

Intersecting Crises: Pandemic and Hurricanes Add to Political Instability Driving Migration from Honduras

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It was one month after Hurricane Iota destroyed his family's home that 31-year-old Jexis decided to leave his hometown of Choloma, Honduras. The storm arrived after months of joblessness he faced during the COVID-19 pandemic, adding to years of economic hardship as contract labor jobs became increasingly hard to find. "When the pandemic came, there was no work and much suffering. But the hurricanes have made everything so much worse," he said in late 2020. That December, he joined a caravan of migrants heading for the United States, in what would be his first attempt to migrate. Jexis and roughly 900 people had departed San Pedro Sula together, but were halted by military police by the end of their first day, after which they splintered into smaller groups.

Jexis's situation is emblematic of many Honduran migrants, for whom the pandemic and Hurricanes Iota and Eta proved the tipping point. "It's a complicated thing, being out of work for nine months and having a family, having children that are demanding food and you're not able to give it," he said. Jexis planned to travel with a friend from his neighborhood soccer team, Nelson, to find work in the United States and send back money to their families. The men were interviewed early in their journey by one of the authors; their surnames and those of others in this article are being withheld due to the vulnerability of their situation.

Driven by similar stories, the number of migrants encountered at the U.S.-Mexico border—particularly from Honduras and its Central American neighbors Guatemala and, to a lesser extent, El Salvador—has risen dramatically in early 2021, to levels not seen in two decades. The impact of the pandemic and hurricanes might seem to be the most immediate causes, but there are numerous factors at work in Honduras, as well as the lure of jobs, family members, and other promises in the United States. Gang violence in Honduras is widespread, and homicide rates consistently rank among the highest in the world. Undergirding the country's challenges is a tense political climate, declining support for democracy, and a majority of citizens who regard politicians as corrupt. The pandemic and hurricanes have also had indirect effects that are difficult to trace: natural disasters disrupt agricultural production and ravage economies as well as destroy possessions, and COVID-19 exacerbated economic woes in an already difficult labor market.

U.S. President Joe Biden has pledged to address these root causes of migration, increasingly emphasizing the destabilizing effects of corruption, in order to reduce the number of spontaneous arrivals at his country's southern border. But the challenges are deeply embedded and have been building for years. This article, based in part on interviews with migrants conducted by one of the authors in December 2020, examines how citizens' frustration with state governance and corruption

(real and perceived) have combined with COVID-19 and back-to-back hurricanes to drive emigration from Honduras.

Honduran Migration Trends in Context

While migration from Central America is often discussed as a single phenomenon, flows from Honduras in particular stand out. Data from the United States and Mexico suggest that more migrants have come from Honduras relative to its population than from El Salvador or Guatemala since fiscal year (FY) 2018. Honduras constitutes 28 percent of the three countries' combined population, but accounted for 43 percent of migrants from the region who came into the custody of Mexican or U.S. authorities between FY 2018 and mid-FY 2021 (see Table 1).

Table 1. Encounters of Central American Migrants in the United States and Mexico by Country of Nationality, FY 2018-21

	FY 2018	FY 2019	FY 2020	FY 2021*	Total FY 2018-21	Share of Total (%)
TOTAL	362,480	784,643	182,775	367,450	1,697,348	100.0%
El Salvador	47,396	115,669	25,956	45,308	234,329	13.8%
Guatemala	179,823	321,689	78,698	153,596	733,806	43.2%
Honduras	135,261	347,285	78,121	168,546	729,213	43.0%

Notes: Data for fiscal year (FY) 2021 run through March for Mexico and April for the United States; apprehension figures from the Mexican government, which uses the calendar year, have been adjusted to match the U.S. government's fiscal year accounting, which runs from October 1 through September 30.

Sources: U.S. Customs and Border Protection (CBP), "Southwest Land Border Encounters," updated May 4, 2021, [available online](#); Mexican Unit for Immigration Policy, Registration, and Person Identity, "Boletín Mensual de Estadísticas Migratorias 2021," [available online](#).

In absolute terms, Mexican and U.S officials had nearly 347,300 encounters with Honduran migrants in FY 2019, slightly more than those from the far more populous Guatemala. While migration worldwide was severely halted by COVID-19-related restrictions in 2020, Honduran and Guatemalan migration continued at a slower pace. By early 2021, migration figures from the region reverted to the trends immediately preceding the pandemic, with Honduras's numbers standing out.

Vanderbilt University's AmericasBarometer survey found that nearly one in five Hondurans expressed a strong desire in 2019 to emigrate—roughly twice the rate of Guatemalans and Salvadorans. The survey also found that Hondurans' reasons for wanting to migrate were complex and multifaceted, including to reconnect with U.S.-based relatives, fear of assault, food insecurity, income loss, and unemployment.

Hondurans of prime working age appear especially concerned about the direction of the country. Sixty-one percent of millennials indicated in a February 2021 survey commissioned by the Honduran Council of Private Enterprise (COHEP) that they would prefer to migrate and were uninterested in voting in the country's March presidential primaries. This suggests that many Hondurans of this age group have grown disenchanted with the government, particularly its recent response to natural disasters and the pandemic, which was often seen as ineffectual, late, or entirely nonexistent.

Corruption, Crisis, and COVID-19: Compounding Drivers

Honduras is consistently considered to be among the world's most corrupt states. Researchers Jørgen Carling, Erlend Paasche, and Melissa Siegel argue emigration will increase in countries where citizens lack faith in local opportunities. In a recent study, regional experts Joy Olson and Eric Olson suggest that widespread corruption and resultant hopelessness for improving conditions could be drivers of migration from Central America. As one 36-year-old Honduran named Juan Carlos told one of the authors from his hurricane-battered village of La Lima, "The people of Honduras, they want to leave this country... The government doesn't work here." Juan Carlos said he planned to join a caravan slated to depart San Pedro Sula in January.

These feelings of hopelessness have been prompted by a decade-long political crisis. The National Party (*Partido Nacional de Honduras*, PNH) has been in power since a 2009 coup d'état removed leftist President Manuel Zelaya after he made early attempts to gauge support for changing the constitution to allow him to seek a second term. The decade of PNH rule has been marked with civil and political strife, including an admission by President Juan Orlando Hernández's 2013 campaign of having received money from companies involved in fraud, and his 2017 reelection, which the Organization of American States described as "characterized by irregularities and deficiencies." Both situations prompted citizens to take to the streets, with the state resorting to harsh tactics to quell the 2017 protests.

Of note is the rumored connection between political officials and the drug trade. Hernández's brother, former PNH congressman Tony Hernández, was charged with narco-trafficking in the United States and sentenced to life imprisonment in March. The 2021 U.S. federal court trial of drug kingpin Geovanny Fuentes led to sworn testimony that Juan Orlando Hernández took campaign donations from drug traffickers, promised to shield associates from extradition, and profited from the cocaine trade, although the president has faced no charges on these counts and has repeatedly denied such allegations.

Hondurans' faith in government appears to have been affected. Between 2010 and 2019, satisfaction with the functioning of Honduran democracy fell from 66 percent to 36 percent, according to Vanderbilt's AmericasBarometer. As La Lima resident Manuel told one of the authors, "Brother, while the corrupt government remains, in this country we aren't able to do anything."

Crisis within a Crisis: COVID-19

The public-health crisis has accelerated many of the migration push factors. During the pandemic, Hondurans faced a desperate economic situation, exacerbated by sweeping government restrictions that disproportionately affected the poorest residents. In March 2020, authorities announced a nationwide lockdown under which people could only leave their homes once every 15 days. Only a handful of large enterprises, primarily grocery store chains and big-box retailers, were permitted to remain open. Informal vendors such as *pulperias* (local grocery stores) and neighborhood pharmacies were shut for months on end.

Military police rigorously enforced these restrictions, detaining more than 6,000 citizens by April 2020 and occasionally engaging in extreme violence. The Committee of Relatives of the Disappeared in Honduras (COFADEH), a Honduran human-rights group, has reported that punishment for violating curfews has been applied disproportionately to low-income Hondurans such as street vendors, the unemployed, and rural producers.

The immediate economic consequences of the pandemic and the government response were severe. GDP quickly dropped by 7 percent and early estimates suggest that the share of Hondurans living in extreme poverty could rise from 42 percent of the population to 64 percent. Women were pushed

further down the economic ladder and have been more likely than men to experience unemployment. In a nationwide survey conducted by the World Food Program and the International Organization for Migration in August 2020, 68 percent of respondents expressed concern about having enough to eat. In February 2021, nearly one-third of the population faced severe hunger, with 614,000 people in emergency situations just below famine level.

The government took steps to provide public-health support and economic relief, yet its efforts have been marred by corruption. In March 2020, the National Congress moved to pass a U.S. \$420 million response package, bypassing contracting rules and an anticorruption watchdog to authorize the construction of 94 health centers which were never built. The watchdog, the National Anticorruption Council, has detailed multiple incidents of corruption related to the government's pandemic response. After auditing more than \$80 million in government contracts, another watchdog organization, Association for a More Just Society (ASJ), found that the Honduran agency charged with medical procurements had overpaid for seven mobile hospitals by more than \$12 million, likely spurring kickbacks.

When asked if he had hope that conditions in Honduras would improve, caravan aspirant Nelson, who was traveling with Jexis, said: "There's nothing, just lies and lies. Many people have died. The government has stolen all the money. That's why you can't thrive here in Honduras. Better to migrate to the other side."

Further Crisis: Hurricane Management and Fallout

When Hurricanes Eta and Iota hit within two weeks of each other in early November, the physical damage they inflicted was immense and far-reaching. In total, nearly half of Honduras's 9 million residents were affected, with 368,000 displaced from their homes and more than 200,000 forced into improvised shelters, where COVID-19 and dengue posed major threats. Roads, bridges, and dams were destroyed along with tens of thousands of houses. Early estimates put the losses at around \$2 billion, or approximately 8 percent of the country's GDP, with estimated losses of up to 80 percent in the agricultural sector. The disaster elicited comparisons to Hurricane Mitch, one of the deadliest hurricanes in recorded history, which drove tens of thousands of Hondurans to migrate to the United States in 1998.

As with the pandemic, the government response was disorganized, slow to mobilize, and saddled by poor planning and mismanagement. For several days Hernández's cabinet ignored warnings about the impending arrival of Eta from the U.S. National Hurricane Center, and instead focused its planning efforts on Semana Morazánica, a national holiday designed to encourage tourism. COPECO, the federal agency charged with pandemic and disaster response, similarly was reportedly more concerned about plans for the holiday as Eta bore down. It was not until after the storm struck that the government suspended the holiday.

Yet even if the government had been prompt in its response, it was not prepared to handle the crisis. The recently appointed head of COPECO, a former reggaeton star named Max Alejandro González Bonilla (who went by the stage name Killa), admitted that he had no experience managing disasters and was unqualified for the job. González found himself in the top position only after his predecessors were accused of corruption in handling the pandemic.

Many Hondurans felt abandoned by the government during the hurricanes, as they had throughout the pandemic, and saw little hope that circumstances would improve. "Why is it always migration? Because here there is no solution," said Juan Carlos. "For me, the government is only promises and corruption. They say there is help but none of us have seen it."

The pandemic prompted governments around the globe to close borders and implement other mobility restrictions, but these steps only temporarily chilled planned movement, rather than stopping it entirely. In Honduras, the hurricanes ignited what was already a tinderbox of discontent, with many planning to depart once the opportunity arose. More than half of residents surveyed in a national CID Gallup poll in January 2021 said they would leave the country if they had the resources to do so; 41 percent of people ages 25-39 said they were “very likely” to migrate.

Toward Effective Governance?

In November 2021, Hondurans will elect a new president. Despite the current administration’s alleged ties to narcotrafficking and public discontent with corruption, two of the four major party candidates have been dogged by corruption charges or allegations: PNH candidate Nasry Asfura, the Tegucigalpa mayor, is under investigation for embezzlement of more than \$1 million in municipal funds; Yani Rosenthal, the right-leaning Liberal Party candidate, recently completed three years in U.S. federal prison for laundering drug money. Opposition to the PNH remains largely divided, and Honduras’s first-past-the-post electoral system means a fragmented landscape could result in a candidate winning with a relatively low percentage of the vote.

Corruption allegations and narcotrafficking connections could render Honduras’s next president ill-equipped to address systemic domestic issues and may create challenges for cooperating with the United States and other international partners. Biden’s February executive order on tackling the root causes of migration from Central America listed combatting corruption, strengthening democratic governance, and advancing the rule of law as its first strategic pillar. Initial reports suggest governments in the region may be uninterested in creating a new regional anticorruption mission.

U.S. officials say they intend to avoid giving handouts to corrupt governments and will use the proposed \$4 billion U.S. aid to empower community partners and civil-society organizations. Community partners will play a central role in any Biden plan, but large-scale funding would require robust oversight to ensure the money does not prompt increased corruption in civil-society organizations. The U.S. administration has also reportedly considered conditional cash transfer programs to address the conditions that lead to migration.

The United States and other donor countries would benefit from reviewing how previous spending in the region helped promote or undermine policy goals including reducing migration. For example, between 2016 and 2018 the U.S.-supported Plan of the Alliance for Prosperity in the Northern Triangle allocated more than 40 times as much funding in Honduras for economic development projects than for initiatives aimed at improving institutions and promoting transparency. Although economic development is critically important, research shows improving economic conditions can increase emigration over the short term, by providing would-be emigrants with the resources to travel.

At present, the most visible regional migration cooperation has been on border enforcement, with the United States supporting Mexico, Guatemala, and Honduras in efforts to break up migrant caravans before they reach the U.S. border. This was the experience of Jexis, whose caravan lasted fewer than 24 hours before being splintered by Honduran authorities, at least temporarily. These efforts may halt migrants in the short term, however they do not appear to be a viable long-term strategy. Neither Jexis nor Nelson reached the United States with the early December caravan, but they pledged to join subsequent groups that were already being organized. At the time of writing, it was not clear if they or Juan Carlos ultimately had completed their trek.

The twin crises of the pandemic and hurricanes laid bare the apparent institutional dysfunction in Honduras’s government. Migration drivers in Honduras are complex and multifaceted but invariably point back to citizen dissatisfaction with and feelings of abandonment by the state. Addressing their

needs will likely be the first and most effective step to stemming emigration and improving humanitarian outcomes.

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