

Central American borders and mobility in 2020. A region of fractures and inequalities impacted by COVID-19

Fronteras centroamericanas y movilidad en 2020. Una región de fracturas y desigualdades impactada por el COVID-19

Delphine Marie Prunier^{a*}  <https://orcid.org/0000-0001-6870-8943>
 Sergio Salazar^b  <https://orcid.org/0000-0003-2623-1125>

^a Universidad Nacional Autónoma de México, Instituto de Investigaciones Sociales, Mexico City, Mexico, e-mail: prunier.delphine@sociales.unam.mx

^b Universidad de Costa Rica, Centro de Investigaciones y Estudio Políticos, San José, Costa Rica, e-mail: sergio.salazar_a@ucr.ac.cr

Abstract

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*Corresponding author:
 Delphine Prunier. E-mail:
 prunier.delphine@sociales.unam.mx

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The article presents a regional perspective on the effects of the COVID-19 pandemic in 2020, with emphasis on the state measures deployed by Central American governments and their impacts. Recovering key elements of the socio-territorial history of the region, and based on a description of border and mobility dynamics in the context of the pandemic, some priority points of analysis are identified in order to propose future lines of academic reflection on the region. The argumentation is based on both academic and news sources and other systematization inputs by social organizations that have emerged in the heat of the crisis. It is concluded that the effects of the pandemic on borders and circulation dynamics should be interpreted in future works in the light of long-standing conflicts and historical cleavages in the region, with emphasis on the aporetic relations between democracy-authoritarianism, accumulation- dispossession and mobility-control.

Keywords: Central America, borders, mobility, migration, COVID-19.

Resumen

El artículo presenta una mirada regional sobre los efectos de la pandemia por COVID-19 en 2020, con énfasis en las medidas estatales desplegadas por los gobiernos centroamericanos y a sus impactos. Recupera elementos clave de la historia socio-territorial de la región y, a partir de una descripción de las dinámicas fronterizas y de movilidad en el contexto de pandemia, se identifican algunos puntos de análisis prioritarios para proponer futuras líneas de reflexión académica sobre la región. La argumentación se fundamenta tanto en fuentes académicas como noticiosas y otros insumos de sistematización por organizaciones sociales que han

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surgido al calor de la crisis. Se concluye que los efectos de la pandemia en las fronteras y en las dinámicas de circulación deberán ser interpretados en futuros trabajos a la luz de conflictos y clivajes históricos de larga data en la región, con énfasis en las relaciones aporéticas entre democracia-autoritarismo, acumulación-despojo y movilidad-control.

Palabras clave: Centroamérica, fronteras, movilidad, migración, COVID-19.

Introduction

Central America has recently become a focus of attention for Mexico due to the increase in migration flows through the country, their media coverage, and the place they have been given in the context of geopolitical tension with the United States. Mexico turned its gaze to the south as it became aware of the reconfiguration of its role as a transit country in the global migration corridor. Central America is often seen as a region in crisis, whose population, victims of poverty and violence, is fleeing en masse to the United States. However, strong contrasts and its own internal dynamics in territorial and migration terms characterize Central America so that internal movements —of the South-South type— are central to the processes of reproduction and survival.

Although the 2020 pandemic abruptly transformed the region, as has been the case throughout the world, this article highlights the possible impacts of COVID-19 on intra-regional border dynamics and their connection with hemispheric and global dynamics. During the first months of the situation, government responses to contain the pandemic were common, guided by nationalist and securitization processes in the context of which border closures and restrictions on cross-border mobility have evident effects on migrant populations, asylum seekers, and those in transit, but not on the movement of goods, which configures a “de facto state of exception in migration matters” and translates into border closures and state hypervigilance (Castro, 2020). The governmental provisions of the countries on migration flows have coincided in time and form, and most of them have been based on declarations of states of exception or emergency. They show trends characterized as a sharpening of selectively xenophobic nationalism, spirals of social and state violence, violation of human rights, creation of spaces of confinement, and processes of reverse mobility (Álvarez Velasco, 2020a).

This article describes the first stages of the 2020 health crisis, specifically concerning state and governmental responses, to draw attention to the complex and diverse dimension of the reconfiguration of the Central American region and its historical fracture lines. Various academic works (Granados Chaverri, 1986; Morales Gamboa, 2005, 2015) demonstrate that Central America, far from being a homogeneous region, has distinct countries, labor markets, political regimes, and demographic dynamics, which draw limits, imbalances, and borders within the region and do not always coincide with those of the nation-state. This article proposes that the current and future impacts of COVID-19 cannot be understood without considering the historical and territorial construction of the isthmus and the mobility of the migrants that cross it. As stated by Abelardo Morales Gamboa (2015, p. 19), “the subordinate and peripheral condition of the region in the hemispheric system, dominated by the United States, and the highly troubled, contradictory, and fragmented nature, both from a territorial and

socio-political and cultural point of view", are essential elements in any reading of the territorial and political dynamics that structure the Central American region.

As a backdrop to the above, the assumption is that there is a historical interweaving of processes of openness (exclusion, economic liberalism), political authoritarianism, brakes to migration (acceleration of capital circulation, flows), enclaves, which, far from being contradictory, form the basis of the development models for a region fully imbricated in globalized capitalism. Therefore, this contribution aims to describe some of the central elements in how the state and social management of the pandemic impact different categories of the border, i.e., considering different scales (national, regional, and international) and different types of limits or asymmetries, whether spatial, productive, labor, or social.

This article uses empirical information gathered mainly from journalistic and governmental sources and some social and non-governmental organizations at the methodological level. It uses national newspapers and media with a digital presence and the websites of governments and organizations. Furthermore, the authors consulted various initiatives that have aimed to systematize and analyze the critical situation from an international academic perspective since the beginning of the pandemic. Since the article was prepared in the context of the pandemic and its permanent and complex evolution, its scope is descriptive, aiming to identify possible future areas of analysis that can be established within the framework of the historicity of the region. The expectation with this contribution is to face the challenge of establishing an analysis of the traditional mechanisms of mobility and circulatory territories in this southern region (Baby-Collin et al., 2009; Mitchell, 1985; Prothero & Chapman, 1985; Simon, 2008; Tarrius, 2000), with a more immediate reading of the emergence of new processes that could transform, at the beginning of the 2020s, regional politics, socio-territorial asymmetries, and strategies of resistance and border transgressions (De Genova, 2017).

This article comprises three sections. The first provides an overview of the regional migrations focused on the historical depth of internal border dynamics to understand better the labor markets, demographic configurations, and political conflicts that have shaped regional space and mobility in recent decades. The second presents the different effects of the current situation on Central American borders and its population's (im)mobility, based on the description of the different closure and control measures implemented in the different countries and their impacts on various types of flows between March 2020 and January 2021. Finally, the third section explores the possible consequences of the pandemic for Central American societies and economies, particularly from the perspective of increased poverty, injustice, and structural violence. The possibility of new phenomena that challenge the global border regime and a deepening of the causes of migration expulsion toward the north is foreseen.

Historical permeability of internal borders

Agrarian processes, territorial structuring by agriculture and labor movements

Regional mobility has historically been related to agrarian dynamics and the advance of the agricultural frontier. Since the 19th century, the growing importance of export crops destined for the global market —particularly coffee, bananas, cacao, and sugarcane— has profoundly structured the territorial organization of the region (Baumeister, 1994; Demyk, 2007), based on an outward-oriented economic model and a socio-political organization deeply marked by the control of two fundamental sources: land and labor. Therefore, population movements were closely linked to the different stages of agrarian reform, colonization, and the increase in value of land considered “empty”. Often, pressure on land was combined with social tensions in contexts of concentration in the hands of exporting farms and the expulsion of peasant populations. For example, in Guatemala, during the colonial period, the establishment of cocoa or sugarcane plantations often led to forced displacements and, after independence in 1821, large estates were essential to the continuity and deepening of inequalities. These migrations of laborers from the highlands to the farms of Chiapas in Mexico continue to this day, marking key spatial, economic, and social boundaries, both nationally and across borders (Angulo Barredo, 2008; Martínez Velazco, 1993).

The case of El Salvador is also relevant, with a period of strong migration movements that crossed the national border to Honduras in search of land (León & Salazar, 2016). Demographic growth, population density, the tradition of temporary mobility, and inequality in the agrarian distribution in the country led a large number of peasant families to settle and colonize the land in southern Honduras; in 1960, 12% of the Salvadoran population was in the neighboring country (Faret, 2015). It is important to note that this process generated high levels of tension between the two countries (the 100-Hour War or Soccer War in 1969), a phenomenon instrumentalized by political and economic elites who preferred to turn their attention and generate xenophobic hatred toward Salvadoran farmers and settlers to avoid a more equitable agrarian reform in their country.

Highly dependent on global trade and focused on intensive agriculture as a comparative advantage, Central American territories have been largely organized in relation to the evolution of these monocultures. This sector generated population displacements at different times in the last century, either in a lasting manner (settlement and colonization, with the advance of agricultural frontiers, as in the case of bananas in Honduras, coffee or cattle in Guatemala and Nicaragua, for example) (Baumeister, 2001; Euraque, 1996; Pérez Brignoli & Samper, 1994) or with flows of temporary and circulatory mobility, in specific and segmented labor markets, such as the emblematic case of Nicaraguan farmers in Costa Rican coffee farms or pineapple fields (Rodríguez Echavarría & Prunier, 2020).

Labor markets and regional mobility

Beyond the agricultural sector, labor mobility contributes to the structuring of Central American territories, creating unequal borders and productive spaces. On the one hand, urban centers attract national workers or workers from neighboring countries, for whom crossing the border is part of the logic of expanding the labor market and diversifying productive activities and spaces. These workers integrate into the sectors of the informal urban economy, domestic service, public works, or construction, according to processes of mobility that may involve long-term settlement (with the whole or part of the domestic group), or migration circulation with frequent returns to the place of origin (Prunier, 2017). It is worth highlighting three important aspects of this labor mobility on a regional scale. First, the importance of female mobility for care or domestic work activities that involves both movements from the countryside to the cities and the crossing of national borders. Second, the role of megaprojects in the mobilization of temporary labor—essentially male—in sites that require large numbers of workers for set periods, for example, for the construction of tourist complexes or of large transportation and communication infrastructure plans (as in the Gulf of Fonseca¹) (Morales Gamboa et al., 2011). Finally, there is replacement or relay migration in the less attractive labor sectors (physically laborious, with precarious conditions and low wages), with jobs filled by the most vulnerable groups willing to migrate. This phenomenon has been observed since the 1990s, for example, in Costa Rica, due to the increase in the educational level of the population and the growing incorporation of women into the labor market; or in El Salvador, where massive migration to the United States and the importance of the receipt of remittances in the family economy have led to a desertion of the national labor force from the most demanding jobs (Cañada, 2011).

Armed conflict and violence, refuge, and counterinsurgency

In Central America, intra-regional border spaces have played a central role during armed conflicts, both in the context of forced displacement and Cold War power relations expressed at the regional geopolitical scale.

In Guatemala, the long civil war that marked almost the entire second half of the 20th century provoked terror and extreme violence, which led to displacements within national borders, and significant refugee flows in neighboring countries (Honduras, Mexico, Belize) and the United States. In El Salvador and Nicaragua, the armed conflicts that began in the 1960s and ended in the early 1990s were responsible for deaths, confrontations, paramilitary violence, economic crises, and poverty that forced tens of thousands of people to cross borders in search of protection and employment. Honduras, a strategic point of U.S. military presence in the region, “protected” from revolutionary movements, and Costa Rica, a neutral country in the confrontation

¹ Port and road construction for the transoceanic corridor project to the Caribbean coast within the framework of the Meso-America Project, at a tri-national interface in Honduras, El Salvador, and Nicaragua (Medina, 2013).

between two blocs and an economy in strong growth, were the two main territories receiving refugees. During the “lost decade” of the 1980s (marked by armed violence, political instability, and low levels of socio-economic development), Honduras was a country of reception rather than expulsion. Furthermore, cross-border areas were key spaces of the global ideological confrontation of the time, which structured strong lines of political opposition between the different countries of the region. From 1985 onwards, the southern zone of Honduras became a strategic platform for U.S. anti-communist policy, with the installation of training bases and logistical support for the Nicaraguan Contras.

It is necessary to emphasize the historical roots of Central American migration to the United States, which relates both to the context of civil violence in different countries of the region and to the flight of a significant number of refugees, as well as to the situation of profound economic vulnerability experienced by these populations, and more recently to the social violence linked to organized crime (Farah, 2012, Sampó, 2013). The integration of these migrant workers into U.S. labor markets generated the formation of significant transnational communities that wove strong social and cultural networks, whose role is evident in the most recent dynamics of international migration to the north, particularly visible with the “caravans” of 2018, but which intensified from the first decade of 2000, due to the worsening poverty, social exclusion, and environmental deterioration in the region (Eguren & Hernández Bonilla, 2019).

Border crossings by extracontinental migrants en route to the north

Today, the Central American region represents a critical zone in the trans-American migration corridor (Álvarez Velasco, 2016; Armijo Canto & Benítez Manaut, 2016). The existence of new contingents comprised of extracontinental migrants from Africa, Haiti, Cuba, and Asia (with connections in Brazil, Colombia, and Ecuador) provoked emerging debates in Mexico regarding its position and role as a transit country concerning the externalization policies of the southern border of the United States (Varela, 2015; Garibo, 2016). This article emphasizes the impact of these corridors in the reconfiguration of border processes in Central America. On the one hand, these flows crossing the region toward the north constitute a new phenomenon that forces the different countries to define differentiated migration policies (control, humanitarian assistance, safe passage, and others). On the other hand, Central America is positioned in the intercontinental interaction of human mobility, which demonstrates the interdependence of migratory systems (South American, African, North American) and the key role of the region in the geopolitics of the global management of human mobility (Álvarez Velasco, 2016).

Closure and control at Central American borders during the COVID-19 epidemic: social and territorial impacts

Military-police control, stigmatization, and discrimination

The health emergency context highlights conflicts, contradictions, and forms of structural violence (Bourgois, 2009; Galtung, 1969) that have marked the history of the region and its national divisions (see Table 1). Previous border conflicts give rise to tensions and expressions of social and institutional violence by governments in their challenges to coordinate containment measures and problems derived from them. Nationalist government policies and discourse, expressions of xenophobia and discrimination, constant threats of deportation, limited access to goods and services, and forms of social protection are historical conditions updated in light of the emergency that particularly affects the most vulnerable populations. A common trend in several countries of the region regarding the response to the pandemic is the increase in surveillance, control, and military-police presence in border areas. This has implied an intensification of some historical tensions in these areas and an aggravation of the conditions of mobility and residency of vulnerable migrant populations.

In Costa Rica, the border closure initiated on March 18, 2020 (operation “Secure Borders”) resulted in the rejection of more than 5 000 foreigners on the northern border in the first month of its implementation alone (Murillo, 2020) and close to 16 000 by early July (Pomareda, 2020a).² On the southern border with Panama, the situation was more serious for the extracontinental migrant population that used this route to reach the United States, as in the case of a group of Bangladeshi migrants who were detained by immigration authorities in mid-July and taken to a detention center of the Directorate of Migration and Foreign Affairs (*Dirección de Migración y Extranjería*) (Pomareda, 2020b).

On the northern border, “the extreme vigilance (...), the arrests, and the identification of infection hotspots in packing plants and farms where Nicaraguan migrants work has also unleashed a xenophobic reaction from broad sectors of the population” (Pomareda, 2020a). Although various international bodies have described the handling of the pandemic by the Nicaraguan government as insufficient and even irresponsible and risky (*OPS reitera advertencias a Nicaragua sobre manejo de la pandemia*, 2020; AFP, 2020; Wallace, 2020), this has provoked official and social discourse in Costa Rica with a nationalist and securitarian tone, which generates the conditions for an increase in xenophobia and discrimination (Chavarría, 2020).

The pandemic has justified a perverse intersection between health policies and mobility control in different national spaces in the Americas. This has exacerbated the common perception constructed by the government and the media that associates the figure of the foreigner with the “plague”. Thus, in general terms, migrants —even more so if they are irregular— are seen as a threat to public health because they are supposed to be vectors of contagion. At the same time, amid economic collapse, the

² Subsequently, the Costa Rican government extended the period of border closures until August 1st, and as of August 2nd allowed entry into the country of foreigners under the migration category of residents or the tourism subcategory, only by air.

figure of the foreigner is perceived as a “social burden”, particularly for the receiving states (Álvarez Velasco, 2020b; Chacón, 2020a; Pomareda, 2020a).³

Outbreaks of social violence accompanied these situations, directly impacting vulnerable populations’ access to health and other forms of protection. In turn, this impacted the containment of the spread of the virus, which does not respect borders or military posts but is aggravated by the conditions that arise from rejection and neglect.

A clear example of these contradictions is the measure by the Costa Rican government, at the end of May, to demand the presence of police and immigration agents as a requirement to attend to foreigners in local health posts. Although it was a provision by the local health authorities (Los Chiles), the central government supported it. The measure established that “for all undocumented patients, an immediate call must be made to the office of Migration and Public Force” and that people would not be attended to until these authorities were present (Ugarte, 2020b).

Another population affected by containment measures was the refugee or asylum-seeking community. In the general balance for the Latin American region, it is possible to state that, although official measures have been diverse, the tendency is for the responses to be “limited, reduced, and have not sought to extend the right to asylum and refuge for the vast majority of applicants”, in addition to reducing “the number of recognitions [...] to transfer this process to third countries, putting this universal right at clear risk” (Álvarez Velasco, 2020c).

In the case of Costa Rica, one of the countries with the highest rate of refugee population in the region (Gatica López, 2018), the measures to close or virtualize institutions and services, both governmental and non-governmental, generated new risks and conditions of vulnerability added to those already known: unemployment, lack of housing, barriers to access health services, and the impossibility of returning to Nicaragua due to the political situation and the closing of borders (Muñoz, 2020). Thanks to a previous agreement between the Costa Rican Social Security Fund and the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR), medical insurance continued to be financed for 6 000 refugees and asylum seekers, now with priority for people with health conditions and precarious economic situations (ACNUR, 2020). However, this was not enough to ensure the stability of this population as a whole. Due to the legal limbo caused by the reduction in the management of certain institutions because of the virtualization of work and the suspension of the granting of refugee status,⁴ around 1 200 Nicaraguans abandoned their applications and had to return to their country.

Honduras also decided to reinforce control at its border with Nicaragua in mid-May. There was special emphasis on the “irresponsibility” of the Nicaraguan government, which, in addition to not having taken contingency measures or closed national borders, was in a position of denial of the pandemic and even organized massive events (“Love in times of COVID-19. We walk as a people with faith, life, and hope”, in March 2020) (see Collombon, 2020). Furthermore, due to the measures implemented by the government, most of the state and private institutions providing care to the migrant

³ In this context, there have been responses from organized civil society confronting the xenophobic and reductive health discourse by demanding a reorientation of state responses to guarantee rights to vulnerable populations.

⁴ Resolution No. DJUR-043-03-2019-JM. <https://migracion.go.cr/Documentos%20compartidos/Otros/RESOLUCION%20MEDIDAS%20ADMINISTRATIVAS%20COVID-19.pdf>

population were paralyzed, health and migration control at customs intensified, and police and military were deployed at blind spots along the border, accompanied by a discourse of stigmatization and mistrust toward people who might cross irregularly from a country where the official figures of COVID-19 cases seemed underestimated (*Honduras se blinda para frenar ingreso de nicaragüenses por COVID-19, 2020*).

This triggered abuses by the authorities, highlighting the case of more than 80 irregular migrants in transit waiting at the Choluteca border, who, at the end of April, while staying in hotels, religious group shelters, community centers, and private homes, were assaulted by police authorities during a forced eviction operation. According to a report by several local organizations, the operation also involved acts of extortion, threats, and other violations of the rights of the waiting migrants, which included pregnant women and children (*La impaciente espera de los migrantes en Choluteca, Honduras, 2020*). Moreover, after the eviction, they were forced to sleep on the streets (*Migrantes violentados por autoridades en medio de emergencia nacional, 2020*).

At the end of January, in El Salvador, one of the earliest countries to take closure and control measures, the migration authorities implemented sanitary measures at borders and airports (*Migración refuerza medidas sanitarias en fronteras y aeropuerto por Coronavirus, 2020*). By the end of February, it had established around forty sanitary surveillance centers at different points of the national territory to control and eventually detain the population and implement mandatory quarantines. Additionally, it established that people entering the country through blind spots should face judicial charges (*Álvarez Velasco, 2020d*), and from the beginning of March, increased all controls and mechanisms for the detention and monitoring of the population at border points (*Migración refuerza medidas sanitarias en fronteras y aeropuerto por Coronavirus, 2020*).

Stranded populations, internments, deportations, and mandatory quarantines

Another common factor in the region and the hemisphere is the impact on the dynamics of transnational mobility as a result of national measures and the absence of international coordination. In particular, there is the case of populations stranded in border areas or interned in detention centers in inadequate conditions.

In Costa Rica, a significant case was that of more than 2 600 migrants from Asia, Africa, and Haiti, who arrived from South America in early March bound for the United States, and were detained at the border with Panama. After several weeks of immobility and in inadequate detention conditions, the Costa Rican government established an agreement with the Panamanian government to develop a controlled transfer to the northern border, where they would remain in a detention center until they could enter Nicaragua to continue their transit to the United States (*Peña, 2020*). However, this was not possible because, in addition to the logistical problems, only part of the group could be transferred; the Nicaraguan government announced the closure of borders with military surveillance, even for humanitarian cordons, so the population remained stranded between Costa Rica and Panama (*Miranda & Murillo, 2020*).

One of the border points where this phenomenon has occurred in the largest numbers is the Darien Gap, where Haitians, Cubans, South Americans, and extracontinental migrants in transit to the United States have been stranded. At the

beginning of March, the Panamanian government closed its borders to the entry of people. By mid-April, there were already more than 2 000 migrants (mainly from Haiti, Congo, Bangladesh, and Yemen) located in the Migrant Reception Station (MRS) "La Peñita" in the community of Bajo Chiquito, and others in the MRS "Los Planes", in Chiriquí (Pomareda, 2020b). The conditions of overcrowding, lack of food, sanitary problems due to waste management, and the increase of anxiety and stress in the population led to critical situations that increased the conditions of risk in the context of the pandemic and demonstrated that governments were not only unprepared to face a situation like this but also could not establish coordinated and joint measures (OIM, 2020).⁵

It is on the region's northern border, between Guatemala and Mexico, where forced mobility has been starkly demonstrated. For Juan Luis Carbajal, priest and director of the Pastoral Human Mobility of the Episcopal Conference of Guatemala, the situation has shown "a lack of respect for migrants", since the authorities of both countries "have simply taken on the task of removing, sweeping away migrants regardless of their health conditions [and] without considering alternatives". This entails non-compliance with regional deportation protocols, agreements, and memorandums of understanding and increased vulnerability and risk for deportees. According to Carbajal, these measures demonstrate "a new migratory reality, where health control is the justification for the control of migrants and where stigmatization has been a constant" (Pomareda, 2020a).

The case of Nicaragua is more complex because, although the government did not establish restrictions on the entry of foreigners by land or air, it did prohibit the return of hundreds of nationals who had lost their jobs abroad, especially in Costa Rica, and were seeking to return to their country (Cajina, 2020). In Honduras, toward the end of June, a group of around 150 migrants, including older adults, women, and children, left the San Pedro Sula bus terminal for the border of Corinto, in the northwest of the country, where police and military authorities of both countries detained and placed them in detention centers where they had to undergo mandatory quarantine. Another group of about 250 people from Africa, Cuba, and Haiti were stranded on the Honduran side of the border and detained in immigration centers in Tegucigalpa and Choluteca (Pomareda, 2020a).

On the other hand, the phenomenon of deportations from the United States added another degree of complexity to the regional panorama. In Guatemala, for example, despite the closure of international borders and cancellation of flights declared on March 13, the country continued to receive flights of deportees from the United States (more than 5 162 people) and by land from Mexico (6 522 people) (Instituto Guatemalteco de Migración, 2020). Although the last planes that arrived in September transported migrants already recovered from COVID-19, the Guatemalan government claimed that the United States did not respect sanitary protocols on different flights during March, so that between 50% and 75% of the people on these flights returned

⁵ A significant case was the Temporary Migrant Attention Center (*Centro de Atención Temporal a Migrantes*, Catem) in northern Costa Rica, where in mid-July a group of detained migrants provoked disturbances, fires, and blockades as a form of protest against the detention conditions and to demand that they be allowed to continue to the north (Pomareda, 2020b). According to the Directorate of Migration and Alien Affairs of Costa Rica, as of July 1st, 285 extra-regional migrants remained detained; 118 people on the northern border (85 adults and 33 minors), and 167 on the southern border (109 adults and 58 minors).

infected with COVID-19 (El Faro/AFP, 2020). This situation caused concern among associations defending the rights of migrants (Equipo de Reflexión, Investigación y Comunicación ERIC-SJ, 2020) and a climate of suspicion and rejection toward these people, undoubtedly related to the statements of the president himself, who spoke of the “cursed flight” (Reyes, 2020).

In the case of El Salvador, deportations also resumed on March 24, just after “the U.S. Department of Homeland Security pressured the governments of the Northern Triangle to lift their quarantines at airports to admit the arrival of deported migrants” (Cáceres et al., 2020). According to Ovidio González, director of the organization Tutela Legal Dra. María Julia Hernández, the government itself contributed to their stigmatization and vulnerability, calling them “the infected”, and determined from the beginning that they would not be allowed to enter the country. For César Ríos, director of the Salvadoran Migrant Institute (Spanish: *Instituto Salvadoreño del Migrante*, Insami), this implied a change in the return cycle because now they are not only detained for months in the migration centers in the northern country, but are locked up again when they return, “thus extending the grief of migration in this new reality, and after being in transnational confinement, they come to be in national confinement” (Pomareda, 2020a).⁶

Impacts on economic sectors dependent on migrant labor

As argued in the first part, the reality of the Central American region is that of historical cross-border regional migration associated with production processes, particularly in agriculture, which has also been impacted by the context of the sanitary emergency and the governmental containment measures associated with it. The Costa Rican case stands out because it receives the Nicaraguan population working in agricultural production, domestic work, and construction labor markets, and the indigenous Ngäbe population working mainly in the agricultural sector (Ugarte, 2020a), particularly coffee harvesting.

Concerning the former, the emergency context and the associated governmental responses, both from the Nicaraguan and Costa Rican governments, generated a highly vulnerable situation for these populations, as noted above. In addition to the containment measures and border closures, there were the activities of several agricultural companies located mainly in the Huetar Norte region, which continue to hire undocumented migrants in exploitative conditions without respecting labor guarantees (Paniagua Arguedas, 2007; Rodríguez Echavarría & Prunier, 2020; Segura Hernández & Ramírez Mora, 2015), and with a high level of risk in light of the pandemic. Although the Presidency of the Republic and the Ministries of Security, Interior and Police, and Agriculture and Livestock signed a decree at the end of September to fine agricultural, agro-export, and agro-industrial companies that hire

⁶ On the conditions in which the migrants were held in detention centers, see <https://www.elsalvador.com/fotogalerias/noticias-fotogalerias/coronavirus-albergues-de-migrantes/695754/2020/>

undocumented migrants or those without their regularization in process, no follow-up actions have been established to enforce the rule fully.⁷

Faced with this situation, in mid-June, an alliance of organizations and institutions issued a statement calling on public authorities to enforce the guarantees and rights of this population, specifically concerning the known practices of exploitation and violation of migrant workers by agribusinesses (Chacón, 2020a). Given the inaction of the respective authorities and the continuation of bad labor practices, at the beginning of July several organizations issued a new statement in which they called for the drafting and approval of a law to authorize the Labor Inspectorate (part of the Ministry of Labor) to establish direct sanctions against agribusinesses that fail to comply with labor legislation. Furthermore, the statement emphasized the concern about the increase in cases of contagion among migrant workers in these companies, associated with the working and living conditions in which the employees were kept (Chacón, 2020b).

The behavior of the domestic service sector also revealed the great paradox of the irregular or precarious migrant as an indispensable worker. Quxabel Cárdenas, the coordinator of the Asociación Enlaces Nicaragüenses in Costa Rica, has argued that the COVID-19 crisis affected migrant women and their families in Costa Rica in three ways: layoffs without respect for labor rights, reduction of working hours with significant drops in income, and increase in workload without compensation in salary (particularly for female workers) (Mejía, 2020).

Notes on the aggravation of migratory expulsion factors

Central America and the permanent crisis

According to Acuña González, “having closed borders contained the virus moderately, but not the exacerbation of vulnerability for hundreds of people in contexts of ‘confined’ mobility” (Acuña González, 2020). The global economic crisis associated with COVID-19 has national and local impacts throughout Central America. Table 1 systematizes the main socio-economic indicators for the six countries in the region and the latest data available up to February 2021 regarding their evolution due to the health emergency.

It is worth noting that the negative gross domestic product (GDP) growth forecasts for 2020 worsened as of the second half of the year, with severe recessions of up to -8.6% or -8.3% for El Salvador and Nicaragua, respectively (CEPAL, 2020b). Figures on formal employment losses are a variable subject to many variations depending on the sources. It is worth noting that the maquiladora sector specializing in textile and biomedical material production, generally installed in tax-exempt free zones, is one of the main generators of jobs in this country and employs mostly women. In Honduras, where the

⁷ Executive Decree No. 42406-MAG-MGP, which establishes that “companies in the agricultural, agro-export, or agro-industrial sectors that hire undocumented migrants or that do not have their regularization in process would face fines of between two and 12 times a base salary” (Sistema Costarricense de Información Jurídica, 2020).

number of maquila workers is estimated at 150 000], there have been massive layoffs and serious labor rights violations, such as the counting of vacation days and holidays during the closure of companies due to contingencies, all permitted by the Honduran Labor Secretariat, according to the Business and Human Rights Information Center on March 26 (*Empresas pueden conceder a cuenta de vacaciones los días de la cuarentena*, 2020). In addition to being illegal, this measure proved to be unsustainable since it only allowed the suspension of the contract to be postponed until mid-April (the number of vacation days of a Honduran worker is barely more than two weeks). By halting production in the maquilas and suppressing the meager wages of thousands of workers (the minimum wage is 350 USD per month, barely enough to cover the basic food basket, and with very low retirement and health benefits), it was mainly women who were affected, and with them poor single-parent households that nevertheless constituted a sector of relative economic stability compared to others in the country (Torres Zelaya, 2020).

However, it is clear that these fragile assessments of formal employment do not reflect the real situation of Central American labor markets, given the high proportion of informal and precarious jobs. In addition to salaried workers who have been laid off without benefits or respect for basic labor rights (often with the blessing of governments that favored support for the business sector), the number of people whose economic activity has declined significantly or stopped completely is incalculable (for example, in sectors such as small businesses, transportation, and services).

Since May 18, the maquila sector in Honduras has gradually been reactivated, while the process of economic reopening at the national level (announced at the beginning of June, under a progressive format and a division of the country into three regions) regressed to phase 1 or even 0 in certain areas, due to the increase in cases of contagion (Gonzalez et al., 2021). Similarly, the economic reopening plan of El Salvador, "Toward the new normality", planned in five stages, began its implementation on August 24, after many tensions between the executive branch, the Supreme Court, the Legislative Assembly, and the Constitutional Court regarding the definition of a balance between the establishment of a state of exception restricting individual liberties and the need to reactivate the economy.

On the other hand, the Economic Commission for Latin America and the Caribbean (ECLAC) forecasts a reduction of around 10% in exports from Central America for the entirety of 2020, with strong disparities according to sectors and countries. However, in the first five months of the pandemic, exports increased for Costa Rica, Nicaragua, Honduras, and Guatemala (the only four countries in Latin America where this phenomenon occurred) due to U.S. demand for manufactured health, personal protection, and agricultural products. For El Salvador, maquila exports fell 42.4% in the textile sector and 24% in the productive sectors as a whole (Cepal, 2020a).

Table 1. Indicators of socio-economic development before and after the COVID-19 pandemic

Country	Indicators before COVID-19						COVID-19 impact indicators	
	Total population 2018 (a)	Rural population 2018 (a)	Population below 34 years of age, 2020 (b)	Percentage of the population severely food insecure, 2019 (c)	Gini coefficient (most recent year, d)	GDP downturn assessment for 2020 (e; f)	Loss of formal jobs in 2020 —months— (sources)	Change in the Consumer Price Index (change in prices of a basket of goods and services representative of the consumption pattern of each country), (January 2019-January 2020, in %. k)
Guatemala	17 247 849	8 440 970: 48.9%	71.50%	18.1	48.3 (2014)	-3% -4.1%		5.24
Honduras	9 587 522	4 040 365: 42.1%	66.50%	23.9	52.1 (2018)	-5.8% -6.1%	182 955, February-August (g; h)	4.18
El Salvador	6 420 746	1 793 751: 27.9%	62%	14.6	38.6 (2018)	-5.4% -8.6%	73 538, February-June (i) 200 000 only in the textile sector (j)	0.31
Nicaragua	6 465 501	2 606 772: 40.3%	63.20%	n/a	46.2 (2014)	-6.3% -8.3%	n/a	n/a
Costa Rica	4 999 441	1 023 354: 20.4%	52.40%	5.4	48 (2018)	-3.3% -5.5%	n/a	0.96
Panama	4 176 869	1 344 157: 32.1%	57.30%	n/a	49.2 (2018)	-2% -6.5%	n/a	n/a

Source: a) <http://www.fao.org/faostat>

b) Cepal, 2019.

c) FAO, IFAD, UNICEF, WFP, & WHO, 2020.

d) Banco Mundial, n. d. By way of comparison, this index allows the evaluation of the level of inequality (stronger as it approaches 100); it is 45.4 for Mexico (2018), 41.1 for the United States (2016, and 31.9 for Germany (2016).

e) Nagovitch, 2020.

f) Cepal, 2020b.

g) *Alarmante pérdida de empleos y cierre de empresas reporta el sector privado*, 2020.h) *Sector formal perdió más de 182 mil plazas de trabajo entre febrero y agosto*, 2020.

i) Fundación Salvadoreña para el Desarrollo Económico y Social (Fusades), 2020.

j) Alemán, 2020.

k) <http://www.secmca.org/?scid=0&cid=0&data=IPC&parent=Precios&son=%C3%8Dndice%20de%20precios%20al%20consumidor&list>

Like most countries with a strong migratory tradition, Central American economies are highly dependent on remittances. This situation becomes apparent when comparing their contribution with other significant indicators at the national level (see Table 2) and is particularly noticeable for El Salvador, Honduras, and Guatemala.

Table 2. Representative indicators of remittance contribution for the main Central American migrant-sending countries, 2019

Country	% of GDP	% of exports	% foreign direct investment (FDI)
Guatemala	13.7	105.3	1 052.7
Honduras	21.6	61.8	1 081
El Salvador	20.9	118	779.4
Nicaragua	13.2	38	328

Source: Cepal, 2020b.

As a result of the global health emergency, there was an abrupt decrease in remittances between February and April (for example, from +10% to -40% compared to the same month of the previous year, in the case of El Salvador [Cepal, 2020b]). However, they rose again from May onwards, reaching record figures in the case of Guatemala, for example, with 1 billion USD received in remittances in July 2020 (Morales Rodas, 2020). These consecutive dynamics present two reactions (connected and not contradictory) of migrants and their families to crises. First, a reaction of caution and a decrease in remittances to the place of origin, in light of the uncertainty caused by the loss of jobs and the lack of knowledge of the medium or long-term impacts on the labor market in the receiving country. Second, the maintenance and reactivation of remittances can be explained by mechanisms of resilience, solidarity, and continuity of labor activities for these essential workers of the so-called “front lines”, despite the crisis.

Finally, it is worth highlighting Central American economies' extractivist and dependent character to analyze the potential effects of the current health and economic crisis in terms of borders. It is essential to think of the border from the perspective of inequalities, asymmetries, and socio-economic fractures, with a focus on understanding their effects in terms of exclusion, marginalization, and violence as key factors in the current dynamics of migration and exile of a large part of the Central American population. Therefore, the suggestion is to pay attention to the political and economic governance modes manifested amid the pandemic. In Honduras, for example, civil society organizations and territorial defense movements—such as the Civic Council of Popular and Indigenous Organizations of Honduras (*Consejo Cívico de Organizaciones Populares e Indígenas de Honduras*) (Copinh) or the Black Honduran Fraternal Organization (*Organización Fraternal Negra Hondureña*) (Ofraneh)—denounced a form of exploitation of the health crisis by the Hernández government to censor the opposition and community or local resistance initiatives in the face of dispossession and privatization of resources. At the same time, the placement of foreign

capital was promoted through mechanisms that lacked transparency and democracy. The case of the Roatán Employment and Economic Development Zone (*Zona de Empleo y Desarrollo Económico, ZEDE*) provoked significant indignation in early October 2020 (Vallejo Larios, 2020), demonstrating once more the links between political and economic interests, the mechanisms of corruption, and the loss of sovereignty, as well as the creation of territories characterized by “exception” and “extraterritoriality” (Roux & Geglia, 2019). The Honduran government played a key role, being the one to select the zones, promoting accumulation by dispossession thanks to its capacity for expropriation, and, finally, promoting privatization mechanisms of certain strategic sectors (intensive agriculture, tourism, maquiladoras, and others) to meet the objective of being part of the value chains of the global economy.

The exacerbation of vulnerability and marginalization

The impacts of the health emergency on employment and social cohesion appear to be particularly severe on youth. The interruption of educational processes, the reduction of family income, domestic violence, and the difficulty of accessing employment have affected the younger generation in countries where it represents a significant proportion of the total population, for example, 57% in countries such as Honduras and Guatemala, more than 10 points above the average for Latin America and the Caribbean.

The demographic structure of Central American countries is an essential factor to consider when observing the impacts of COVID-19 on border dynamics. In full productive age and a situation of economic responsibility toward dependent family members (children and parents), the young population was already at a labor disadvantage concerning the economically active population before the health crisis (Sandoval García, 2017). However, the widening of the labor gap and the increase in the number of young people marginalized by the double impossibility of improving opportunities is concerning. Without study or work, this population sees their level of socio-economic desperation skyrocket: poverty, family disintegration, and gang violence comprise a complex combination of reasons for migration to the north (Salazar Araya, 2017).

On the other hand, the United Nations World Food Program warned that “the health pandemic is driving hunger and food insecurity” (Programa Mundial de Alimentos, 2020b). In addition to particularly vulnerable groups such as Haitians or Venezuelans (who are in their countries or areas of mobility due to exile), the UN World Food Program draws particular attention to the region of the “Central American dry corridor”, where people, who were faced with hunger in the pre-pandemic period, are now threatened by job losses and the hurricane season, additional pressure on subsistence production and social protection programs.⁸

⁸ See estimates made in the course of the pandemic by different international anti-hunger programs for El Salvador, Honduras, and Guatemala (Programa Mundial de Alimentos, 2020a; *Más de 1.6 millones de hondureños sufren inseguridad alimentaria por COVID-19*, 2020; Acción contra el Hambre, 2020).

It is worth noting that the Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations (FAO) reported, through its tool for monitoring and analyzing food prices, a significant increase in the prices of basic grains in all countries of the region for April 2020—corn and black beans experienced a 20% increase in El Salvador and 30% in Guatemala, compared to the same month of the previous year.⁹ This phenomenon occurred due to the increase in domestic demand following the implementation of containment measures and the strong demand for exports on the global market, confirming the close relationship between trade dependence of national economies turned outward and food insecurity of a population unable to meet its basic needs.

Throughout the region, hunger has turned into famine, particularly in the three northern countries, where white flags have begun to hang in the windows of inns in working-class neighborhoods or in small houses that dot the landscapes of the countryside. They are families calling for help when children, adults, or the elderly suffer from a lack of food; they also represent a silent protest in the context of absent governments and great social anguish.¹⁰ Other manifestations of hunger were road blockades, barricades, curfews, signs of social irritation, and spontaneous protests to demand government food aid.¹¹ Poverty rates before the pandemic are a variable that has been added since March to an acute economic and employment crisis. Food precariousness can be found in urban areas—with highly marginalized groups in search of daily income and who find it impossible to comply with quarantine measures—and in rural areas (49% of the population in Guatemala or 42% in Honduras; against 20% for Latin American countries as a whole) which are structurally fragile and weakened at social and productive levels by environmental deterioration, the expansion of monocultures, and the expulsion of the peasantry.

Temporary and regional mobility strategies hindered: impacts on the Central American migration system

In addition to the difficulty in obtaining income from local jobs or informal activities, part of Central American family economies face the impossibility of activating temporary, regional migration strategies due to closing borders with neighboring countries. These traditional dynamics of circulation and short mobility are essential for family reproduction in many Central American households, where survival depends on the combined logic of precarious activities in the place of residence and temporary activities in other nearby labor markets, sometimes on the other side of the national border. Although academics and the media often focus on the mechanisms for solving the problems of poverty, violence, and unemployment through international migration towards the United States (due to the spectacular nature of the caravans, the geopolitical implications for the relationship between Mexico and its northern neighbor, or the symbolic effect of crossing the Guatemala-Mexico border in terms of breaking a regional boundary), it is essential to highlight the importance of temporary

⁹ <http://www.fao.org/giews/food-prices/price-tool/es/>

¹⁰ See, for example, in El Salvador: Dada, 2020; Labrador, 2020; Barrera, 2020.

¹¹ See, for example, in Honduras: Red de Solidaridad de la Maquila, 2019.

mobility and the relative permeability of intra-regional borders to understand better the challenges facing Central America in the time of COVID-19. These forms of mobility have been a long-standing strategy of excluded and precarious populations in the region in light of the historical cleavages and conflicts described above. The interdependence of territories is especially demonstrated in border areas. The search for temporary jobs or integration into regional trade dynamics gives rise to frequent displacements and a socio-economic fabric that crosses borders for generations.

In the case of Nicaragua, mobility to El Salvador, Honduras, and Guatemala, is relatively easy in administrative and economic terms (because of the Central American Convention on free mobility or CA-4), constituting a means of integration into labor markets beyond the area of residence, integrating into fragile resource systems where short-distance and duration migration allows for the reinforcing of resilience strategies (Prunier, 2018). Labor force sharing (different family members in different mobility spaces) is, above all, a mechanism used by families with lower economic and social resources who cannot invest in extra-regional migration. In other words, without underestimating the importance of exile and the processes of flight of migrants who decide to seek employment or asylum in the United States, it is worth emphasizing another side of the Central American migratory reality, strongly affected by the health crisis: the centrality of temporary displacements on a regional scale as a resource to maintain and reproduce life in the place of origin (education, health, housing). Therefore, although no current systematized study can measure the extent of the impacts of national border closures as of March 2020, it is possible to hypothesize serious effects on family economies that previously relied on pluriactivity and diversification mechanisms, both of activities and regional labor market spaces.

A complex reading of migratory systems is encouraged, where scales, productive territories, and different migration flows cannot be separated. Gildas Simon defines these systems as a “dynamic interaction of migratory spaces and fields on a broad geographical scale [...] that produces a territorial construction at the regional level, structured by governmental formations and the effects of regulatory devices” of border control (Simon, 2008, p. 21). From this perspective, it is necessary to understand the impacts of globalization on the constitution of labor markets and mobility at the Central American scale and the emergence of migration flows involving other spaces, particularly Mexico and the United States. The close relationship between the two border dynamics (intraregional and extraregional) is essential for understanding the Central American migration system since temporary and circulatory mobility of the south-south type is not unrelated to migration strategies toward the north both at the individual and family trajectory levels.

Conclusions

The borderlines in the region are multiple and intertwined, national and administrative as well as productive, social, political, and spatial; they have provoked intense movements of agrarian colonization, settlement, and circulation throughout the history of the region. Understanding the historical depth of migratory cycles helps relate current flows to the United States—in their dimension of response to contexts

of violence and forced migration (Devia Garzon et al., 2016; Faret, 2020; Winton, 2017; Wolf, 2020)—to previous internal or regional cycles. The case of Honduras is notable, for example, whose migration cycles—banana, agrarian, and maquila—are linked to the structural violence of the economic development model in force in the area, via intensive agriculture, land concentration, and industrialization for export (Equipo de Reflexión, Investigación y Comunicación Compañía de Jesús ERIC-SJ et al., 2020).

The health crisis has demonstrated that the configuration of the region is a multi-territorial space (Haesbaert, 2011), highlighting the different modes of political governance and control of circulation at the borders of the nation-state, as well as the socio-economic asymmetries that influence access to work, income, food, networks, and others. In the context of the pandemic, different meanings of the border (scales and types of limits or asymmetries) need to be put into perspective. It is necessary to consider the place of the region in the dynamics of exclusion-integration by globalization. Thus, it is possible to observe how, parallel to the strict control of the mobility of workers and exiles at national borders, processes of extractivism, dependence, and unequal integration into global capitalism have deepened (Smith, 2020), which exacerbate competition for foreign investment, by offering capital the “best” conditions (Central America Data, 2020) (low wages, almost non-existent labor rights, tax advantages, economic zones of exception, among others). Between the closing of borders for the circulation of certain types of people and the commitment to development based on the sale of cheap labor, the lines of fracture and socio-territorial asymmetry have become more pronounced in the last year.

The crisis is seen, as in other moments in the history of the region, more as an opportunity for the political elites to speed up the implementation of measures in line with their interests (control of mobility and population—particularly of subaltern protesting actors—, sustaining the flow of capital and merchandise, economic and labor reform, and others), than as a situation of instability for the hegemonic project. On the other hand, it is perceived that civil society, whether organized or spontaneous, maintains an important capacity for agency and a strong potential for resistance in light of the historical and contemporary inequalities that structure the region. Whether from institutional or militant structures, in local movements, social networks, or the migrant caravans themselves, there are actions aimed at adaptation and self-protection (for example, the trend in the flow of remittances, which illustrates great management capacity to make effective the response of “putting money in the pockets” of the most affected populations), to the denunciation of xenophobic and reductive sanitary discourses, or the exploitation of the crisis by some governments to censor forms of opposition and community or local resistance initiatives in light of dispossession and privatization of resources.

Finally, with the establishment of emergency measures and declarations of exception, the authoritarian and corrupt tendencies of certain Central American regimes came into a new light: the collusion between the government, drug trafficking, and the human rights crisis in Honduras (Equipo de Reflexión, Investigación y Comunicación ERIC-SJ, n. d.; Vásquez, 2020), the militarization of the territory, the neo-populist character and anti-constitutional positions of President Bukele in El Salvador (Monterrosa, 2020; Valencia & Sánchez, 2020), or the despotic drift of the Ortega-Murillo couple in Nicaragua (Collombon, 2020). It is important to insist on the epidemic’s effects on the evolution of authoritarian forms of government in the region (López Bernal, 2020) in terms of border management and human mobility.

From the criminalization of precarious labor mobility to the application of inhumane quarantine measures for deportees, the rejection of nationals stranded abroad, and threats to fundamental rights,¹² the deepening of exclusion and social injustice factors in countries that have traditionally expelled migrants can be foreshadowed.

However, authoritarianism, control, and the threat to the most basic rights are once again being confronted with collective mobility strategies as a way of making the diaspora visible and generating self-protection measures (Salazar Araya, 2019). In the early morning of October 1, 2020, a group of Honduran migrants left San Pedro Sula to form a new caravan heading to the United States. Despite the police-military deployment that sought to prevent their passage, they entered Guatemalan territory through two border crossings (Corinto and Agua Caliente). The Guatemalan government quickly set the tone by presenting the undocumented passage through its territory as a health threat: it prohibited carriers from transporting Honduran migrants, promoted the denunciation of migrants, and disseminated a discourse that linked them to the risk of contagion. Without waiting, the Mexican government, through the Secretariat of the Interior, issued bulletin no. 366, in which it recalled the penalties and fines or imprisonment for any person who “endangers the health of others”. Armed forces were deployed in both countries, and in different points of the Guatemalan territory, actions were promoted to dissolve the migrant groups, control them, deport them, and encourage them to return voluntarily. Civil society organizations, observers, and academics interpret these measures as forms of intimidation, discrimination, and criminalization of migrant populations.¹³

On January 15, 2021, another caravan was formed from the same starting point. More than 3 500 people organized themselves through social networks, and soon more joined to reach around 9 000 people. On the 16th, despite the presence of security forces, they crossed the border into Guatemala at the El Florido crossing, only to be blocked the following day some 60 km away in the town of Chiquimula. On the way, they were confronted with the brutal use of force and had their efforts nullified against a backdrop of fear and criminalization that associates the illegalization of the migrant body with a health threat.¹⁴

The consolidation of the new geopolitical process governed by the externalization of borders appeared more clearly than ever (Sandoval García, 2020). The fight against undocumented migration in the United States is no longer played out (not only) in the discussion about the wall or even on Mexico’s southern border; it is now defined ever further south, in Central America. The process of externalization is deployed on the border between Honduras and Guatemala (Salazar Araya, 2017), which traditionally constituted a porous circulation zone. The foreign policy of the United States and that of Mexico are reflected in this new role assumed by Guatemala as a migration policy on the way north, in exchange for cooperation programs and development projects

¹² For example, in Honduras, with the repression of protests against the government of Juan Orlando Hernández (Red de Solidaridad de la Maquila, 2019), and with the threat to economic, social, and cultural rights (Coalición Contra la Impunidad, 2020).

¹³ See the October 2020 communiqués by the Colectivo de Observación y Monitoreo de Derechos Humanos in the Mexican southeast (Programa de Asuntos Migratorios de la Universidad Iberoamericana Ciudad de México, n. d.).

¹⁴ See the Discussion migrant struggle (Álvarez Velasco, 2021).

(Villafuerte Solís, 2018; Toussaint & Garzón, 2017). In this context, the pandemic offers a perfect pretext to obstruct flows under the justification of sanitary containment.

Recently, the Biden administration wanted to demonstrate a turnaround in the policy of its predecessor. By a decree signed on February 6 (EFE, 2021; Guimón, 2021), it put an end to the “safe third country” agreement with Guatemala, Honduras, and El Salvador, while stating that it wanted to pursue an “orderly” migration management policy with these countries. Signed in July 2019 with Guatemala (in fact, it had never been established with the other two countries), the Asylum Cooperation Agreement (ACA) allowed Honduran or Salvadoran migrants to be deported to this country where they could theoretically find satisfactory conditions to apply for asylum.

In this context, the displacement of the border within Central America itself (Washington Office on Latin America [WOLA], 2020) and the militarization of transit areas justified by the new fight against the pandemic are two new and worrisome elements.

Borders form limits whose transgression by migrants reflects the integration of societies into global dynamics. The unequal, violent, and urgent nature of the need for displacement that can be anticipated for the coming months or years, as a result of the deepening conditions of poverty, exploitation, and marginalization in the places of origin, becomes evident.

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Delphine Marie Prunier

French. PhD in geography from the Paris Diderot University. Researcher at the Institute of Social Research of the UNAM. She is a member of the Laboratorio Mixto Internacional LMI-MESO “Movilidad, gobernanza y recursos en la cuenca mesoamericana” and the Clacso Group “Fronteras: movilidades, identidades y comercios”. She is member of the National System of Researchers, level 1. Research lines: international migrations, mobility dynamics, circulation and return, labor markets, agriculture and rurality in Central America and Mexico. Recent publication: Prunier, D. (2021). Conflictos territoriales y territorios de los conflictos. ¿Cómo los movimientos sociales interactúan con el espacio? *Geopolitica(s)*, 12(1), 77-98. <https://doi.org/10.5209/geop.68992>

Sergio Salazar

Costa Rican. PhD in social anthropology from the Universidad Iberoamericana de México. Professor at the Escuela de Ciencias Políticas, Universidad de Costa Rica and researcher at the Centro de Investigaciones y Estudios Políticos (UCR). Research lines: democracy, security and democratization policies in Central America, Central American migration in transit, punitive models and prison policies in Costa Rica, and the juvenile prison population in Costa Rica. Recent publication: Salazar Araya, S. (2020). Violence and value in the migratory passage through Central America: the Cadereyta massacre (2012) and the struggle to have the bodies returned. *Violence: an international journal*, 1(2), 221-241. <https://doi.org/10.1177%2F2633002420970965>