



## Mexico's Southern Border Strategy: *Programa Frontera Sur*

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By Christopher Wilson and Pedro Valenzuela

The most common adjective used to describe Mexico's southern border with Guatemala and Belize is probably 'porous.' The large volume of Central American migrants, including many families and unaccompanied minors, crossing the border on their way north to the United States suggests as much. The simultaneous operation of criminal groups involved in drug trafficking, human trafficking, migrant smuggling and other sinister pursuits in the region adds several layers to the challenge. Though these issues are not entirely unlike those faced at the U.S.-Mexico border, the context—in terms of border infrastructure, economic development and the number of border and public security officials stationed in the region, among other things—is quite different.<sup>1</sup> In response to these challenges, and also in an effort to facilitate the legal flow of commerce, tourism and guest workers, Mexican President Enrique Peña Nieto launched the *Programa Frontera Sur* (South Border Program) on July 7, 2014. The program has two main objectives: first, **to protect migrants who enter Mexico**, and second, **to manage the ports of entry in a way that promotes the security and prosperity of the region**. The program includes five key components:

- 1) **Regular and Ordered Migration:** In an effort to regularize movements across the southern border, improvements will be made to the temporary work and visit permits for Guatemalan and Belizean migrants to stay legally in Mexico's border region. The *Tarjeta de Visitante Regional de Mexico* (Regional Visitor Card) is valid for up to 5 years with an unlimited number of entries, each of which is limited to a 72 hour period. A separate *Tarjeta de Visitante Trabajador Fronterizo* (Border Worker Visitor Card) allows those working in the border zone to stay for longer periods. The new southern border strategy includes a simplification of application procedures and the addition of new application offices for the two border crossing cards.
- 2) **Improvements in Infrastructure, for border security and migration:** The twelve border crossings will be enhanced, five *Centros de Atención Integral al Tránsito Fronterizo* (Comprehensive Border Crossing Attention Centers) will be established, and improvements will be made to mobile checkpoints. At the ports of entry, the objective is to increase

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<sup>1</sup> For a detailed description of the southern border and Mexico's current border security efforts, see the Washington Office on Latin America report by Adam Isaacson, Maureen Meyer, and Gabriela Morales, "Mexico's Other Border: Security, Migration, and the Humanitarian Crisis at the line with Central America," June 17, 2014, [http://www.wola.org/publications/mexicos\\_other\\_border](http://www.wola.org/publications/mexicos_other_border).

technology and material resources at the disposal of the border and immigration agents. The attention centers will offer migrants medical care and will have special facilities for unaccompanied migrant children who are awaiting repatriation.

- 3) **Protecting Migrants:** The Mexican government recently put in place medical units in the state of Chiapas to serve migrants. Additionally, the government will work with civil society to support improvements to migrant shelters. Special support from the Mexican government's *Sistema Nacional para el Desarrollo Integral de la Familia* (National System for Integral Family Development) will target care for unaccompanied minors at the shelters.
- 4) **Regional Shared Responsibility:** Mexico will seek to increase coordination mechanisms among the countries of the region. In particular, Mexico and Guatemala are working on joint strategies to dismantle criminal groups operating in the border region and the creation of a shared database that will allow both countries to access biometric and migration data for those crossing the border. Mexico will also host the next Regional Conference on Migration, which brings together representatives from Belize, Canada, Costa Rica, El Salvador, the United States, Guatemala, Honduras, Mexico, Nicaragua, Panama and the Dominican Republic, in addition to several observer countries and organizations.
- 5) **Interagency Coordination:** The southern border strategy will be led by the *Secretaría de Gobernación* (Ministry of the Interior) in conjunction with the governments of the four southern border States: Campeche, Chiapas, Quintana Roo, and Tabasco. President Peña Nieto has announced the creation of the *Coordinación para la Atención Integral de la Migración en la Frontera Sur* (Coordinating Mechanism for Comprehensive Attention to Migration at the Southern Border), which will be headed by a general coordinator appointed by the Ministry of the Interior. This coordinator will work with all the relevant Mexican ministries and the state governments to implement the strategy.

## Observations

- As he announced the program, President Peña Nieto was accompanied by Guatemalan President Otto Perez Molina, and Peña Nieto noted the Mexican government is also working with El Salvador and Honduras to order and secure migration flows from Central America.
- The United States has increased its engagement with Mexico on southern border issues, largely through the Merida Initiative (under Pillar III: Creating a 21<sup>st</sup> Century Border). The two governments have had discussions about border management strategies for some time, and the U.S. government has supported Mexico with equipment donations as well. A recent [Congressional Research Service report](#) by Clare Seelke notes, “The State Department has provided \$6.6 million of mobile Non-Intrusive Inspection Equipment (NIIE) and approximately \$3.5 million in mobile kiosks, operated by Mexico’s National Migration Institute, that capture the biometric and biographic data of individuals living and transiting southern Mexico. The U.S. Department of Defense (DOD) has also provided training to troops patrolling the border, communications equipment, and support for the development of Mexico’s air mobility and surveillance capabilities.”
- The official definition of the Southern Border used in the strategy includes the states of Campeche, Chiapas, Quintana Roo and Tabasco, each of which contain a part of Mexico’s almost 750 miles of border with Guatemala and Belize.

- Already, beginning in January 2014, the *Tarjeta de Visitante Regional de Mexico* (Regional Visitor Card), which allows residents of Guatemala and Belize to enter Mexican southern border communities for up to three days at a time, was made free in order to facilitate the regularization of day-to-day traffic across the Guatemala-Mexico border.

### Some Reactions

“[This program] makes things easier by giving Guatemalans and Belizeans permission to work and visit Mexico. This is certainly a very important part of the problem however is not the total solution, because there are also migrants coming from Honduras and El Salvador that right now are not included. Additionally, is a correct decision not treating the migrant children as refugees because that will give them different rights that not all the migrants that cross Mexico are entitled to.” (Researcher Jorge Bustamante from Colegio de la Frontera Norte in [Radioformula](#), July 9 2014).

“We applaud yesterday’s announcement by Mexican President Enrique Peña Nieto regarding Mexico’s strategy for its southern border. The Mexican government has been working on this strategy for more than a year, and has routinely briefed the U.S. government on Mexico’s objectives.” ([Embassy of the United States in Mexico](#), July 8 2014).

“This kind of efforts will not give any result if no qualified and professionalized human capital has the expertise needed in human rights, therefore *Frontera Sur* could end up just as good intentions. In addition to this, the program is focused mainly in populations that do not need urgent intervention because Mexico already has mobility programs for citizens of both Guatemala and Belize.” (Director of the Program on Migration of the Iberoamericana University Jorge Urbano in [El Economista](#), July 8 2014).

“What did the presidents Peña Nieto and Perez Molina was to locate the migration problem in a regional context and give, not unilateral and regional judicial outputs as has been the reaction of the U.S. government.” (Columnist Pablo Hiriart in [El Financiero](#), July 9 2014).

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