Human Rights Commission

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<sup>5</sup> Stephanie Leutert and Caitlyn Yates, "Migrant Smuggling Along Mexico's Highway System" (Robert Strauss Center for International Security and Law, 2017), [http://www.strausscenter.org/images/pdf/MSI/MSI\\_Migrant\\_Report.pdf](http://www.strausscenter.org/images/pdf/MSI/MSI_Migrant_Report.pdf).

<sup>6</sup> Manny Fernandez, Richard Pérez-Peña, and David Montgomery, "In San Antonio Smuggling Case, a Fatal Journey in a Packed and Sweltering Truck," *The New York Times*, January 20, 2018, sec. U.S., <https://www.nytimes.com/2017/07/24/us/san-antonio-truck-trafficking.html>.

<sup>7</sup> Ximena Suarez, Andres Diaz, Jose Knippen, and Maureen Meyer. "Access to Justice for Migrants in Mexico," WOLA, July 2017. [https://www.wola.org/wp-content/uploads/2017/07/Access-to-Justice-for-Migrants\\_July-2017.pdf](https://www.wola.org/wp-content/uploads/2017/07/Access-to-Justice-for-Migrants_July-2017.pdf)

<sup>8</sup> Kyra Gurney, "A Journey Through Corrupt Military Checkpoints in Mexico," *InSight Crime*, January 14, 2015, <https://www.insightcrime.org/news/analysis/military-checkpoints-corruption-mexico/>.

(CIDH) reported a 40 percent increase in complaints against authorities by migrants in 2015. Moreover, the statistics under-represent the problem, as many migrants don't dare approach authorities to report mistreatment.<sup>9</sup>

But when policing and enforcement are both so difficult to achieve in southern Mexico, what does the future look like for Mexican migration policy?

Clearly, pulling people off buses along Mexico's southern highway doesn't stop people from migrating, as long as there are better economic opportunities in Mexico, and domestic abuse and gang violence in Honduras and El Salvador continue to tear apart families. And while Mexican lawmakers have a history of upping the ante when it comes to security spending, rarely does increased militarization have a deterrent effect.

As it looks increasingly likely that AMLO will clinch the presidency, perhaps the populist frontrunner should extend his "man of the people" image by drastically increasing government resources and spending on programs that will feed, house, clothe, shelter, and protect migrants, rather than relying on private sector NGOs or simply apprehending and deporting migrants.

Indeed, perhaps it's time Mexico erect its own monument dedicated to the tired, hungry, and poor and act with open arms along its southern border, but first it needs policies to match.

*Scott Squires received a 2017 Mexico Security Initiative grant for research along Mexico's southern border.*

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<sup>9</sup> Nolen, "The Costly Border Plan Mexico Won't Discuss."