



# Other Situations of Violence in the Northern Triangle of Central America: Invisible Borders, Vicious Spirals, and the Normalisation of Terror

## Executive Summary

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### 1. Background

In recent years, the countries in the Northern Triangle of Central America – El Salvador, Guatemala and Honduras – have seen an increase in the levels of violence perpetrated by armed groups, gangs, organised criminals, drug traffickers and some members of the state. According to United Nations Office of Drugs and Crime (UNODC) data for 2012, Honduras ranks as the most violent country in the world, followed by El Salvador, with Guatemala not far behind (UNDP 2013, UNODC 2012). The period between 2009 and 2011 was particularly violent.

Changes in drug smuggling routes are a key reason for the increase in violence. Mexico's 'war on drugs' since 2006 has disturbed the power balance among criminal groups in the Northern Triangle and increased the number, range, and use of weapons. Drug trafficking gangs, illegal groups, and clandestine powers have adopted strategies of violence to accrue benefits and guarantee impunity. The high levels of inequality in the region, the coup in Honduras in 2009, the US's deportation of Northern Triangle citizens who have criminal records, and the repressive *mano dura*<sup>1</sup> policy response to the increase in violence have all aggravated the situation.

The states are not responding effectively or appropriately to victims' basic demands for health, education, protection, and justice (REDALYC 2011). Distrust in state institutions is high, with high levels of corruption, a lack of access to justice, the incursion of organised crime into many military, political, and social structures, and the porosity of borders exacerbating structural weaknesses within state systems.

A huge percentage of crimes go unreported: between 2011 and 2013, 95% of homicides in the Northern Triangle went unpunished (La prensa gráfica 2014). The unreported crimes are a major obstacle in understanding the magnitude and intensity of

<sup>1</sup> Translated as *heavy handed* - police and legal measures designed to combat crime

the humanitarian impact of violence, especially related to the most 'invisible' impacts like forced displacement, disappearances, and extortion.

Some of the critical areas of the Northern Triangle, also known as 'red areas', are in effect conflict zones and exhibit high levels of violence and criminality, large numbers of injuries caused by firearms, physical and sexual abuse, torture, extortion, kidnappings, forced recruitment, curfews (unofficial), confinement, invisible borders, a population in fear of violent death or crime, lack of state rule, corruption and impunity, limited access to health and other basic services, and limited access to protection and justice. Some of the population are forced into displacement to escape threats and violence, moving within the state, requesting asylum, or resorting to irregular migration.

#### The aim of this study is to:

- Improve understanding of the key humanitarian impacts of violence on the lives of the affected population, using a multi-sectoral approach and considering both direct and indirect effects.
- Identify and propose specific sectoral indicators to measure these impacts, identifying available sources at national or regional level.
- Provide an analytical framework that will help humanitarian actors decide the relevance of a humanitarian response based on the situation of the affected population, humanitarian access, and existing response capacities at the national and international level.

### 2. Definition of Violence

This study uses the term coined by the ICRC, "other situations of violence" (OSV), which refers to civil unrest, riots, state repression, post-election violence, gang violence, demonstrations, etc. The consequences can be as devastating and deadly to the civilian population as those of an armed conflict (ICRC 2011).

As indicated by Robert Muggah, violence is becoming a less structured phenomenon. It is increasingly moving away from traditional notions of conflict and wars to more dynamic and unstructured phenomena, linked to criminal violence, terrorism and civil unrest (IDRC 2012).

### 3. The Visible Impact of OSV in the Northern Triangle

In the last ten years (2004–2013), 143,588 homicides were recorded in the Northern Triangle, around 41.9 homicides per day in an area of approximately 30 million people. However, the rate of underreporting is very high throughout the region, and neither does this number include the numerous people who go missing and whose bodies are later found (UNODC 2014, IUDPAS, IML, INACIF).

At 90.4 homicides per 100,000 people, Honduras remains the most violent country in the world. El Salvador (41.2) and Guatemala (39.9) have higher homicide rates now than during their civil wars. Data from a UNODC report shows that the homicidal violence in the Northern Triangle results in considerably more civilian casualties than in any other countries, including those with ongoing armed conflicts or war, such as DRC (28.3 in 2012) and Afghanistan (6.5 in 2012) (UNODC 2014). In 2012 the global average homicide rate was 6.2 per 100,000 people.

Young men are the main victims and perpetrators of organised murder and gang violence. Latin America has the highest levels of youth violence in the world. Central America has four times more male victims between 15 and 29 years than the rest of the world, and two out of every three homicides are committed by firearms (UNODC 2014).

### 4. The Hidden Humanitarian Impact of OSV

Murder, injury, assault, and physical threat are among the direct and most visible impacts of OSV. But there are also abandoned houses, limitations on public services, deteriorating public infrastructure, and the pervasive presence of security forces (police, military, private security, in hospitals, health centres and schools). There is a deeper impact, which creates dynamics that withhold the most basic rights and freedoms from communities, especially the ones that are the most vulnerable.

#### **Health Impact**

- Daily exposure to high levels of violence permanently scars the psyche of a population, affecting the mental health of direct and indirect victims of violence.
- The health system is oversaturated, and cannot meet all health needs. Saving the lives of victims of violence takes precedence over the health needs of others. Victims of sexual violence do not receive adequate support from the health system (or the justice system).

- In areas where violence is most prevalent, the state is often absent and basic services are lacking, especially access to emergency services and first aid.
- Risks of infectious diseases, such as dengue, are higher, as access of vector control and fumigation teams to carry out preventive activities can be limited.

#### **Educational Impact**

- To avoid the risk of forcibly recruited or becoming victims of sexual abuse, some students are dropping out of school, restricting their opportunities for the future.
- Schools are a place of risk instead of protection. Extortion and threats against teachers and high levels of violence are common.

#### **Economic Impact**

- When the main income-generating member of the household is killed or injured, family living conditions are likely to deteriorate. Expensive medical bills can add to the economic impact, and without a support network households can descend into extreme poverty.
- Widespread extortion affects traders, small shops and street vendors, as well as the final price paid by the consumer. In some areas there is a monopoly on commercial brands that reach the shops, or among traders, which is often linked to access payments or to businesses' links with structures that have power within criminal organisations with territorial control. These monopolies affect services such as water distribution and local transport or taxi services, as well as products.
- The losses from extortion payments, employment discrimination, access "fees" and price increases have a detrimental impact on the household economy of many families.

#### **Social Impact**

- Violence and organised crime have led to the loss of public spaces.
- The law of "see, hear, and be silent" results in self-censorship and limitations on freedom of expression among the community, reducing participation.
- Mistrust generates an increasingly claustrophobic situation. Confinement becomes not only physical but also permeates into the psychological and social spheres, restricting freedom of expression and further eroding the capacity of communities to organise and establish common resistance against violence.
- Community organisations have disintegrated. The collapse of community involvement in public or advisory/consultative activities increases the isolation and vulnerability of populations, and puts the socially and economically vulnerable at even greater risk.

## ***Forced Displacement***

The high levels of violence are activating forms of involuntary migration that could be described as forced displacement (PNUD 2013). This crisis of displacement remains hidden, only reported by the media in extreme cases. Lack of confidence in the authorities, apprehension of discovery, and the absence of official support for these victims of violence all contribute to their invisibility. The humanitarian impact is therefore difficult to measure or quantify.

Preliminary data from an unpublished UNHCR/JIPS study on Honduras shows that about 1% of the surveyed population had migrated internally due to insecurity. If we extrapolate this to the total population covered by the survey, around 30,000 people have been internally displaced due to violence. However it is considered that this ratio underestimates the potential magnitude of displacement in Honduras (UNHCR 2014, preliminary results, not yet published).

The results of a 2012 IUDOP survey in El Salvador (representative sample: 1,268 people) showed that 2.1% of respondents had changed their place of residence due to threats and violence (and 37% of them had moved twice or more). If we extrapolate the results (with a confidence rating of 95%) to the population of El Salvador, it would mean that 2.1% of its 6.2 million people opted for internal displacement as a strategy to escape violence (IUDOP 2012).

Comparing the figures of the preliminary UNHCR 2014 report with homicide rates and violent incidents in the Northern Triangle, there is a clear link between increased violence and the substantial increase in asylum applications and in the recognition of refugee status for Northern Triangle nationals (130% increase in asylum applications from 2009 to 2013, 31% increase in granting of refugee status between 2010 and 2012).

Thousands of people are also migrating illegally to avoid detection, leaving their lives in the hands of strangers operating outside the law. Some 185,000 people from the Northern Triangle were deported in 2013 (a 46% increase since 2011), indicating the tendency of the Northern Triangle population to resort to cross-border movement or irregular migration as a strategy to flee violence. Women make up about 20% of irregular migrants and are particularly vulnerable to human exploitation networks. In recent years there has also been dramatic increase in the number of unaccompanied minors fleeing the region (UNODC TOCTA 2011, UNHCR 2014).

There is insufficient quantitative evidence to calculate the magnitude, trends, and needs for protection generated by the different types of forced displacement. The UNHCR/JIPS 2014 project aims to create and generate more evidence, to identify the profiles of the affected population, and to identify the drivers of displacement from particular geographic areas. Ongoing humanitarian interventions by ICRC and MSF are also contributing to generating evidence and understanding of OSV impacts. This information will enable humanitarians to identify issues beyond protection, which can guide complementary humanitarian support and long-term development interventions.

## **5. Geography of Violence**

The geography of violence follows the geography of the illegal drugs trade, of arms trafficking, of the battles for territorial control between organised armed gangs or between gangs and state forces, and of forced displacement. Violence is most prevalent in urban areas, along the borders and on the Atlantic or Pacific coast; normally areas controlled by organised crime, where armed gangs work with drug cartels, using murder and extortion to control territory. Five departments in Honduras have homicide rates above the national average: Cortés, Atlántida, Yoro, Colón, and Ocotepeque. The highest indices of lethal and non-lethal violence in Guatemala are in the departments of Zacapa, Chiquimula, Escuintla, Izabal, Guatemala, Santa Rosa and Petén (INACIF 2013). In El Salvador violence is worst in the departments of Cuscatlán, La Paz, Cabañas, Usulután, La Unión, San Vicente, San Salvador, and Sonsonate (IML).

## **6. Demographics of the Victims of Violence**

It is necessary to develop vulnerability profiles of people affected by violence to better understand their needs and inform the humanitarian response, as well as to find entry points for development programmes and advocacy that can complement humanitarian action. As a starting point, several distinct groups can be identified as particularly vulnerable.

The inhabitants of the most violent 'red areas' are extremely vulnerable, and among this population, the elderly, disabled and chronically ill are particularly vulnerable, given the limited access to services. The LGBTI population is often subject to discrimination and abuse.

Many people who have been displaced by violence, either internally or transnationally, are in need of protection and health assistance while travelling or upon return or deportation.

Children are being raised in an oppressive environment of aggression, which limits their opportunities for education, health and development, and is also likely to cause psychological damage. They are being recruited by armed groups as informers and to carry out surveillance. Unaccompanied minors who migrate are also at significant risk. Data from the US Border Patrol indicate an alarming increase in the presence of minors from the Northern Triangle. In 2011 there were 4,059 juvenile detainees; in 2013 this figure rose to 21,537 (UTECH 2013, UNHCR 2014). Surveys reflect violence, gang pressure and insecurity as factors for child migration (UTECH El Salvador 2013, UNHCR *Children on the Run* 2014). Boys fear for their lives and girls fear rape or disappearance (State University of San Diego and University of California in Santa Barbara, Elizabeth G. Kennedy 2014).

Women are victims of violence inside and outside the home. Some are exposed to high levels of sexual violence and physical and psychological abuse, which most often goes untreated.

## 7. The Challenge of Measuring the Humanitarian Impact of OSV

While underreporting is a key challenge to identifying the humanitarian impact of OSV, there are also many other obstacles to calculating the magnitude of the least visible humanitarian impacts of OSV.

One of the biggest difficulties is finding indicators that measure specific impacts of OSV. Beyond the most obvious (homicide, injuries due to violence, criminal acts linked to OSV, members of criminal groups, maps of violent areas), little information is specific or exclusive to OSV impact.

It could be possible to make an approximation through the intersection of a dataset, variables, or proxy indicators and geo-referenced systems (e.g. cross-referencing maps of areas with high violence and maps with socio-economic data, morbidity, or rates of schooling).

Information from opinion and victim surveys can be used as indicative in calculating levels of unreported crime or the number of victims of the most invisible impacts. Data from representative surveys with a high level of confidence can be used in combination with the population census (or population projections for that particular year) to approximate the number of people who might be affected.

# — ANALYTICAL FRAMEWORK —



The recommended analytical framework above contains elements similar to those used in a situation of conflict or natural disaster. The framework includes the situation of the population (contributing/underlying factors of the crisis), identification of impacts and coping strategies, humanitarian access (population to aid, humanitarian actors to population) and the response capacities of institutions, NGOs, civil society and international organisations.

The results of the analysis seek to show the extent of the humanitarian crisis, to classify its profile, to identify the most vulnerable population groups and geographic areas, and to indicate trends and potential development of the crisis (scenarios) as well as existing information gaps.

## 8. Recommendations for Improving Knowledge of the Humanitarian Impact of OSV

- Introduce specialised technical support, and create an OSV monitoring and analysis working group at the regional level. This group should lead the development and implementation of a monitoring system in the Northern Triangle, relying as much as possible on existing systems.
- The monitoring system could also be used as an early warning system to inform decision making and contribute to improved coordination among all humanitarian actors at regional and national level.
- Development a guide and toolkit with a multi-sectorial approach, which includes OSV indicators (qualitative and quantitative) to measure the visible and invisible impacts of OSV.
- Capacity building and the promotion of the constant exchange of information to ensure the proper use and maintenance of the monitoring system.
- Use the evidence generated by the OSV monitoring system and OSV interventions to prompt humanitarian action and to advocate for support for these invisible victims.

**To read the full report (in Spanish) please [click here](#)**