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Research Report

The Question of:

Migration in Central America

Introduction

The Central American migration is the exodus of Central American peoples to the United States of America owing to numerous causes ranging from climate change to security-related ones.
The phenomenon is present from the 1970s and has four periods, based on the root cause. As the intensity of the migration has been noticeably increasing since 2009, it became a serious issue nowadays.
Citizens of Central American countries are experiencing abuse and violation. As drug trafficking and the street fights between local gangs are common, no one can feel safe. Besides, as these countries are some of the world's most vulnerable countries to the effects of climate change, droughts and floods cause agrarian territories to become almost deserted, as the agricultural workers leave their farms due to the lack of crops which results in starvation. Because in the involved countries the industry is underdeveloped, sometimes moving to bigger cities is not a solution either. People have no other options but to leave and go to a country that they think will provide with a better and safer life. For Central Americans, this country is the United States of America.

The Committee

The fourth committee of the General Assembly, the Special Political and Decolonisation Committee was formed in 1993, merging two former committees, the Decolonization Committee and the Special Political Committee. Currently, it is dealing with a wide range of issues, such as questions related to information, decolonisation, effects of atomic radiation, international cooperation in the peaceful uses of outer space, special political missions, peacekeeping operations and assistance to Palestine refugees. Being responsible for such various problems, the work of the committee is very diversified.
The committee's achievements in the issue of decolonisation should be highlighted. Since the creation of the United Nations in 1945, 80 former colonies gained independence with the help of the organization. However, the process of decolonisation is still not complete as there are 17 non-self-governing countries.
In the Special Political and Decolonisation Committee, a draft resolution is needed for every issue to be debated and every draft resolution is required to have one or more main submitters and co-submitters.
At this years' LEMUN, this committee is going to deal with 3 issues, such as Migration in Central America, Protecting indigenous women from violence and justice system failures and The annexation of occupied territories by Israel.

Key Terms

NTCA: Northern Triangle of Central America; collective phrase for the countries Guatemala, Honduras and El Salvado

Southern Region: a collective phrase for the Central American countries Panama, Costa Rica and Nicaragua

Migrant caravan: a group of people migrating north from Central America with a goal of finding safety, political stability, or better economic opportunity in the United States. Most of the migrants come from Honduras, Guatemala, and El Salvador and many say they are fleeing violence, poverty, and persecution at home

Transition economy: an economy that is changing from being one under government control to being a market economy (= one in which companies are not controlled by the government)

Global labour demand: The need for employees and workers in a particular job market such as construction or manufacturing.

IOM: United Nations Migration Agency

UNHCR: United Nations Refugee Agency

NGO: Non-Governmental Organization; any non-profit, voluntary citizens' group which is organized on a local, national or international level. Task-oriented and driven by people with a common interest, NGOs perform a variety of service and humanitarian functions, bring citizen concerns to Governments, advocate and monitor policies and encourage political participation through provision of information.

General Overview

The Central American migration has been on air since the 1970s, but the root cause has continuously changed through the years. The seven countries of Central America - Guatemala, El Salvador, Honduras, Nicaragua, Costa Rica, Panama and Belize – are often arranged into two groups based on their geographical position and also their characteristics on this issue (Belize is not part of either group). The Southern Region consists of Nicaragua, Costa Rica and Panama and the Northern Triangle of Central America (NTCA) count Guatemala, El Salvador and Honduras. These peoples migrate to the United States of America, which phenomenon this overview is going to study in terms of effects, causes, history and characteristics.

At large, the migration can be separated into three fundamental periods based on its reasons. From 1970 until 1990, the main cause was the escaping from military rule, civil wars and repression. This period started with and was hugely influenced by the Central American Crisis when communist revolutions erupted in most of the involved countries. Between 1990 and 2000 economic transition and global labour demand played the leading role in the motivation of people leaving their home country. During this period, the migrants were mostly single men who went to the United States to find work. From 2000 and on, the reasons range from economic to security-related problems with upsurging intensity from 2009. Based on the research of UNDESA, the number of Central American migrants in the USA nearly doubled between 2000 and 2010. One significant reason for this boost is that nowadays instead of single men, whole families cross the border, usually gathered together with other families forming so-called migrant caravans. These caravans are more favourable for the migrants in terms of safety, so many people are likely to join on the way taking this opportunity. This means that these groups constantly grow during the journey and in the end, it is not impossible that more than a thousand people get to the border at once. The largest caravan so far originated in October 2018 in San Pedro Sula, a crime-troubled city in Honduras. By the time it reached Tijuana on the U.S.-Mexico border in November, the caravan had travelled nearly 3,000 miles, and 7,000 people had joined.

Currently, insecurity makes thousands of people across the border. After the civil wars, the rate of unemployment highly increased and owing to the constant violent conflicts, the industry could not improve. Most of the time, families living in extreme poverty see no other way to survive, but to leave as the parents hardly have jobs – even if they have, the salary is not enough for a whole family not to hunger – and they cannot provide the younger generations with a safe childhood. The same time, organised crime also flourished in this area. A horrifying proof for this is that four of the seven Central American countries are in the top five having the highest homicide rates. Violation, abuse and torture are part of everyday life in the NTCA and Belize. As drug trafficking routes from South to North America cross these countries, the constant competition between local gangs and crime syndicates also make this area exceedingly hard and dangerous to live in.

Because the industry remained underdeveloped, agriculture still dominates the market. However, global warming is about to change this. In recent years, Central America experienced harmful, and - in the long term – disastrous impacts of climate change such as decreased rainfall, prolonged drought and a further increase in temperature. For instance, in Honduras, rainfall will be sparse in areas where it is needed, while in other territories, floods will increase by 60% according to US Agency for International Development, which phenomena will make farmers and agricultural workers look for other job opportunities and leave.

Besides, in El Salvador, the rising sea levels are destroying the mangrove forests, the marine life that relies on them, and thus the fishermen who rely on that marine life to feed themselves and their family. Well, in these cases the question arises that people fleeing global warming should be treated as refugees or migrants.
Although the United States of America has great interest to stop or slow down the Central American migration, instead of intervening in this root cause, President Donald Trump denied the existence of such climate change.

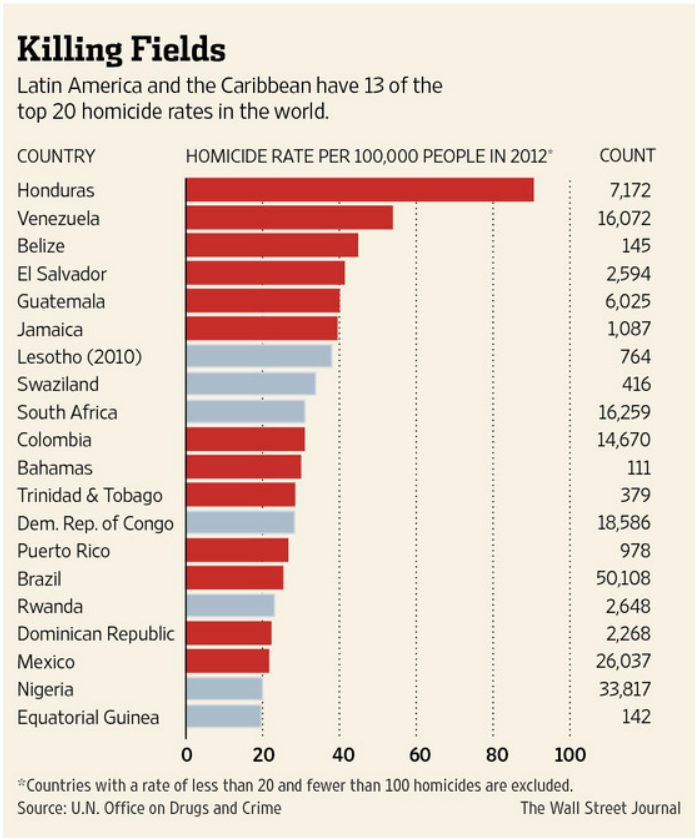
The migrant policy of the United States is also worth going through. The first significant action on the issue of illegal immigration was the creation of the Immigration Reform and Control Act (IRCA) in 1986. This document includes legalization programs for people who had entered the US before 1982 and also for certain unauthorised farmers, new funding for border enforcement and new civil and criminal penalties against employers who hire unauthorised workers. Soon after the congress passed the Immigration Act of 1990, which also authorised more spending at the border and expanded the number of employment-based visas.
The United States then passed six additional laws between 2002 and 2006 focusing on tougher immigration enforcement. These laws and numerous associated administrative reforms have resulted in a modest increase in legal migration, growth in border enforcement, new worksite enforcement measures, and an expansion of enforcement within the United States.

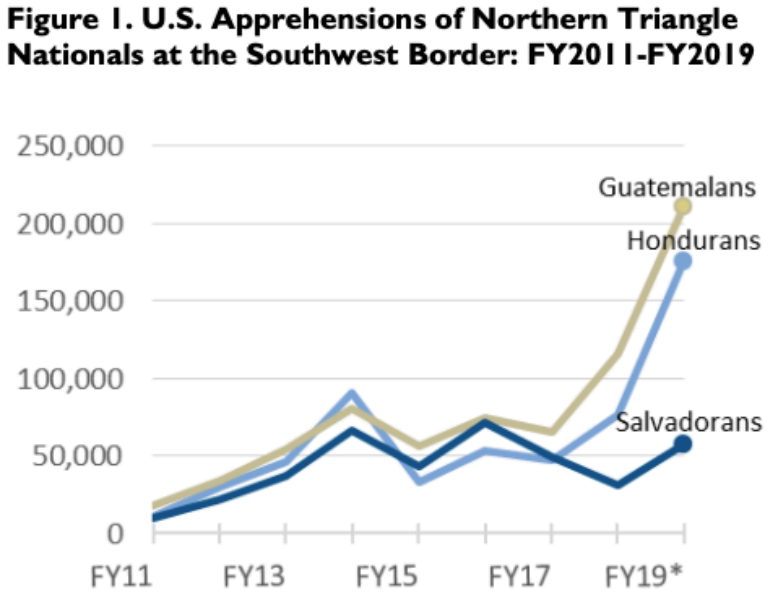
As the situation was getting more and more critical, making good on previous threats, President Donald Trump recently declared an end to aid to El Salvador, Honduras, and Guatemala, blaming the three NTCA governments for failing to stop the flow of their citizens to the United States. “They have ALL been taking U.S. money for years and doing ABSOLUTELY NOTHING for us.” he tweeted. Well, it is very simple to criticise governments for not being able to stop the outflow of people from their country. However, it requires hard work, serious efforts and last but not least, international cooperation and support. Beside financial aids, help to improve the economy and industry would also be essential to give reasons for the people not to leave these countries. It also should not be ignored that Guatemala and Honduras are in the top third of the most corrupt countries according to Transparency International’s Corruption Perceptions Index for 2018. Although El Salvador has shown some improvement it still falls in the top half.

Nevertheless, the situation of Mexico should not be ignored either. Not only it is easier to get to the USA through the country geographically, but the procedure is easier than through Canada. In addition to this, in December 2018 Mexico made it much easier for Central American migrants seeking to travel to the US to get temporary “humanitarian visas” that allowed them 90 days of legal status in Mexico. This action also made the number of migrants increase.

Although there are still plenty of things to dissolve the problem, UN organs have already begun this journey. The United Nations Migration Agency (IOM) provides support and assistance to migrants on their way. Together with the Mexican Secretary of Foreign Affairs, they are supplying food and basic hygiene kits to over 1,500 migrants seeking asylum in the country. According to Christopher Gascon, UN Migration’s Chief of Mission in Mexico: “IOM maintains its position that the human rights and basic needs of all migrants must be respected, regardless of their migratory status.”. In coordination with UN Refugee Agency UNHCR, he said "we will continue to monitor the situation of the caravan counting on-field staff, the Mexican Office of Assistance for Migrants and Refugees, and partner NGOs, providing information regarding alternatives for regular and safe migration, as well as options for voluntary returns,” he added.

On the whole, although there are successful missions accomplished, the end of this problem still not can be seen. However, with international cooperation, we will be able to come up with a mutually favourable solution to Central American migration.





Source: CRS presentation of data from U.S. Customs and Border Protection, "U.S. Border Patrol Nationwide Apprehensions by Citizenship and Sector in FY2007-FY2018;" and "U.S. Border Patrol Southwest Border Apprehensions by Sector Fiscal Year 2019," press release, June 5, 2019.

Major Parties Involved

United States of America:

The USA plays a leading role in the issue as this is the country where Central Americans migrate to due to various reasons. Current president, Donald Trump is clearly against the migration and wants to stop the inflow of Central American asylum-seekers.

Guatemala (NTCA):

The Central American migration highly affects this country as many Guatemalan citizens leave their home country for a better life. Guatemala is consistently listed among the world's 10 most vulnerable nations to the effects of climate change. In the countryside, farming is almost the only source of living and so the droughts caused by global warming are slowly going to be fatal for the community. In addition to this, Guatemala is also considered one of the most dangerous countries in the world.

Honduras (NTCA):

Many people fleeing Honduras due to similar reasons than Guatemala. According to a study by the United Nations Office on Drugs and Crimes, Honduras had the highest homicide rates per 100 000 people in 2012. Alongside with Guatemala, Honduras is also one of the world's most vulnerable countries to the effects of climate change. The unpredictable weather patterns with floods and droughts put the country's economy at risk, as bananas and coffee are still two of the top economic drivers.

El Salvador (NTCA):

In El Salvador, severe deforestation and land degradation have negatively impacted agricultural lands, increasing the country's vulnerability to climate variability and change. The rising sea levels are destroying mangrove forests, which affects the marine, which will cause the fishermen to catch less fish and after a matter of time, they will have no other chance but to leave. Local gangs also threaten the citizens' lives and force them to leave for their safety.

IOM:
The United Nations Migration Agency gives assistance to migrant caravans with food and hygiene kits. The work of the organization is extremely important and supportive for migrants.

Timeline of Events

1950: formation of UNHCR

1951: formation of the IOM

1970-1990: main cause of migration - escaping from military rule, civil wars and repression

1986: Immigration Reform and Control Act

1990: Immigration Act of 1990

1990-2000: main cause of migration – economic transition and global labour demand

2000-present: main cause of migration – economic and security-related problems

2009-present: the intensity of migration increases

2018 December: Mexico issues temporary humanitarian visas allowing Central American migrant to spend 90 days in the country

Previous attempts to solve the issue

On the whole, there has been no effective strife to eliminate the roots of this problem. United Nations organs are helping migrant caravans, but although it is essential, this will not reduce the number of migrants. The United States wants to solve the problem with further restrictions, however, helping the Central American governments to make their countries worth for the people live there may be more efficient.

The Future

Of course, we can make predictions about how the situation of Central American migrants will change, but no one can tell what exactly is going to happen. Following the line of previous actions, President Donald Trump and the United States of America will make it more difficult for immigrants to settle in the country and will be striving to have less Central American migrants in the USA. The United Nations is expected to give further assistance to the migrants and especially migrant caravans with food and hygiene kits. If things do not change until then, the violation, abuse and suffer caused by local gangs and drug trafficking is likely to continue the same way. However, this would be indispensable to stop the people leaving their home country as no one wants themselves and their children to live in constant fear and insecurity. Furthermore, the threats that climate change make are exceedingly serious in this area, so the acceptance of global warming and the will to try to lessen its effect would be also essential. In summary, the future is unpredictable, but with international cooperation, we have the chance to come up with solutions for the Central American Migration.

Questions a Resolution Must Answer (Q.A.R.M.A.)

- Should people fleeing global warming be treated as migrant or refugees?
- Beside financial aids, how could other countries help involved governments to solve the outflow of their citizens?
- In what ways could the life of farmers, who are experiencing difficulties due to global warming, be helped?
- How could the IOM's work be more efficient while assisting the migrant caravans?
- By what method could the life of families living in extreme poverty be taken easier?
- How drug cartels and organised crime syndicates could be abolished in the area (and so one major cause of migration would be eliminated)?
- By what means could the corruption in Central American governments be reduced?
- What kind of new work opportunities should be established that are less dependent of the environment and so not influenced by climate change?
- How could living standards be raised in Central American countries?
- In what other ways could Central American governments make their countries favourable to live in for their citizens?

Further Reading

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