



ROBERT STRAUSS CENTER
FOR INTERNATIONAL SECURITY AND LAW

MEXICO SECURITY INITIATIVE

Mexico Security Initiative Student Paper
December 2017

New Migrant Routes, the Same Policy Responses: African Migration to Mexico

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For three months, Omar and Mohamed walked through jungles, caught buses, and slept on the streets, as they fled their native Sierra Leone through South and Central American countries to finally reach Mexico City. The two were looking to escape the violence and poverty they experienced every day at home. Instead, throughout the journey, they only encountered more violence, getting beaten, robbed, and almost killed on the roads and shelters along the way.

Mexico's role as a transit country for migrants has shaped its migratory policy for decades and influenced the United States' migration policies as well. Traditionally, the focus has been on Central American transit migration through Mexico toward the United States. However, these policies tend to ignore the historically invisible, but increasingly prevalent African migration arriving to, and transiting through, Mexico. This lack of attention is rooted in centuries of discriminatory practices against Africans in the region, leading to African migrants' low prioritization and contributing to their invisibility.ⁱ

On their way to Mexico City, Omar and Mohamed travelled alone through nine Latin American countries without money, any understanding of Spanish, or a network to consult along the way. Occasionally the two men met other West Africans along the journey, but they did not maintain contact with these other migrants for extended periods of time, given varying migratory paths and different countries of origin. Only when the men crossed the Guatemalan border into Mexico, did the pair meet and learn that they were both from Sierra Leone, forming a support network for the remainder of their journey to Mexico City.

Omar and Mohamed are only two of hundreds of African refugees who are not looking to Europe or the United States for refugee status, but are instead fleeing to Mexico. This number of asylum applications has increased by at least 200 percent annually for the last three years.ⁱⁱ From January to August 2017, 150 Africans submitted their asylum applications. This may seem to be a small number, but it is an almost 300 percent increase from the same period last year and only includes those African migrants who lodged official asylum applications.ⁱⁱⁱ

Over the past five years, African asylum seekers have arrived from all corners of the continent. About 65 percent of the asylum applications come from Nigeria, Ghana, and Cameroon, but Mexican asylum officials have received asylum applications from 17 African nations. This year's data suggests that Mexican immigration officials are increasingly apprehending individuals from Eritrea, Guinea, and Somalia, fleeing border conflicts, ethnic tensions, authoritarian regimes, and general insecurity.^{iv} While apprehensions of individuals from African countries has decreased overall this year, the number of asylum applications has more than doubled.

Before applying for asylum, migrants like Omar and Mohamed first spend three to four months on their journeys. The main route for African asylum seekers is to fly first to Brazil.^v From there, migrants typically travel west to Peru and continue north through seven countries before reaching the Mexico-Guatemala border. This route requires passing thousands of miles on buses, walking through the jungle, and sometimes, though infrequently, hiring smugglers to guide them along certain parts of the journey. In general, African migrants tend to not use physical smugglers but rather virtual ones, contacting their guide by phone or in internet cafes along the way.^{vi} Regardless, the Latin American route is brutally difficult, both physically and psychologically. Migrants rarely take the most visible routes throughout the hemisphere—to avoid being apprehended and deported—making them more susceptible to crimes. Food and water are also hard to come by, with both men often going a day or more without either.

Considering that the physical challenges along the route may be as difficult as the traditional European routes, with the added obstacle of limited African diasporas in the Americas, why African migrants choose Mexico is not immediately clear. In some cases, West Africans stay in Mexico because they ran out of money on their way to the United States. Yet for other African migrants, Mexico becomes the preferred destination during the journey. Upon arrival to migrant shelters in southern Mexico, African migrants are often informed of the country's laxer immigration enforcement toward African asylum seekers. While Mexico's asylum laws are comparable to other countries around the world, the frequency of deportation is not. So, while an African asylum seeker's asylum application may be denied, there is a very small chance that the migrant will actually be forced to leave Mexico. These laws are especially lenient when compared to those in the United States and Europe.

After African asylum seekers file their asylum application with the Mexican refugee agency, the Mexican Commission for Aid to Refugees (COMAR), they can solicit a migration document referred to colloquially as a humanitarian visa. This migration document allows migrants to move freely throughout Mexico for up to one year while their asylum application is being considered, without fear of detention or deportation. The asylum application process is only 45 days—extended at times to 90 days—which is much faster than the wait times in the United States and Europe, which can take up to three years.^{vii} Moreover, asylum seekers whose claims are approved, immediately receive work permits, and can eventually become Mexican citizens.

Even if asylum seekers' applications are rejected, Mexican immigration authorities rarely deport African migrants given the expense. In 2016, 88 percent of apprehended migrants from African nations were not deported.^{viii} These figures include African migrants who had not applied for asylum in the country, but rather were in Mexico as irregular migrants. African migrants are often detained for a few months and then released with a letter stating that they should exit Mexico. Yet there is no follow-up mechanism to ensure that these migrants return home. For many migrants, the risk of temporary detention is worth the limited threat of deportation. This is especially true for African migrants who do not have strong asylum claims, and would likely not be granted protections in the United States.

While the legal framework and immigration enforcement strategies favor African over Central American migrants, the social and cultural factors do not. African asylum seekers living in Mexico are among the least fortunate of the migrant populations, regardless of their legal status in the country. Even if African migrants have some working knowledge of English, migration officials and the majority of Mexican citizens only speak Spanish. Aside from their limited communication abilities, there are few established African communities within Mexico City, and even less so in Mexico's more rural areas. Without African diasporas in Mexico, there are few resources available to this migrant population to assist in the legal process or in navigating the social and cultural landscape.

African migrants may also be discriminated against in Mexico, which becomes even more likely for those migrants who lack the appropriate papers for entering the labor market. Omar and Mohamed reported that they were often unable to find long-term work, and regularly moved between construction jobs. In their experience, most companies would pay the two men for one or two weeks and would then refuse to continue payments, since the companies were aware that Omar and Mohamed had no ability to file complaints given their irregular

migration statuses. Between jobs, both men frequently appeared at immigrant and refugee shelters throughout the city in search of a hot meal and advice on where to go next.

Aside from poor working conditions, Omar and Mohamed also expressed complaints about their living situation. After weeks of initially sleeping on the streets, the two men eventually found a room to rent for \$1,200 Mexican pesos per month (roughly US\$63 dollars). This was expensive, as the two did not have steady jobs. Yet their landlord frequently increased the price without warning and when the men finally could not pay, the landlord threatened to call immigration enforcement officials. Since then, Omar and Mohamed have bounced around through similar situations, frequently ending up back on the streets, staying with friends, or in Mexico City's migrant shelters.

For Omar and Mohamed, it's been a slow adjustment to life in Mexico. The two men have unsuccessfully held down jobs, been denied basic social services like healthcare, and struggled through daily activities with their broken Spanish. Both men also missed the deadline to appeal their negative asylum decisions and their humanitarian visas are set to expire in December 2017. With no viable options, at least in the short term, to become legal residents, Omar and Mohamed are poised to join the small but growing ranks of unauthorized African immigrants in Mexico. Their chances of being deported back to Sierra Leone are low. However, more than a year after leaving their homes and journeying across much of the Western Hemisphere, Omar and Mohamed's odds of finding the stability they were looking for appears equally implausible. Their stories, along with African migrants in Mexico, continue to be invisible, marginalized, and sidelined from the country's broader migration narratives and policies.

ⁱ Romero Torres, Jorge Alfonso and Isidro Ramírez López (2008). Aportaciones para la visibilidad, la no discriminación y el reconocimiento de los pueblos afromexicanos en la Costa Chica de Oaxaca, México. 19. *Experiencias del combate institucional contra la discriminación*, 219.

ⁱⁱ Comisión Mexicana de Ayuda a Refugiados. "Estadísticas 2013-2017." *COMAR*.

ⁱⁱⁱ *Ibid*.

^{iv} Instituto Nacional de Migración. "Boletines Estadísticas". *INM*.
http://www.politicamigratoria.gob.mx/es_mx/SEGOB/Boletines_Estadisticos.

^v Miranda, Fanny. (2013). Llegan a México 12 mil africanus en un mes: INM. *Milenio*.
http://www.milenio.com/estados/Llegan_a_Mexico_africanos_en_un_mes-INM-conflictos_belicos-africanos_en_Mexico_0_819518078.html.

^{vi} Author interview with Rodolfo Castillas. 27 November 2017.

^{vii} United States Citizenship and Immigration Services. (2017). Affirmative Asylum Scheduling Bulletin. *USCIS*.
<https://www.uscis.gov/humanitarian/refugees-asylum/asylum/affirmative-asylum-scheduling-bulletin>

^{viii} *Ibid*. Instituto Nacional de Migración.