

## The Numbers Are Staggering: Central America's Normalized Refugee Crisis: The northern triangle (Guatemala-Honduras-El Salvador) is the world's most dangerous region outside an official war zone

(<http://us9.campaign-archive1.com/?u=ea011209a243050dfb66dff59&id=61c4fa5475>)

- Below: Two articles by Nina Lakhani summarizing how large and devastating is the now normalized Central American refugee crisis, particularly from Honduras, Guatemala and El Salvador.



Children eat at a shelter for migrants in Oaxaca. Shelters for migrants have tripled in population since the U.S. "Southern Border Plan" started in 2014. Photo: Encarni Pindado, The Guardian

The governments of Honduras, Guatemala and El Salvador are "doing little to protect people". And the governments of the U.S. and Canada, our companies and investors, and the U.S. military are doing a lot to create and benefit from the very conditions so many people are forced to flee from. This is not a Central American issue. If U.S. and Canadian governments, companies and investors also do not change course, the "Central American refugee crisis" will continue for decades more.

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- **"The emperor isn't wearing anything at all"**, Rights Action newsletter, December 2016, <http://www.rightsaction.org/action-content/rights-action-fundraising-newsletter-december-2016>
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## Central America's Rampant Violence Fuels An Invisible Refugee Crisis

by Nina Lakhani, Tapachula, Mexico, 13 October 2016

<https://www.theguardian.com/world/2016/oct/13/central-america-violence-refugee-crisis-gangs-murder>

Until a few months ago, Carlos Hernández was a government health promoter in central El Salvador. His job was to visit poor families and ensure their children attended school and received health checks, in exchange for modest cash benefits.

One day in March, on his way to visit a family in a neighbourhood controlled by the Mara Salvatrucha (MS13) gang, Hernández witnessed a beating by gang members. Too scared to intervene, he hurried past, completed his visit and started his long walk home.

The four assailants were waiting for him. “I pleaded with them to let me live. I said I had children, that I’d say nothing,” said Hernández, 31. “They agreed to spare my life but told me never to return.”

The victim was found dead three days later – one of 611 homicides in the tiny Central American nation that month. Hernández was scared, but couldn’t find another job. So when he returned to visit the same family a month later, he took a different route and left his uniform at home in hope of going unnoticed. But he was spotted by gang informants, and the same four youngsters confronted Hernández with baseball bats, accusing him of spying for a rival group.

“They took down my address from my identity card, and threatened to kill my whole family if they ever saw me again. We left El Salvador five days later,” said Hernández, now living with his wife and two children in a sparsely furnished room in Tapachula, in southern Mexico, where they are seeking asylum.

The Hernández family are part of an alarming exodus of entire families forced to flee widespread violence in Central America’s northern triangle, the world’s most dangerous region outside an official war zone.

As huge numbers of Syrian and African refugees risk their lives crossing the Mediterranean Sea to escape war-torn states, advocates say a parallel refugee crisis has unfolded on America’s doorstep amid an undeclared but increasingly brutal war between criminal groups and security forces.

An estimated 80,000 people from El Salvador, Guatemala and Honduras, mostly families and unaccompanied children, are expected to apply for asylum overseas this year – a 658% increase since 2011, according to the UN refugee agency (UNHCR). Tens of thousands more will be forcibly displaced, but not seek international help.

During the 1980s, the three countries - known as the northern triangle - were blighted by vicious civil wars between US-backed military dictatorships and leftist guerrilla groups. But even after ceasefires were agreed, peace never came to the region as unresolved inequalities and amnesties which let war criminals escape justice fuelled a new wave of violence and corruption.

This toxic mix of warring gangs and corrupt security forces is driving one of the world's least visible refugee crises, Amnesty International will say in a new report on Friday. "What is shocking is the absolute lack of protection their governments are providing their own people," Salil Shetty, Amnesty's general secretary told the Guardian.

In El Salvador, people are fleeing – and dying – at the same rate now as they did during the country's 12-year civil war in which 1 million were forcibly displaced and 75,000 were killed. Last year, 6,657 people were murdered and violence forced at least 23,000 children to abandon school, in a country of 6 million people.

"The current internal displacement and forced migration is the same human drama we saw during the war," said Celia Medrano from the Civil Society Roundtable against Forced Displacement in El Salvador. Often the same weapons are doing the killing: many gangs are using assault rifles left over from the civil war.

### **Mexico's migration crackdown escalates dangers for Central Americans**

While reaching the US remains the primary goal for most Central Americans in flight, Mexico is an increasingly popular final destination. In Tapachula, the largest city near the Guatemalan border, shelters which once served transient migrants hoping to find work in the US are now full of frightened asylum seekers. "Before, people left home in search of a better life – now they're fleeing overnight to save their lives," said Olga Sánchez Martínez, founder of Jesus the Good Shepherd shelter.

The shift is in large part down to the Southern Border Plan: the US-instigated immigration crackdown on Central American migrants, launched in June 2014 after a surge of unaccompanied minors that year, which has made it much harder to traverse Mexico.

The Republican presidential candidate, Donald Trump, has pledged to build a wall on the US-Mexican border to keep migrants out. But the proliferation of immigration checkpoints and bandits who prey on migrants has already created a formidable barrier, forcing people to risk clandestine new routes through even more isolated regions – or to stay in Mexico.

In the first six months of this year the Mexican refugee agency, Comar, received 3,486 asylum applications – a 150% rise compared to same period in 2015. More than 8,000 are expected by the end of 2016. But despite a significant rise in approval rates over the past year, activists say too many asylum seekers are rejected or simply drop out because of long delays in processing.

The Hernández family are such a case: their application for asylum was rejected on the grounds they could return to El Salvador and move to a district designated as a safe space after a gang truce was brokered in 2012.

But the truce – which initially reduced murders by almost 50% – was abandoned in 2014. Since then, gang warfare, organised crime and police brutality have intensified across the tiny country.

### **One murder every hour: how El Salvador became the homicide capital of the world**

The gangs are stronger than ever, it's a national problem. If you move to a community controlled by a rival gang, you're suspected of being an informant –which is enough to get you killed too," said Hernández.

His wife Elizabeth Portillo, 24, said: "We left everything we had, our beds, cots, fridge, our families, to come and sleep on the floor in this room. We didn't want this, we left because we had to."

Rejecting asylum claims on the grounds people can relocate within their own country violates national and international protocols, according to Perrine Leclerc, director of UNHCR in Tapachula. "Internal relocation as a safe alternative to asylum should only be used in very specific circumstances and not in small countries like those in Central America where violence is generalized," she said.

The family is challenging the decision, but appeals are rarely successful; in the meantime they cannot legally work and are reliant on stipends from UNHCR. Comar did not respond to questions from the Guardian. But strong refugee laws coupled with pressure from activists means a small but growing number of families are being granted asylum in Mexico.

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Janet Machado, 48, fled the city of La Ceiba in northern [Honduras](#) after her youngest daughter was shot and paralysed by a neighbourhood thug in January. Machado travelled overland to Mexico with two wheelchair-using children –Gabriela and son Eric, 30, who is severely physically and learning disabled as a result of childhood meningitis – as well as her 17-year-old daughter Maholy and grandson Donavon, aged two.

Gabriela, 14, was shot in the left shoulder on her way to buy tortillas at the corner shop, following an argument with a male classmate. The boy's father, who was under the influence of drugs or alcohol, shot her at close range and kicked her unconscious body. The bullet damaged the spinal cord and remains lodged between her lungs.

"My life completely changed, just like that. I spent three months in hospital, I haven't been to school since January," Gabriela told the Guardian after a rare physiotherapy session. The family struggle to pay the taxi fair to the rehab clinic and do not qualify for UNHCR cash benefits.

After four months living in a crowded shelter in Tapachula, the family were recently granted refugee status by Comar. Eventually they hope to make it to the US to join Donovan's mother, an undocumented migrant working as a cleaner in Texas.

- Going home isn't an option. The migrants who fled violence for the US only to be sent back to their deaths: <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2015/oct/12/deportation-migrants-flee-honduras-guatemala-salvador>

“Security in Honduras is getting worse, and you cannot trust the authorities. Everyone knows who shot my daughter, but he’s still free. Even if they arrest him, it could make it things worse for us. We can’t go back,” said Machado.

A blend of organised crime, state brutality and deep-seated impunity left 8,035 people dead in Honduras last year, which has a population of 8.5 million.

In reality, those receiving international protection are a tiny proportion of those who would qualify. Less than 1% of those crossing Mexico’s southern border – or 3,423 people – sought asylum here last year. In comparison, 170,323 Central Americans were detained by Mexican immigrations agents, and most were immediately deported home.

In addition, more than 100,000 families and unaccompanied children from Honduras, El Salvador and Guatemala were detained at the US southern border in the past year. Nevertheless, neither the US, Mexico nor the northern triangle countries have acknowledged the escalating refugee crisis despite warnings from the UN and rights groups.

Meanwhile, many people are too scared to apply for asylum or are simply unaware of their rights, said Fermina Rodríguez, from the Fray Matías Human Rights Centre in Tapachula. “People are fleeing Central America to save their own lives, to save their children’s lives, in need of help. Yet Mexico’s main policy – which is always directed from Washington – is to detain and deport them, to stop them reaching the US, rather than offering them protection,” she said.

Leclerc, the UNHCR official, said: “The American dream still exists – but now most people are just looking for a safe place to live with their families; they’re searching for a normal life.”

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### **'It's a crime to be young and pretty': girls flee predatory Central America gangs**

Sexual exploitation that the UN says amounts to slavery is forcing girls and their families from El Salvador, Guatemala and Honduras to seek refuge in Mexico

by Nina Lakhani, Tapachula, Guatemala, 23 November 2016

[https://www.theguardian.com/global-development/2016/nov/23/central-america-gangs-migrants-sexual-exploitation-prostitution?CMP=Share\\_AndroidApp\\_Facebook](https://www.theguardian.com/global-development/2016/nov/23/central-america-gangs-migrants-sexual-exploitation-prostitution?CMP=Share_AndroidApp_Facebook)

Sara Rincón was walking home from college in the capital of El Salvador when she was confronted by three heavily tattooed gang members who had been harassing her for weeks.

The group's leader – a man in his 30s, with the figure 18 etched on to his shaven head – threw her against a wall, and with his hands around her neck gave her one last warning.

“He said no woman had ever turned him down, and if I refused to be his girlfriend, he would kill me and my family. I didn't want to leave home but after that we couldn't stay; we left for Mexico in the middle of the night,” said Rincón, forcing a smile through her tears.

Increasing numbers of women and girls are fleeing El Salvador, Guatemala and Honduras amid mounting evidence that criminal gangs are systematically targeting adolescent girls as sexual slaves.

More than 20 years after peace deals were signed to end vicious conflicts between the region's leftwing guerrillas and US-backed dictatorships, the three countries of the so-called Northern Triangle are still struggling with the consequences of war. Corrupt security forces, international drug cartels and warring street gangs have helped turn the Northern Triangle into the world's most dangerous region outside an official war zone. And the threat of sexual violence against women and girls has become a growing factor behind the refugee crisis that is quietly unfolding on America's doorstep.

Of the 32,142 female migrants detained by Mexican immigration agents in the first nine months of this year, almost one in three were under 18. Almost 15,000 12- to 17-year-old girls from Central America's northern triangle – Guatemala, El Salvador and Honduras – have been apprehended here since 2014.

Forcing women and girls into sexual activities with gang members is prima facie evidence of modern slavery, according to Urmila Bhoola, the UN's special rapporteur for contemporary slavery. “The forced recruitment of girls and young women into gang-related activities, and especially being forced into prostitution through providing ‘conjugal visits’ to gang members in prison, are extreme forms of sexual exploitation and human degradation that involve exercising powers akin to the right of ownership over these individuals,” Bhoola said. “Gangs reflect the deeply patriarchal power structures that prevail in this region,” she said. “It's a problem affecting millions of women and girls.”

But it is a phenomenon that regional authorities still deny, according to Erika Guevara, the Americas director at Amnesty International. “Women and girls are living in a constant state of terror ... treated as mere trophies in a ruthless war between gangs that largely control their countries. Authorities must invest some of the millions they are receiving to halt immigration in programmes to ensure these women are safe at home,” Guevara said.

For Rincón, the nightmare started in March, when the leader of a local *clica*, or neighbourhood cell, of the Calle 18 street gang started targeting her. “Every time I got on the bus he'd be there, shouting that I was his girlfriend. Then, he sent guys to watch me. If they saw me talking to male friends, they'd tell them to back off, so I stopped going to college,” said Rincón.

In 2014 and 2015, at least 66,000 girls in El Salvador changed or abandoned school, according to ministry of education figures, in a country of 6.5 million people. Rincón and her father fled north, and they are now sharing a tiny room in Tapachula, the biggest city on Mexico's southern border, while they apply for refugee status.

But they could not afford the passage for the whole family, so her mother and five siblings are staying with relatives in another part of San Salvador – part of a growing wave of internally displaced people in the country. They escaped the immediate threat, but the whole family is deeply traumatised. Rincón is anxious and tearful – and she has started self-harming. “It feels like I’m trapped. I miss my mum. Cutting myself feels like a release. I just want this all to end,” she said. She recently turned 18, and wants to finish high school.

Her father Ricardo, 40, a shoe seller and evangelical pastor, recounts the ordeal in barely audible whispers and complains of a constant headache. He refuses to allow Rincón to make new friends because he is terrified the gang will track them down.

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### **Central America's rampant violence fuels an invisible refugee crisis**

Increasingly, entire families from the Northern Triangle are fleeing together, seeking to escape warring street gangs and corrupt security forces. Andrea Hernández, 17, is staying in one of Tapachula's migrant shelters with eight members of her family. They fled Tegucigalpa, Honduras, one night in June, soon after Hernández was rescued from a gang kidnapping.

She was abducted on her way to a sports field for a morning run, and held captive for a week by gang members who wanted to recruit her, according to her mother Isabel, 54. Andrea was rescued by the authorities after Isabel pleaded with a relative who works in the prosecutor's office, but that was not the end of the ordeal: although the family begged officials not to make any arrests, they still feared retaliation from the gang.

The entire family – Hernández, her parents, her younger sister, 13, as well as her older sister, 28, and her husband and three children – fled the country. “We left our dogs and cat, all my clothes, I couldn't even say goodbye to my friends,” said Hernández. So far, she has barely spoken about her seven-day ordeal at the hands of the kidnapers: “I can't,” she said, turning her face to rub her eyes, “I've tried but I can't.”

According to Isabel, her daughter cries at night, when she thinks the rest of the family is asleep. “She hardly eats, she's traumatised, she's not the same. My daughter was a model student in Honduras, she wanted to be an architect. Everything changed, for all of us, in one day,” said Isabel.

### **Mexico's migration crackdown escalates dangers for Central Americans**

Two-thirds of the women interviewed by the UN refugee agency in 2015 described direct threats and attacks by members of criminal groups as a key reason for their flight. But leaving

home doesn't guarantee safety, and there are growing reports that criminal groups and gangs are seeking out and targeting Central American migrants and refugees.

Soon after arriving in Tapachula in July, Andrea enrolled in a beauty course at another shelter. A month into the course, after a minor disagreement, two young Salvadorans told her she had five days to drop out or be killed. The family was forced to flee again. "If we're not safe here either. Why can't we go home?" said Hernández, before walking out of the room. "She doesn't understand the dangers – we're never going back," said her mother.

Hernández and her family are also applying for refugee status in Mexico – part of a growing number of migrants seeking asylum here after a Washington-backed crackdown launched in July 2014 made it much harder to reach the US.

Mexico's refugee agency (Comar) has a local office on a quiet corner in Tapachula's historic centre. It recently extended its opening hours to tackle growing demand, but new applicants must still queue early in the morning to be seen.

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Elena Cruz, 15, from San Salvador sat silently next to her mother Barbara, 39, clutching a folder of documents to show Comar. She told a familiar story: a tattooed gang leader took a liking to Cruz. He started following her to and from school, and sending her threatening messages via a classmate. "It was always the same, 'if you don't go out with me, you won't go out with anyone'," said Cruz. "I want to be a doctor but I had to stop school. I was terrified to be in the house as he knows where we live."

Cruz's mother moved her four times to live with different relatives, but each time the gang tracked her down. "They would send me messages on Facebook telling me where I was, threatening to come and take me."

Too scared to go to the police in case the gang found out, mother and daughter packed two suitcases, and fled in the middle of the night, abandoning their home and Barbara's successful seafood market stall. "We're seeking refuge because they'll take my daughter or kill us if we go back," said Barbara. "There's no future in El Salvador, it's now a crime for girls to be young and pretty."

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