

SPOTLIGHT

NORTHERN TRIANGLE OF CENTRAL AMERICA

A reluctant and fragmented response



There has been a marked upsurge in recent years in the number of people fleeing El Salvador, Guatemala and Honduras – known collectively as the Northern Triangle of Central America (NTCA) – to escape drug-related violence, the activities of organised crime gangs, conflicts over land and other generalised violence.¹⁹⁵ This rise in the number of asylum seekers, many of them unaccompanied minors or whole families, is undoubtedly symptomatic of a larger displacement crisis inside the three countries' borders.¹⁹⁶

Information about internal displacement is, however, largely anecdotal, making NTCA's IDPs all but invisible. Partly because of this knowledge gap, authorities have been reluctant to acknowledge and tackle the phenomenon. Given their reluctance and the lack of systematic data, responses to IDPs' needs have been fragmented. It is also difficult to judge their effectiveness.

The causes of flight within and from the region are much less ambiguous than its scale. Homicide rates in NTCA were nearly seven times the global average in 2017, despite reductions in recent years.¹⁹⁷ Aside from assassinations, extrajudicial killings and femicide, the region is also haunted by disappearances, rape, kidnappings, threats, the forced recruitment of children, intimidation and extortion. There tend to be few official investigations into crimes and even fewer convictions, even for homicides, creating an environment of flagrant impunity.¹⁹⁸ Some communities also face the impact of structural violence rooted in the reallocation of resources in ways that limit their ability to secure their basic needs.

Faced with such endemic violence, many people feel they have no choice but to uproot their families and livelihoods in search of safety elsewhere in their countries. Given the criminal organisations' wide reach and states' lack of protection capacity, and in some cases political will, they often find that internal displacement does not provide the sanctuary they seek. Studies have found that people who had fled NTCA countries to Mexico crossed the border after those perpetrating violence or threats against them had caught up with them.¹⁹⁹ Many people are also reluctant to file reports for fear of reprisals, deep distrust of some authorities and the lack of a guarantee of state assistance if a report is made.

Amid mounting evidence of a displacement and protection crisis in NTCA, stakeholders worked at the local, national and regional level in 2017 to strengthen responses for those affected.²⁰⁰ Such efforts are cause for cautious optimism, but it remains to be seen whether they will translate into real change for people at risk of, or affected by displacement.

The Honduran government has taken the regional lead in officially recognising displacement, and it took several promising policy steps during the year. The Inter-institutional Commission for the Protection of People Displaced by Violence, created in 2013, was endowed with a human rights secretary and a directorate for IDPs' protection. Draft legislation on preventing and responding to internal displacement is due for presentation to congress in 2018, which would make gang-related displacement a criminal offence. Several municipalities also began designing displacement response

plans, a first step toward creating local public policies to address the phenomenon.

In El Salvador, the constitutional chamber of the Supreme Court accepted petitions filed in November referring to internal displacement associated with criminal violence. The move came after the Inter-American Commission of Human Rights granted precautionary measures in favour of one of the cases and following an amendment to the Criminal Code in 2016 that included the crime of restricting freedom of movement by threats, intimidation or violence.²⁰¹ The country's justice and security minister also officially recognised displacement associated with gang violence, a significant development for a government that had previously been reluctant to do so.²⁰²

This progress was undermined, however, by the US government's announcement in January 2018 that it was to revoke temporary protective status for nearly 200,000 Salvadorans who had been living legally in the country since two earthquakes struck in 2001.²⁰³ In the absence of clear and effective protocols for reintegrating returnees, it is feared that deportations on such a scale could overwhelm El Salvador's political and economic capacity to receive them and add to the country's displacement crisis.

A national government's acknowledgement of internal displacement on its territory and its responsibility for addressing the phenomenon is an essential first step toward an effective and integrated response.²⁰⁴ It is, however, only a first step. A broad range of measures are needed to mitigate the humanitarian consequences of a displacement crisis. Long-term solutions lie in socio-economic development and regional cooperation based on a full understanding of the breadth and depth of the crisis.

With this in mind, countries of origin, transit and asylum met in October 2017 for a conference on the implementation of the Comprehensive Refugee Response Framework in the Americas.²⁰⁵ With the adoption of the global refugee compact due in 2018, national and regional stakeholders discussed ways of putting commitments made in their 2016 San José action statement into practice to better protect people who flee violence in NTCA.

The US government had been one of nine - along with those of the three NTCA countries, Belize, Canada, Mexico and Panama - that welcomed the 2016 San

José action statement. Together with representatives from international organisations, academia and civil society, they pledged to prevent and address the causes of violence, improve asylum and protection responses and promote regional cooperation.²⁰⁶

Policymakers and responders in NTCA need to harness this momentum and implement the political commitments already made. Legislative, administrative and budgetary measures should be based on reliable and timely data on the numbers and needs of IDPs that sheds light on risk across the displacement continuum, from internal flight to cross-border movement and back again. In parallel, countries outside the region should recognise the need to share responsibility for addressing the situation and achieving durable solutions. Otherwise the impact on individuals, communities and countries as a whole of a growing displacement crisis will continue unchecked.