A combination of push factors, such as violence, disasters, poverty and lack of response from governments are largely intertwined as key drivers of new caravans in Central America.

**Background**

A new caravan set out from San Pedro Sula, Honduras beginning on the 15th of January, and quickly grew to more than 4,000 people. It split as it entered Guatemala, with groups taking one of two routes to the Mexican border with Guatemala. Many migrants and refugees have opted to form caravans, rather than travel through Mexico alone, because they are frightened of being kidnapped by human traffickers, falling into the hands of organized crime and drug cartels, or suffering abuses from the police or military.

**Timeline and key facts**

- The first caravan, of about 500 people, was convened in San Pedro Sula bus station, Honduras, on the 14th of January.
- By the 16th of January, between 3,500 and 4,000 personas had entered into Guatemala through different border crossings, both regularly and irregularly, including Corinto, Entre Rios and Agua Caliente.
- By the 19th of January, approximately 2,500 people had arrived at Tecun Uman, and were waiting to cross the border with Mexico.
- On the 20th of January, people were reported to start travelling directly from El Salvador to join the caravans.
- People are travelling in smaller, dispersed groups (up to 20 or 30 people), by foot, trucks and buses.
- Chaos in different border crossings between Guatemala and Honduras have been reported while migrants and displaced people try to reach safety.
- According to estimations made by organisations in the protection cluster in Guatemala, families, unaccompanied minors, LGBTI persons and

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1 Guatamala: Flujos mixtos: migrantes y refugiados en Centro America, Informe de Situacion No. 1

2https://www.telemundo.com/noticias/2020/01/19/2500-migrantes-ajgardan-en-la-frontera-de-guatemala-con-mexico-para-intentar-cruzarla-este-tmna3649135
pregnant women make up at least a third of the members of the caravans.

**Increased border security and protection concerns**

Due to the range of restrictive migration measures taken by Guatemala and Mexico over the past few months, under pressure from the US, the caravans are travelling in smaller groups. People fear being deported if they don’t move fast, and many in the caravan have decided to cross borders via dangerous paths. Mexico has already declared that it will not be providing transit documents, and that only people who intend to stay in Mexico will be allowed in (in particular, those seeking asylum in Mexico, and those with work permits, or other visas)³. Humanitarian actors report that the caravans have split into two routes through Guatemala: west, to Tecun Uman, to cross the Suchiate river, or north, through Peten to El Ceibo, in order to avoid the increased border patrols in Tecun Uman⁴.

Reports were made of police repression, including the use of tear gas, at the border between Guatemala and Honduras at Corinto- Entre Ríos on the first night of the mobilisation⁵.

According to various reports, Guatemalan migration authorities have been providing members of the caravan with a 72-hour transit ticket, and deporting those travelling without the document. Close to the border, Guatemalan police forces were accompanied by US Immigration and Customs Enforcement agents in plain clothes⁶. On Thursday the 16th of January, they dispersed a caravan of 300 people, forcing them on to buses and deporting them back to Honduras. Police are also said to have increased random checks on public transport.

On Saturday the 18th, clashes between migrants and Mexican police (including the use of pepper spray) were reported on the bridge crossing the Suchiate River at the border between Guatemala and Mexico, where armed National Guard and marines were stationed, and recordings played over loudspeakers that the United States would not be granting asylum. Subsequently, small groups of people were allowed to cross the border and register with migration officials. Once registered in Mexico, “people were transported on white unmarked busses to another location to continue their application process”⁷. However, on Monday the 20th, chaos was reported on the Guatemala-Mexican border after hundreds of migrants and asylum seekers attempted to cross the Suchiate River, after authorities denied the caravan to pass as a group into Mexico.

On the side of Peten, at least 75 people have sought shelter at the Casa de El Ceibo at the Guatemalan-Mexican border, which has petitioned the local authorities to set up an additional shelter for incoming arrivals. Local networks estimate that 600 people are on their way.

**Needs and Humanitarian Response**

Protection of asylum seekers is of fundamental concern. States are obliged to respect the principle of non-refoulement prescribed by international refugee law and human rights law, and no one with protection needs in the caravan should be returned or deported to Honduras or El Salvador where his or her life or freedom would be threatened.

Other most urgent needs of the fleeing population are related to: shelter, medical assistance, need for information and other basic humanitarian assistance for people on the move. The Casas del Migrante (especially in Guatemala City, and Tecun Uman) in particular need support to scale up their capacity to shelter people on the move (including temporary infrastructure, food, NFI).

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³https://elpais.com/internacional/2020/01/16/mexico/1579135664_675464.html
⁵https://www.animalpolitico.com/2020/01/nueva-caravana-migrantes-honduras-eu/
⁶https://www.theguardian.com/world/2020/jan/16/guatemala-migrants-us-agents-honduras
Local organisations (Casa del Migrante, Misioneros Scalabrinianos, Cruz Roja Guatemalteca, Pastoral de Movilidad Humana, Lambda) have led the emergency response, with various Casas de Migrantes stretched over capacity due to the rise in arrivals (in Honduras, between the 15th and 16th, the Casa del Migrante Ocotepeque received 1,000 people).

The Guatemalan Red Cross has also scaled up activities, providing basic first aid, water and snacks, psychosocial support, and family reunification for over a thousand people. The Pastoral de Movilidad Humana has been accompanying the caravans and providing information sheets.

The Guatemalan UNCT has activated the contingency plan related to human mobility. The protection cluster, led by UNHCR and OHCHR is coordinating information sharing, risk and needs assessments. UNHCR has presence in various spots across both the southern and northern Guatemalan border. UNICEF is working closely with the relevant Guatemalan institutions to identify and attend to unaccompanied minors.

NRC recommendations:

1. To Governments:
   Restrictive border control mechanisms in Guatemala, Mexico and the US to stop irregular entries must ensure the necessary distinctions for providing the right to seek asylum for people in need of international protection, and address security concerns without undermining the rights of migrants and refugees.

   Everyone should have the right to make their case for asylum before migration authorities in the United States or in Mexico. For those seeking international protection, the possibility of failing to reach their destination and being immediately deported back to face the violence and persecution that they fled from, is horrifying, traumatic, and incredibly painful.

2. To the UN:
   The world is witnessing families fleeing life-threatening violence from the NCA, yet the silence from the international community is overwhelming. We urgently need the United Nations to lead the development of a humanitarian response plan, and to support Governments in the region to face this neglected crisis.

3. To Donors:
   International donors need to act decisively and prioritise funding to address the effects of generalized violence. The humanitarian response should be geared towards the phenomenon of violence related to criminal gangs and tailored to meet the needs of those most vulnerable in Honduras and El Salvador.

   People in the caravans need to access food, water, shelters, healthcare and transport – needs that must be addressed. Donors and international community should be planning for, and thinking about, how to manage these humanitarian needs, so as to minimise the impact on local communities living near borders and to ensure that migrants and displaced people are treated humanely.