

Reflections on Mexico's Southern Border

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April 1, 2015



Introduction

In early March, 2015, a small group of researchers from the Washington-based Wilson Center and from Mexico's Instituto Tecnológico Autónomo de México and Centro de Investigación y Docencia Económicas traveled to the southwestern section of the Mexico-Guatemala border to observe developments in migration, various types of illicit trafficking, trade, and border management. While there, we met with a wide range of government and non-governmental actors. We crossed the border and visited the official and irregular installations at Ciudad Hidalgo-Tecún Umán and Talisman-El Carmen. We met with officials from Mexico's SRE (Foreign Ministry), SEMAR (Navy/Marines), the Interior Ministry's Coordinación para la Atención Integral de la Migración en la Frontera Sur, and INM (National Immigration Institute); including a visit to the migrant holding center Estación Migratoria Siglo XXI in Tapachula. We were able to dialogue with a range of Chiapas state officials in charge of law enforcement and economic development in the border region. We visited two migrant shelters run by Scalabrini priests, one on each side of the border, and held meetings with NGO representatives and academics working on issues of human rights protection in relation to migrants, migrant workers, sex workers and victims of human trafficking. Finally, we met with Guatemala's interagency border security task force, Fuerza de Tarea Interinstitucional Tecun Uman, including personnel from several Guatemalan government agencies. Below, each of the five researchers participating in the visit presents a short reflection based on several of these encounters.

Reflections on the Mexico-Guatemala Border

By Duncan Wood

National borders are both dividing lines and meeting points, and Mexico's southern border with Guatemala is no exception. When crossing the Rio Suchiate via the Dr Rodolfo Robles bridge from Ciudad Hidalgo, Chiapas, to Tecun Uman, Guatemala, one is immediately reminded of the dividing forces exerted by borders. To access the bridge, one passes by modern, well-organized facilities for immigration and customs, with ample holding space and a fumigation station for incoming vehicles. The intent is clear: to separate Mexico from its southern neighbor.



The infrastructure itself seems to speak of the divide, a concerted effort to distinguish between two countries, between the two societies and political systems. The language of government representatives from various offices suggests something similar, with the words “control”, “regulate”, and “detain” liberally sprinkled through their speeches and discourse. And the difference between the two sides of the border is never more obvious than when one crosses the bridge between Talisman, Chiapas and El Carmen, San Marcos. Leaving Mexico the investment in infrastructure and procedure is clear, with a well-ordered immigration and customs office. At the halfway

point of the bridge, at exactly the line marking the boundary between Mexico and Guatemala, disorder begins, with bicycle taxis, vendors and local residents milling around on the Guatemalan side. On the Mexican side, two private security agents stand guard to maintain the integrity of the northern half. As we were given a tour of the crossing, our Mexican guide stressed the well-ordered nature of the facilities and, when shown the immigration office in the Casa Roja, there are clearly impressive efforts being made to regularize as much of the immigration flow as possible, at least those migrants who choose to cross through official channels.



But despite the differentiating force that the border exerts between the two countries, there is clearly an even stronger connection that unites the communities on both sides of

the river. At the Rio Suchiate between Ciudad Hidalgo and Tecun Uman, the Dr Rodolfo Robles bridge provides an official crossing point, where once again the difference between Mexican and Guatemalan facilities and organization can be seen. A steady but small flow of foot passengers and those traveling in bicycle taxis use the bridge, showing their official travel documents as they enter Mexico, and passing through immigration and customs. But from the middle of the bridge far more people can be seen crossing the river using the multiple informal crossings, riding balsas (or rafts) made from the inner tubes of tires. Many observers have noted this phenomenon before, of course, and to the eyes of an outsider it seems bizarre that the governments of both countries would allow this undocumented flow to take place only meters from the bridge.

It is only when one goes down to the river's edge on the Ciudad Hidalgo side that one begins to understand the logic at work. There the streets are filled with bodegas and stores selling a wide range of basic provisions, such as toilet paper, snack foods, milk and canned fish. Truck after truck arrives from cities to the north, bringing supplies to Ciudad Hidalgo, and the streets are clogged with parked vehicles and merchants moving product to their stores. Guatemalans cross the river on rafts to buy in bulk, then cross back to fill their homes and stores with the product. In effect, Ciudad Hidalgo is a large warehouse for Tecun Uman, providing access to a wide range of goods that are hard to come by in Guatemala, and at a reasonable price (in fact presently at a heavy discount given the strength of the Quetzal versus the Peso). The alternative, namely crossing the bridge and bringing the goods back into the country through Guatemalan customs would involve paying import taxes and having to deal with authorities that commonly request some kind of bribe.

The pattern, therefore, of this informal cross-river trade shapes the local economy. But it must also be recognized that the informal crossings are part of local custom, a way of doing things that is seen as perfectly normal and embedded in culture and day-to-day practice. People cross the river on rafts because that is the way they have done it for time immemorial, and the communities of Ciudad Hidalgo and Tecun Uman are joined by family and social ties as much as by economics. Speaking with one balsero, we learned that the two towns share an annual festival, and that people regularly cross to visit family and friends. In that sense, the Mexico-Guatemala border lands are just like similar regions across the globe (and like the U.S.-Mexico were until relatively recently). What's more, although the transportation service is informal, it is extremely well-organized, with different river taxi companies operating at different crossing points. The balseros provide a service, one that is much needed by the local community and serves the needs of both the broader local economy and society.



Mexico's southern border region connects more than just local communities, however. Many of the goods that make it down to Ciudad Hidalgo originate in the United States, and it became clear that the through-trade to Central America is even more important through official crossings such as Suchiate II at the Luis Cabrera bridge. Our discussions with immigration officials, migrant advocates and our visit to the Estacion Migratoria Siglo XXI, a

major and modern holding station for migrants about to be deported from Mexico, all served to emphasize the fact that this border is directly and intimately connected to the other border, namely Mexico's northern border with the United States. In conversation after conversation we heard that the flow of migrants northwards is constant, unstoppable and a matter of human survival, as individuals and families seek a better life in the north. None of those individuals with whom we spoke had noticed a significant spike in the number of unaccompanied minors last year, when the issue attracted so much political attention in the United States, rather seeing this phenomenon as part of the regular movement of migrants. At the Siglo XXI holding station, we did come across a sizeable contingent of teenage boys, who had been traveling without their parents, although local experts and advocates alike saw this as being a normal occurrence.

The station holds deportees for periods of time ranging from a few hours to several weeks (the average holding time, we were told, is 3 days), depending on the difficulty of arranging deportation from Mexico. The overwhelming majority of migrants were of Central American origin, although we also noticed African and Asian individuals, and official records support this observation. We even came across a young woman who said she was an American citizen, had entered Mexico without a passport and was requesting to be sent to Mexico City to receive assistance from the U.S. Embassy. This single center processes tens of thousands of migrants each year, and has become the focus of criticism from Mexico's National Human Rights Commission (CNDH) and campaigns to improve treatment and conditions from civil society, although the conditions that we were permitted to observe appeared decent and well-organized. What was most striking however, were the testimonies of most of the migrants themselves, who want to be processed and deported as quickly as possible so that they can make another attempt. The migration service that many have paid for, we learned, offers them up to three

attempts to make it to the United States, and costs around \$7000, a small fortune for most Central American families that involves selling most of their worldly goods. These individuals and families, it was clear, will keep trying until they run out of options, and then will work and save the funds to try again. The pull of the north is so strong, and the push from the south so urgent, that this is a phenomenon that will continue for years to come.

Trade and Border Management at the Guatemala-Mexico Line

By Christopher Wilson

In the United States, talk about Mexico's southern border is primarily focused on the trafficking of drugs and movement of migrants through Mexico on their way to the United States. These are real and important phenomena, but while visiting Mexico's southern border, I was struck by the extent to which local economic forces in Chiapas and Guatemala, rather than the dream of wealth and safety in the US, drove dynamics at the border.



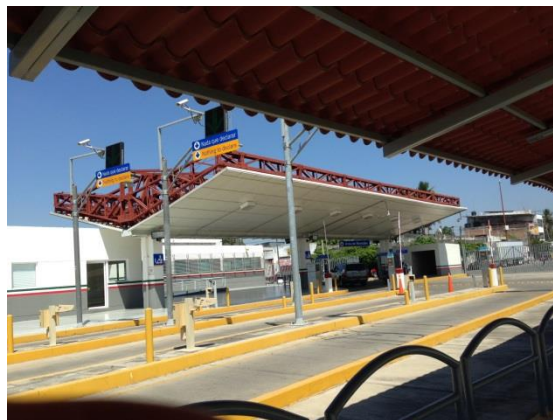
When arriving at the Suchiate river, which divides a large section of the Chiapas-Guatemala border as it makes its way to the Pacific Ocean, the first thing that grabs one's attention is the extremely busy and organized flow of cross-border commerce, not at, but rather between—and indeed right next to—the official border crossings. Teams of stevedores and makeshift gondoliers wear company tee-shirts and work under the direction of a manager shipping cookies, chips, toilet paper, beer and any number of other basic household products to Guatemala on rafts made by lashing inner tubes together with a basic wood-plank deck. On the return trip, fruits and vegetables are sent from Guatemala, and people readily cross in both directions.

This movement of contraband is both a sign of the deeply integrated nature of the local communities and economies on each side of the border, but it is also a billboard advertising lawlessness. It takes no more than a minute at the border to realize passports, visas, and import and export procedures are largely optional. Understandably, contraband snack foods are not a top priority for governments seeking to address the serious challenges of drug trafficking and unauthorized migration, but it is hard to imagine significant advances in stemming the flow of drugs and criminals when people and product bounce back and forth across the border unregulated in plain sight of the very authorities charged with stopping them. Unfortunately, as Duncan Wood describes in his contribution to this trip report, it is also neither simple nor necessarily desirable to simply shut down these trading outfits.

In the summer of 2014, at the height of the unaccompanied Central American minor migration crisis in the United States, Mexico announced the creation of a new plan to manage its southern border (see the short [Wilson Center publication](#) on the plan for more detail). Two central concepts behind the plan, which might be better termed an

outline of a plan still in need of further development. First, Mexico seeks to regularize as much of the local traffic as possible through improvements in border state guest worker and visitor programs. Second, through the development of security belts away from the border itself, the government will aim to stem the flow of drugs and migrants transiting through Mexico. Note that neither of these objectives addresses the issue of non-narcotic contraband.

As someone who has spent a great deal of time traveling and analyzing the U.S.-Mexico border, the notion that not all border security work should be done at the border itself is something I readily embrace. Intelligence-based enforcement efforts at strategic points along illicit supply chains are preferable to randomly opening car trunks at the border in hopes of finding drugs or guns. Nonetheless, at the Chiapas-Guatemala border, there is a glaring need for increased border enforcement.



This is not to say that innovative policy solutions, such as a free trade zone in a delimited border region, or even the eventual creation of a Mesoamerican customs union, should not be considered as tools to regularize rather than disrupt natural (albeit irregular) border commerce, but establishing order and ensuring safety ultimately requires a combination of carrots and sticks. The virtual absence of pedestrian and vehicular traffic at the main Ciudad Hidalgo-Tapachula crossing, despite the improvements in the guest worker and regional visitor card programs, demonstrate the inadequacy of efforts to regularize without border enforcement.

While illicit trade occurs at irregular crossings along the 960 kilometer border, legitimate imports and exports are quite limited, with only the Suchiate II crossing having full commercial inspection infrastructure and capabilities. Any path toward an ordered border will clearly require the development of additional commercial crossing infrastructure.

A similar conclusion can be reached about the management of the border more generally. While the details of a clear vision and strategy for the border are still pending, everyone seems to be in agreement that capacity, in terms of infrastructure and institutions at the border itself (not just the security belts deeper in Mexico's border states), will need upgrades as a part of any sustainable solution.

The Dynamics on the Mexico-Guatemala Border

Ernesto Rodríguez Chávez

For a long time, the borders of the Mesoamerican region have been seen and understood as forgotten areas, far from the powers of the central governments and the rule of law. It was as if what has been occurring on a daily basis was not of interest for the governments and societies involved. Instead, local dynamics built the reality of cross-border life, characterized by intense commercial, labor, services and family ties.

The Mexico-Guatemala border has not escaped these trends, except when extraordinary events offer the region national and international visibility. This occurred in the 1980's when tens of thousands of Guatemalans were displaced, traveling to Mexico in search of protection and in the mid-1990s with the Zapatista armed uprising in Chiapas, Mexico.

In the last 15 years, there has been a constant and massive displacement of Central Americans moving through Mexico with the intention of reaching the United States. Their impacts and confluence with other local and regional processes have driven Mexican and Guatemalan academics, social organizations, mass media and politicians to gradually increase their interests in the border region. Human rights violations against migrants, migrant security, human trafficking, the mobility of visitors and border guest workers, migration governance, and arms and drug trafficking are some of the issues that have become a focus of analysis and debate.

Recently, the disproportionate increase in the arrival of minors to the southern border of the United States and the crisis that managing this phenomenon provoked in 2014 again drew attention to the Mexico-Guatemala border and to the violence prevailing in the countries of the northern triangle (Guatemala, Honduras and El Salvador), especially impacting young Central Americans in urban areas. The Mexican Government created an office of Coordination of Integral Attention for Migration at the Southern Border and the United States Government pushed for the Alliance for Prosperity along with the Central American countries. It is still too early to judge the results of these initiatives.

Traveling the Mexico-Guatemala border in the area with the most intense movement of people, goods and services (as well as dialoguing with governmental and civil society actors in both countries), provides our group from the Wilson Center, ITAM and CIDE an opportunity to confirm firsthand some of the above observations.

Unquestionably, what stands out the most at the border between Ciudad Hidalgo, Mexico and Tecun Uman, Guatemala, is the continued irregular crossing of goods and people between the banks of the Suchiate River, a few meters from the customs and immigration authorities. A makeshift, but organized system of piers and rafts built with big inner tubes and planks, defies any logic of control on the part of immigration and customs authorities. These rafts are able to move hundreds of people in one day charging the individual 5 quetzals (10 pesos / \$0.67 dol.), as well as tons of goods, which are charged according to weight and quantity. This system has been in existence for some 50 years and connects dozens of warehouses on the Mexican side with a distribution network that stretches into the interior of Guatemala by means of cargo-tricycles and various other vehicles.



This situation has not been able to be reversed despite the substantive improvements in the infrastructure and resources at the Ciudad Hidalgo port of entry after the previous facilities were destroyed in 2005 by Hurricane Stan and the gradual improvements on both sides of the border at Suchiate II, Mexico / Tecún Umán II, Guatemala.

The objectives and efforts to promote a safe and orderly border have become increasingly strong in the speeches, plans and actions of the Mexican and Guatemalan governments, as well as the increased interest of the United States. However, there is no evidence of a concrete strategy that could precipitate a change the dynamics of a border that is still self-managed by the local communities, and which, at the margin of any form of the rule of law, continues occupying and consolidating irregular vehicle and river border crossings that allow the passage of basic consumer products and other illicit goods. To counteract this, the Mexican government has put an emphasis on the role of the new comprehensive internal control points in Chiapas and Guatemala in the development of inter-agency task forces, specially trained for border protection.

The process of documentation for visitors and Guatemalan border state guest workers at ports of entry in Ciudad Hidalgo and Talisman, Mexico, show the consolidation and maturity of this policy, promoted since 2008 and signed into law in the 2011 Migration Act. However, the critical point is the continued decrease in recent years in the number of documented workers, compared to the data reported in systematic surveys about the movement of labor in this border (EMIF SUR) and the known demand for Guatemalan labor in agriculture and construction in the Soconusco region of Chiapas. The regularization of domestic workers, street vendors, and service industry workers from

Guatemala, who work in areas close to the Mexico-Guatemala border, remains an outstanding issue.

A new cycle of increased controls and greater detention of Central American migrants crossing the Mexico-Guatemala border in irregular transit to the United States is evident. It highlights that for the first time there has been a reduction in the number of migrants who get aboard the freight train due to the surveillance of immigration authorities and other security forces. As a result the immigration station and the state shelter for migrant children in Tapachula are at maximum capacity. The official data of the National Migration Institute demonstrates that 120,000 Central American migrants were taken to holding centers in 2014, which is 48% more than the previous year. In 2015, the increase in apprehensions continued with more than 25,000 total cases in January and February, almost double the amount during the same period in 2014 (yet still below the levels of migrants detained between 2000 and 2006). Similarly, the number of unaccompanied minors detained during January and February of 2015 was nearly twice as many as were detained during the same period in 2014.

There is an apparent change in the increased presence of Hondurans and youth, as well as an increase in petitions for asylum. This increase in asylum petitions contrasts with the very low acceptance of the requests on the part of the Mexican Commission of Help to Refugees (COMAR).

Border security revisited along the Mexico-Guatemala Border

By Eric L. Olson

A recent trip to the Mexico-Guatemala border with Wilson Center and Mexican colleagues was a unique opportunity to examine one of the most contentious and complex issues in security policy. Borders and border security have become the bywords and buzzwords of the post-9/11 era. Concerns over securing U.S. borders are paramount in many U.S. policy circles with a primary focus on the U.S.-Mexico border. As a consequence migrants have often been viewed as a potential security threat rather than a reflection of humanitarian or economic distress.

Issues of border security again took center stage with the arrival of nearly 70,000 Central American child migrants at the U.S. border in 2014. While much of the public debate has focused on the underlying factors such as crime, violence, and poverty driving the influx, many in the U.S. have also asked what, if anything, Mexico and Central America are doing to stop the tide of unaccompanied Central American children from reaching the U.S. Borders and border security have once again become an important element in the debate about migration.



The crisis of migrant children had a particularly strong impact on Mexico where President Peña Nieto gave a major policy speech in July 2014 outlining a series of policy goals for improving security and the treatment of migrants at Mexico's southern border. What we witnessed, however, was a border region that is still largely unprepared to deal with the flow of migrants and illicit trade that has existed for decades along that border.

Among the government's accomplishments thus far is a significant improvement in the physical infrastructure of the eight formal crossings between Mexico, Guatemala and Belize. The government has also provided access to free temporary visitor passes and temporary worker permits to the tens-of-thousands of Guatemalans that have contributed to the local economy of Mexico's Border States for decades, allowing them to travel freely throughout the border state region. They have also developed, with U.S. support, an internal security perimeter comprised of four check points along strategic travel lanes. Additionally, Mexico's National Immigration Institute (INAMI) has significantly increased its immigration enforcement capacity stepping up detentions by

as much as 25% in 2014 over the previous year, and likewise increasing deportations back to Central America. INAMI is also widely credited with dramatically reducing the irregular use of freight trains by migrants as a means to reach the Mexican interior and the U.S. border.

Nevertheless, the over fifty irregular crossing points along the border continue largely unchecked and no viable plan exists for addressing the problem. We witnessed the continued existence of significant local contraband traveling between the twin border cities of Ciudad Hidalgo (Mexico) and Tecun Uman (Guatemala), all within a stone's throw from the official crossing point. Unauthorized labor from Guatemala and possibly other Central American countries continues to flow largely unrestricted into Chiapas's agriculture fields and as domestic workers in the middle and upper class homes of Tapachula. Labor, human rights, and health protections are difficult to enforce in such an unregulated market, and the potential for physical abuse of irregular workers is great.

Promises of economic investment and development programs, as well as social programs to benefit migrants are still at the planning stage and may never materialize given the lack of a dedicated federal budget for the area.

U.S interest in expanding its security perimeter beyond its border with Mexico to the Guatemalan border is well known. The challenge for all three countries – Mexico, Guatemala, and the U.S. – is not to fall into the same trap encountered on the U.S.-Mexico border that relied too heavily on a security strategy that does not take into account the economic realities of the region, and the reality that Central American migration is likely to continue at significant levels until there are improvements in economic conditions in the Northern Triangle countries and the causes of elevated levels of violence are addressed.

Duplicating the experience along the U.S.-Mexico border is not a viable option but neither is simply ignoring or failing to address the very real problems of safety and security for migrants, and economic distress in the southern border region. The Mexican government's announced "plan for an integral treatment of migrants along the southern border" is still very much in waiting and urgently needs to be defined and implemented.

Organized Civil Society on the Southern Border and Migration Governance

By Brenda Elisa Valdés Corona

The past 8th, 9th and 10th of March, a small group of academics from CIDE and ITAM together with members from the Woodrow Wilson Center visited the border zone of Tapachula. After a series of meetings with activists, defenders of human rights and members of civil society with a presence in the region, we were able to witness some of the work of these civil organizations as well as the applied academic research projects being undertaken in the area. Mainly, their activities are centered on the defense and promotion of human rights for people that are migrating as well as research, training and advocacy for public policy. Projects designed to facilitate the social integration of the migrant population in the Soconusco (southwest portion of the state of Chiapas), known as a space of high mobility, were especially noteworthy.

We also visited the shelters or the institutions for the assistance of transmigrants (those traveling through the region, usually to the United States). The Belen Shelter directed by Father Flor Maria Rigoni,

opened its doors in January of 1997, offering men, women and children, mainly from Central America and on their way to the United States, food, medical attention and a safe place to sleep. The shelter emphasizes the dignified treatment that it offers migrants, which allows them to restore confidence lost on the journey from the indignities suffered during the journey. The strength of Father Rigoni and the migrants themselves is hard to comprehend.



The migrant house in Tecún Umán, Guatemala, directed by Father Ademar Barilli, started as a project 20 years ago. A few steps away from the Dr. Rodolfo Robles border crossing, the institution offers not only a place to take refuge for three days but also medical services, dental

services, consultation with a social worker, legal advice, as well as educational services. The search for solutions in the face of their complex situations is the common denominator that we found at both of the Scalabrinian missionary shelters that we visited in Guatemala and Mexico.

Both in the case of civil organizations and religious institutions, we observed the importance of opening communication and forming networks in order to collaborate with government authorities in efforts to protect and address the needs of migrants. Although the work of these organizations does not and cannot substitute the functions of the state on either side of the border, they have certainly contributed to improving the respect of the human rights of migrants. This relationship between government and civil society, with respect to governing migration, has not always been smooth or without conflicts, but both sides have found reasons to seek collaboration. The articulation of networks, despite their inherent challenges, has facilitated the development of channels to develop and push forward clear and viable proposals to resolve problems common to the border region.

Another element to highlight from our observation is the necessity of psychological support interventions and strategies for those who dedicate themselves to the care of migrants. As the adversity of the environment and the risks for migrants have increased, it becomes ever more clear that those who work with and care for migrants also need tools to take care of themselves in order to not accumulate emotional tensions that in the long run bring important physical and psychological repercussions. This necessity was observed both among public servants in working with migrants (such as those in the Estacion Migratoria Siglo XXI) as well as members of civil society.

In conclusion, it can be said that organized civil society in the border communities has attained a level of maturity and experience through decades of presence in the region. The experience and trajectory of these organizations enables them to work in a jointly responsible manner with the government, seeking not only to meet the day-to-day needs of the migrants but to address the structural causes behind them.

About the Authors

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Duncan Wood is the director of the Mexico Institute at the Wilson Center. Prior to this, he was a professor and the director of the International Relations Program at the Instituto Tecnológico Autónomo de México (ITAM) in Mexico City for 17 years. He has been a member of the Mexican National Research System, an editorial advisor to both *Reforma* and *El Universal* newspapers, and is a member of the editorial board of *Foreign Affairs Latinoamérica*. In 2007, he was a non-resident Fulbright Fellow and, between 2007 and 2009, he was technical secretary of the Red Mexicana de Energía, a group of experts in the area of energy policy in Mexico. He has been a Senior Associate

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