



The Mexican Government's Frontera Sur Program: An Inconsistent Immigration Policy

***By Alejandra Castillo,
Research Associate at the Council on Hemispheric Affairs***

At the September 19, 2016 convention of the first United Nations Summit for Refugees and Migrants, Mexico's President Enrique Peña Nieto addressed the assembly, calling on world leaders to rise in a collective effort to alleviate the global humanitarian crisis. Delivering a compelling statement, Peña Nieto reiterated Mexico's commitment to securing a global agreement for a safe and orderly process of migration. Peña Nieto assured the world that Mexico has always been a place of "origin, transit, destination, and return for people" and will remain so, as no man-made barrier in history has ever been successful at stopping human movement.ⁱ In part, Peña Nieto's discourse at the UN was a response to how Mexican migration to the United States has become a heated point of discussion during that country's presidential elections. As a result, Peña Nieto has sought to present himself as a defender of immigrant rights, willing to stand up to xenophobia, specifically, to Donald Trump's rhetoric.

However, U.S. public and media attention on the issue of immigration has remained almost completely focused on the northern Mexican border and fine points of U.S. immigration policy. In contrast, Mexico's "other" border—the southern border—has fallen in the shadow of media coverage even as it has become the primary transit route for Central American migrants fleeing escalating violence in the region. Meanwhile, since the start of President Peña Nieto's Programa Frontera Sur in 2014 and under pressure from the U.S. government, Mexico has gradually enforced strict immigration policies aimed at shutting down transit lines along its southern border. As several reports have shown, however, these crackdowns are accompanied by increased human rights violations against Central American migrants.ⁱⁱ Coupled with the alarming rise in apprehensions along Mexico's southern border since the start of Programa Frontera Sur, Peña Nieto's recent claims on the benevolence of Mexico's immigration policies ring hollow. On the contrary, data generated over the two-years of Programa Frontera Sur indicates that Mexico continues to prioritize the detention and deportation of migrants, instead of investing in their safety.

Mexico's Changing Role

According to the Pew Research Center, between 2009 and 2014, 870,000 Mexican nationals came to the U.S., compared to the 2.9 million who left Mexico for the U.S. between 1995 and 2000.ⁱⁱⁱ This drop in Mexican migration coincides with the results a 2015 Pew Research Center survey completed in Mexico, which shows that, while the prospect of living in the U.S. has not lost its allure, there is a shifting view of the living conditions in Mexico. The results of a 2015 survey indicated that 33 percent of Mexican adults said life in the U.S. is neither better nor worse than life in Mexico, a 23 percent from the 2007 survey. At the same time, data trends over the past decade have depicted Mexico's evolving role into a country of transit for rising numbers of Central American refugees. Additionally, the renewal of diplomatic relations between the U.S and Cuba has led to a growth of transitory migrants from the island nation. The number of Cubans traveling through Mexico in order to reach the U.S. during fiscal 2015 showed a 78 percent growth over 2014.

The largest increase of transitory migrants came from the huge wave of Central Americans, principally from Honduras, Guatemala, and El Salvador, crossing Mexico to reach the United States. Apprehensions of Central Americans at the U.S.-Mexico border doubled between October 1, 2015 and January 31, 2016, in comparison to the same period the previous year. Over that same time period, Mexico deported around 150,000 Central Americans, signaling a 44 percent increase over the previous year.^{iv} In spite of the overall decline of Mexican immigrants seeking to cross into the United States, they still outpace Central American migrants as the largest population group entering the U.S. without authorization.

Programa Frontera Sur

Following the unprecedented surge in Central American child migrants and family units crossing the U.S.-Mexico border during 2014, Mexico increased its immigration enforcement efforts with the encouragement of the United States. On July 7, 2014 President Enrique Peña Nieto announced the Programa Frontera Sur, a border plan that aimed to increase security at 12 points of entry with Guatemala and Belize, as well as several popular migration routes across the country, in order to promote regional security and prosperity.^v As a result of the implementation of Programa Frontera Sur, the numbers of migrants apprehended along the northern Mexican borders decreased over 2015 and projections generated by think tanks and government research agencies predicted a similar decline over 2016. Contrary to these predictions, the U.S. Customs and Border Protection (CBP) program revealed statistics earlier this year indicating an increase in apprehensions of unaccompanied children and small family units throughout the first six months of fiscal 2016.^{vi}

Along Mexico's southern border, the growing number of apprehensions skyrocketed over fiscal year 2015. According to data compiled by Unidad de Política Migratoria^{vii} (branch of Mexico's Secretariat of Interior) in 2015 there were 198,141 apprehensions of illegal immigrants, 90 percent of whom were from Central America. This figure beats the record number for the past six years. Over 2016 there have been 99,768 arrests, reflecting a slight decrease of 17 percent from 2015. Nevertheless the 2016 figure remains 63 percent higher than the one from 2014 (61,092) and 88 percent higher than 2013's (52,906).^{viii}

This increase in detentions along Mexico's southern border correlates with efforts by the Mexican government to seize control over the country's railroad system. In August of 2016, Mexico's Communications and Transport Ministry reclaimed ownership of the cross-country railroad line known as "La Bestia" ("The Beast") that has long been used by Central American migrants to traverse Mexico en route to the United States. According to *Animal Politico* the government's seizing of La Bestia is one in a series of similar efforts to close down the railroads, which has resulted in the apprehension of 2,351 migrants. This pattern of apprehension and deportations of Central American migrants is something President Peña Nieto confirmed last month, on September 3 in his meeting with Donald Trump. While Peña Nieto engages in discussion on whether he did or did not agree to build a wall by Mexico's northern border, he did see eye to eye with Trump on the need to strengthen Mexico's southern border.

But over the same time period on the U.S. side of the Mexican border, there were 27,754 apprehensions of unaccompanied children—indicating a 78 percent jump from the 15,616 apprehended in 2015. This number becomes particularly alarming when compared to the 28,579 apprehensions that occurred during the "height of the humanitarian crisis" in fiscal year 2014, clearly calling into question the effectiveness of Mexico's Programa Frontera Sur.

Mounting Human Rights Abuses

Along with the heightened crackdown on Central American migrants, data indicates that Mexico also retained its very restrictive policy towards those fleeing gang violence. In effect, 21 percent of all applicants were granted asylum in 2013 (280 out of 1,296 requests) and 2014 (456 out of 2,137).^{ix} The rate climbed to 27 percent in 2015 with 949 approved demands out of 3,424. Finally, in the first six months of 2016 an unprecedented record of 3,486 applications was submitted, of which, only 35 percent were approved. While asylum seekers between 2013 and 2016 increased by 169 percent (1,296 to 3,486) the funds allocated by the Comisión Mexicana de Ayuda a Refugiados (COMAR), (roughly translated as the Mexican Commission on Refugees) have remained well below \$2 million USD. This pales in comparison with the \$86 million USD budget for the Instituto Nacional de Migración—in charge of, amongst other functions, the detention and eventual deportation of undocumented migrants.^x The vast gap in these numbers suggests, at the very least, a contradiction between the open-armed Mexico portrayed in Peña

Nieto's rhetoric and the reality of Mexico's approach on the ground, to the situation. Mexico's ascent to prioritize the deportation and detention of migrants instead of investing in their safety has been widely reported upon.

To begin with, research suggests that Mexico's migrant deportations in many cases are arbitrary, and those who might qualify as asylum-seekers encounter a series of life-endangering situations."^{xi} The Human Rights Watch, for example, published a report last March revealing that less than 1 percent of all minors detained by Mexican authorities are granted refugee status.^{xii} This report suggests that this alarmingly low number may be attributed to how migratory agents fail to inform young migrants or their representatives of their right to seek asylum. Thus, authorities withhold case-by-case legal advice and let an overwhelming number of endangered individuals slip right through their fingers.

While Mexico demands that the United States treat immigrants with dignity, it simultaneously turns on the Central American migrants, negating their basic rights. Data demonstrates how Mexico continues to prioritize deportations over policies to protect migrants who might be fleeing dangerous situations. This disparity may largely be an unintended consequence of Peña Nieto's Programa Frontera Sur. Theoretically, one of its five pillars targets the protection of undocumented migrants. In practice, the increased migratory control along Mexico's southern border has forced Central Americans to look for alternative routes to the US, making them vulnerable to organized crime, extortion, and local delinquents. Over the year after Programa Frontera Sur was implemented, there was an overall increase of 4.7 percent in crimes against migrants recorded in four Mexican southern border states: Tabasco, Chiapas, Oaxaca, and Veracruz. The more specific the reports on crimes get, the more drastic the numbers. The crimes specifically reported as theft, robbery (violent), and assault in Tabasco, Chiapas and Oaxaca totaled 232 between July 2014 and April 2015. This number is 81 percent higher than the previous year's—July 2013 to April 2014—when 178 reports from the same three states were initially recorded.

Many emerging reports on the consequences of Programa Frontera Sur highlight the human toll that increased regulation has taken on migrants attempting to cross into Mexico. Overall, the studies converge at this central point: that instead of deterring unauthorized immigration, Programa Frontera Sur has dispersed many displaced people and made them vulnerable to extortionists, rapists, and thieves lurking along the many routes to the United States. The Peña Nieto administration shares a substantial amount of the responsibility for this outcome with its northern neighbor. The U.S. allocated 75 million USD for Mexico's National Migration Institute—the institution responsible for Programa Frontera Sur—in 2016 alone.^{xiii} Contrary to some speculation, this amount is not to be invested into the construction of a

physical wall across Mexico's southern border.^{xiv} Instead, the funds are meant to entice Mexico into securing its southern border—likely through the endeavors of Programa Frontera Sur.

In the words of the Mexican president at the UN summit, “We have a pending commitment to [migrants] that we all must assume, because migration represents not only the past and the present of mankind, but also its future.”^{xv} But the rise of human rights abuses of Central American migrants resulting from the Programa Frontera Sur contradicts Peña Nieto's pro-immigrant rhetoric. To resolve this crisis the Mexican government has to stop replicating the United States' militarized security-based approach to deterring migration. Instead of spending more money on the failed Programa Frontera Sur, Mexico should invest its resources to strengthen institutions like COMAR that finally hope to approach migration from a committed humanitarian perspective.

***By Alejandra Castillo,
Research Associate at the Council on Hemispheric Affairs***

ⁱ Peña Nieto, Enrique. "Address by Enrique Peña Nieto President of the United States." Unmeetings.org. September 19, 2016. Accessed October 5, 2016. <http://statements.unmeetings.org/media2/7660341/mexico.pdf>

ⁱⁱ Ureste, Manu. "Peña Defiende a Migrantes En La ONU, Pero En México Aumentan Deportaciones Y Agresiones." Animal Politico. September 20, 2016. Accessed October 10, 2016. <http://www.animalpolitico.com/2016/09/pena-migrantes-onu-deportaciones/>.

ⁱⁱⁱ Krogstad, Jens Manuel. "5 Facts about Mexico and Immigration to the U.S." Pew Research Center. February 11, 2016. Accessed October 5, 2016. <http://www.pewresearch.org/fact-tank/2016/02/11/mexico-and-immigration-to-us/>.

^{iv} Ibid.

^v "CRS Report US Assistance Mexico Southern Border Plan March ..." Accessed October 20, 2016. <https://www.documentcloud.org/documents/2842650-CRS-Report-US-Assistance-Mexico-Southern-Border.html>.

^{vi} Lillis, Mike. "Illegal Immigrant Numbers Skyrocket at Mexican Border ..." The Hill. May 5, 2016. Accessed October 20, 2016. <http://thehill.com/latino/278785-migrant-numbers-skyrocket-at-mexican-border>

^{vii} "Boletines Estadísticos - Secretaría De Gobernación." SEGOB- Secretaria De Gobernacion. Accessed October 25, 2016. http://www.politicamigratoria.gob.mx/es_mx/SEGOB/Boletines_Estadisticos.

^{viii} Ibid.

^{ix} "ESTADÍSTICAS - 2013 a 2016." COMAR - Comision Mexicana De Ayuda a Refugiados. Accessed October 25, 2016. http://www.comar.gob.mx/work/models/COMAR/Resource/267/6/images/ESTADISTICAS_2013_A_06-2016_act.pdf

^x "PRESUPUESTO DE EGRESOS DE LA FEDERACIÓN PARA EL EJERCICIO FISCAL 2017." Gob.mx. Accessed October 25, 2016. http://ppfef.hacienda.gob.mx/work/models/PPEF2017/paquete/egresos/Proyecto_Decreto.pdf.

^{xi} Suárez, Ximena, José Knippen Knippen, and Maureen Meyer. "A Trail of Impunity: Thousands of Migrants in Transit Face Abuses amid Mexico's Crackdown." Washington Report on the Hemisphere. September 2016. Accessed September/October 2016. <https://www.wola.org/wp-content/uploads/2016/09/A-Trail-of-Impunity-2016.pdf>

^{xii} Ureste, Manu. "México Fracasa En Proteger a Niños Migrantes, Denuncia HRW; De 18 Mil Detenidos, Sólo Da Refugio a 57." Animal Politico. September 31, 2016. Accessed October 14, 2016. <http://www.animalpolitico.com/2016/03/mexico-fracasa-en-proteger-a-ninos-migrantes-no-acompanados-solo-dio-refugio-a-57-hrw/>.

^{xiii} Seelke, Clare Ribando, and Kristin Finlkea. "U.S.-Mexican Security Cooperation: The Mérida Initiative ..." Federation of American Scientists. February 22, 2016. Accessed October 20, 2016. <https://fas.org/sgp/crs/row/R41349.pdf>.

^{xiv} LaCapria, Kim. "Wall-Lied". Snopes.com. September 22, 2016. Accessed October 25, 2016. <http://www.snopes.com/mexico-75-million-border-wall/>.

^{xv} Peña Nieto, Enrique. "Address by Enrique Peña Nieto President of the United States." Unmeetings.org. September 19, 2016. Accessed October 5, 2016. <http://statements.unmeetings.org/media2/7660341/mexico.pdf>.