

Covid19 & Caravans of forced migrants from Honduras

Thousands flee desperation, violence and corruption of U.S. and Canadian-backed regime

<https://mailchi.mp/rightsaction/covid19-caravans-of-forced-migrants-from-honduras>

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Honduran migrants are caught between economic despair and militarized crackdowns

By Sandra Cuffe, Los Angeles Times, Oct. 3, 2020

<https://www.latimes.com/world-nation/story/2020-10-03/migrant-caravan-daily>



Migrants ride on the back of a truck in Rio Dulce, Guatemala, on Friday. A new caravan of about 2,000 migrants set out from neighboring Honduras in hopes of reaching the United States.

(Moises Castillo / Associated Press)

GUATEMALA CITY —

Ana Solís sat down on the sidewalk to rest. After entering Guatemala on foot with thousands of Honduran migrants hoping to make it to the United States earlier this week, she slept beside a highway and then found rides to the capital. “There are no jobs,” she said outside a migrant shelter Friday. “There is nothing to eat.”

Solís, 26, said she lost her job last year. She worked in a banana packing plant in Bonito Oriental, in northeastern Honduras, but often earned less than minimum wage. Her partner tried to migrate north last year but was deported from Mexico.

This time Solís was the one to leave in an effort to support the couple and their 5-year-old daughter. The COVID-19 pandemic has made work more scarce than ever. “Things are even harder now,” she said.

More than 1,000 Hondurans participating in the latest migrant caravan have begun heading by foot and in vehicles toward neighboring Guatemala with the hope of eventually reaching the far-off U.S.

Some 3,000 to 4,000 Honduran migrants entered Guatemala on Thursday, according to various estimates by Guatemalan government and United Nations officials. All but a few failed to register with immigration agents or provide the required evidence of a negative coronavirus test result.

The Guatemalan government declared a state of prevention in eastern regions — limiting freedom of movement — and deployed the army and police to stop the caravan. Within a day and a half, 2,065 Hondurans were deported. They were “voluntary returnees,” according to Guatemalan authorities, but most were stopped by security forces.

Mexico reinforced its southern border with hundreds of immigration agents and troops.

Small groups of Honduran migrants continue to advance through Guatemala toward border crossings into the Mexican states of Chiapas and Tabasco.

Rafael Lesveri Pérez came across one such group on the outskirts of Guatemala City on Friday and brought them to the Casa del Migrante shelter, which has been providing food, hygiene supplies and rain gear to migrants.

“I know how hard it is to be a migrant in another country,” the 41-year-old Guatemalan said. Pérez migrated to the United States in 1998, sending money home to support his daughter, now an adult, and her mother.

He was first deported in 2003 and has since tried six times to get back. His last attempt landed him in a Colorado jail for a year and a half for multiple unlawful entries.

After his most recent deportation eight months ago, Pérez lived at Casa del Migrante for two months. He has been unable to find work because of the pandemic, but he wants to help the Honduran migrants however he can.

“People have supported me many times in Mexico,” Pérez said outside the Guatemala City shelter.

Roughly 200 Honduran migrants have stopped by for humanitarian aid over the last three days, said the shelter’s director, Father Mauro Verzeletti.

As pandemic-related border and travel restrictions loosen, migration could again pick up. Last year the U.S. deported 109,185 Hondurans.

The pandemic has decimated the Honduran economy, said Hugo Noé Pino, a Honduran economist with a doctorate in economics from the University of Texas. The nation's gross domestic product has fallen 12% and is not expected to recover anytime soon despite a gradual reopening, said Pino, a former national economy minister.

"It is difficult to give totally reliable figures," he said, noting that the Honduran Ministry of Labor probably will not release updated unemployment statistics until the end of the year. Some 120,000 workers whose jobs were formally suspended, mostly in the maquila factory sector, sought support from a government program.

But Pino believes worker and business sector estimates of 250,000 to 300,000 jobs lost during the pandemic are accurate. The total takes into account the severe effects of the pandemic on the country's informal work sector, which represents roughly half of all economic activity in Honduras, he said.

"The effects of the pandemic have been total despair," said Pino, who served during the administration of President José Manuel Zelaya, who was deposed in a 2009 coup. "Migration is often considered the only option."

The nation's homicide rate and human rights abuses both skyrocketed in the wake of the coup, and political crises continued. Honduran President Juan Orlando Hernández was reelected in 2017 amid widespread allegations of election fraud, resulting in months of protests and crackdowns.

Hernández is an unindicted co-conspirator in a U.S. federal drug trafficking case against his brother, former congressman Juan Antonio "Tony" Hernández, who was convicted on four charges last year and awaits sentencing.

Honduras has long been a key U.S. ally in the region, and the two countries maintain a close relationship with cooperation on immigration, security and other issues. Honduran government officials have alleged organized crime or political opposition groups are behind the latest caravan.

Mexican President Andrés Manuel López Obrador and many others have questioned its timing, one month before the U.S. presidential election, suggesting that political forces are behind the caravan, which President Trump could conceivably exploit as a wedge issue to rally voters who want stricter immigration enforcement.

Similar arguments were made two years ago around the U.S. midterm elections when a large migrant caravan left Honduras and made it to the U.S. border, but no one has ever provided any evidence of political influence, Pino said.

Pino does not exclude the possibility of some outside influence behind mobilization calls for the caravan, but he said that would not negate the reality of the thousands of Hondurans who participated in the exodus. “The underlying causes of migration are all still there,” he said.

Matías López, 63, was one of those thousands. He worked as a farm laborer earning six dollars a day but lost his job six months ago when the government implemented lockdown measures in response to the pandemic. “There is no work,” he said.

López lucked out with a ride on a flatbed truck all the way to Guatemala City, and he hopes his luck persists as he continues north.

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