



MIGRATION: OUR WORK IN AMERICAS



ICRC

The ICRC uses a deliberately broad description of migrants, which includes all people who leave or flee their country of origin or habitual residence to go abroad to seek safer or better prospects. This description includes refugees and asylum seekers, who have special protection under international law.

Background

More than 244 million people around the world were migrants in 2015.ⁱ Of the 54 million migrants living in the United States and Canada, 25 million of them are from Latin America and the Caribbean. Meanwhile, Latin America and the Caribbean countries themselves host 6 million migrants originating from within the region.ⁱⁱ

While migration from Central America and Mexico towards the US has been a major dynamic in the region for a long time, figures show that since 2012 migration from Guatemala, Honduras and El Salvador (also known as Central America's Northern Triangle) towards the US and Mexico has significantly increased. Between 2015 and 2016 alone, the number of families from Northern Triangle countries who were apprehended at the US–Mexico border increased by around 100%.ⁱⁱⁱ In addition, thousands of migrants from Africa, Asia and – to a lesser extent – the Middle East transited through Ecuador, Colombia and the Darién region of Panama. Meanwhile, the number of Haitian and Cuban migrants has actually decreased in 2017, and Canada, Belize and Costa Rica are increasingly becoming countries of destination in addition to the United States.

The underlying causes of migration in the region are multiple and complex. People are seeking job opportunities, health care and education for their children, and to join their families and communities who have already migrated. Chronic violence is undoubtedly a fixture of everyday life in many migrants' places of origin. As a result, the insecurity caused notably by surging gang violence, recruitment and extortion also drive people to flee in search of safety and security.

Because they are travelling through or entering countries without the necessary authorization or documents, these so-called irregular migrants face journeys full of danger and struggle, most taking weeks or months. Every year, hundreds of thousands of them embark on these extremely perilous migratory journeys. Although many migrants arrive safely in their destination countries and integrate into new communities, others endure great hardship along the way. And once they set off, they may become more vulnerable to illness, injury, accidents, dehydration and hunger. Some face abuse and exploitation, some die on the way. Many lose contact with their families. Others are detained for being irregular migrants.

The ICRC works with the wider International Red Cross and Red Crescent Movement to alleviate and prevent suffering among the most vulnerable migrants.

What we do

Partnering to deliver aid and service

Working closely with the National Red Cross Societies of Mexico, Guatemala, Honduras, El Salvador, Panama and Costa Rica, the ICRC strives to meet the needs of the most vulnerable migrants travelling through Central America and Mexico.

The ICRC supports “assistance points” that are run by the Mexican, Guatemalan and Honduran Red Cross along some of the most inhospitable stretches of the migration route. These assistance points provide migrants with basic medical assistance, drinking water, hygiene kits and phone call services. There are nine assistance points in Mexico, two in Guatemala and one in Honduras. The assistance points also alert local authorities and health facilities to the migrants' ordeals, and encourage them to provide services.

THE NUMBERS

In 2016 the assistance points:

- distributed bottled water and/or water purification chlorine tablets to over 68,000 migrants
- treated over 28,000 migrants and referred 142 patients to specialized medical facilities
- helped migrants get treatment for amputations, spinal cord injuries and other major illnesses in Honduras and Guatemala: 132 of them received physical rehabilitation, prostheses and/or orthoses, and 134 received surgical support and/or were referred to other medical facilities



Olivier Moeckli / ICRC

In 2016, 9,000 returnee migrants benefited from basic medical assistance, family links services, food and accommodation at centres for returnee migrants supported by the Honduran Red Cross, the Guatemalan Red Cross and the ICRC.

The ICRC also supports the efforts of civil society organizations and the authorities. For instance, in 2016 we contributed to the renovation and upgrading of 17 charity-run shelters that offered temporary accommodation to over 68,000 migrants. Water-treatment and heating systems were installed and the sanitary facilities improved. In addition, existing medical structures and shelters serving some 3,000 migrants arriving in Panama, Costa Rica, Honduras and Mexico received medicines, medical equipment and technical advice.

Working in immigration detention

Irregular migrants are often taken into custody and held in detention facilities. This can happen when they are at a border, before they are deported, while they are en route to their destination or when they have arrived. We engage with States as part of a dialogue urging them to use detention only as a last resort and to always consider liberty and alternatives to detention first.^{iv} In addition, we seek to make sure that the principle of non-refoulement^v is upheld, and that migrants are afforded due process of law, treated humanely, held in conditions that preserve their dignity, and are able to maintain contact with the outside world – their families and consular authorities – if they wish to do so.



Jesús Cornejo / ICRC

For instance, the ICRC visits immigration detention centres in Mexico to assess the treatment and living conditions – including the infrastructure, water supply and health – of detained migrants and to help them stay in contact with their families. The ICRC focuses in particular on making sure they have access to the information they need and on meeting the specific needs of detained migrant children. The ICRC reminds the authorities that the best interests of the child must be a primary consideration in all measures concerning children. Children should not be detained for reasons related to their or their parents' migratory status. In the ICRC's experience and observation, the best interests of the child are not served by such detention.

Using our Restoring Family Links network to help migrants

Migrants frequently lose contact with their families. Some may not wish to make contact, while others are prevented from contacting their loved ones. This can cause considerable distress and lead to greater vulnerability of migrants and their families. So we work with National Red Cross and Red Crescent Societies to help prevent families from becoming separated, and to help people get back in touch with their relatives. We also help people who have no news about their loved ones to find out what has happened to them.

Tens of thousands of migrants use the free phone services we provide to call their families in Mexico, Central America and the United States. We are also piloting a project to give migrants internet access in some locations along the migratory route.



Jesús Cornejo / ICRC

Supporting the families of missing migrants

Uncertainty about the fate and whereabouts of a loved one who has migrated is a harsh reality for many families in the Americas. To help them cope with this tragic situation, we have developed a wide-ranging programme for missing persons and their families in the region.

In Honduras, Guatemala, El Salvador and Mexico the ICRC is supporting the creation of nationwide information-exchange mechanisms on missing migrants, and has trained members of family committees (local support structures) to provide psychosocial support to many others in their communities whose loved ones are missing.

Providing humanitarian forensic support

Migrants often take risky routes and may not survive the perils of their journeys. Often, their remains are never found or identified, while steps to ensure they can be identified are not always taken.

Treating the dead with dignity and notifying their families are matters of great humanitarian concern. We bring these matters to the attention of the authorities as part of an ongoing humanitarian dialogue. Our forensic teams help local forensic authorities and institutions to improve their methods for recovering, handling, documenting and identifying the bodies of migrants who have lost their lives. We do so mainly by promoting the use of standardized regional protocols and fostering regional cooperation between the authorities involved in this endeavour. We also run local and regional training courses for forensic experts and agencies, and provide them with material support.

SELF-PROTECTION MESSAGES

The ICRC developed a set of self-protection messages – practical advice to help migrants look after their health and well-being, how to prevent accidents if travelling on foot, by train or by road, and how to behave in different geographical settings. The pamphlet also provides information about the location of shelters and medical services, useful telephone numbers and general tips for staying safe and in good health. It exists in Spanish, English, French and Creole and is available from the southern border of Panama to the northern border of Mexico. In 2016, more than 40,000 pamphlets were distributed. The project was carried out in cooperation with the National Red Cross Societies of Honduras, El Salvador, Guatemala, Mexico and the United States.



Jesús Cornejo / ICRC

What we say

Talking to governments

We engage the authorities in confidential dialogue to ensure that they fulfil their legal obligations so as to protect the lives, preserve the dignity and alleviate the suffering of vulnerable migrants.

The ICRC and the Honduran and Salvadorean Red Cross work with local authorities to advise on and develop assistance and protection mechanisms for returnee migrants.



Jesús Cornejo / ICRC

Influencing the debate

The ICRC seeks to influence the debate on migration by drawing attention to issues of humanitarian concern in regional forums. For example, we attend the Regional Conference on Migration (Conferencia Regional sobre Migración) every year as an observer, where we raise issues related to access to health care for migrants and share humanitarian concerns regarding detained migrants and missing migrants. We are also called upon to share our observations about the situation of migrants at the Organization of American States (OAS), and we have participated in thematic and regional meetings as part of the preparatory process for the Global Compact for Migration.

ⁱ United Nations, Department of Economic and Social Affairs

ⁱⁱ <http://www.un.org/en/development/desa/population/migration/data/estimates2/estimatesgraphs.shtml?2g2>

ⁱⁱⁱ US Customs and Border Protection figures for the 2015 and 2016 fiscal years (i.e. ending 30 September) – see table entitled “Family Unit Apprehensions Encountered by Fiscal Year”: <https://www.cbp.gov/newsroom/stats/southwest-border-unaccompanied-children/fy-2016>

^{iv} ICRC policy on immigration detention: <https://www.icrc.org/en/document/migrant-detainees-icrc-policy>

^v The principle of non-refoulement prohibits the transfer of people to places where there are substantial grounds to believe that they would face violations of certain fundamental rights, such as torture, ill-treatment, persecution and arbitrary deprivation of life.