



VIOLENCE AND PROTECTION IN THE NORTH OF CENTRAL AMERICA

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The Humanitarian Response to the 'Migrant Caravans'

In October and November 2018, thousands of Hondurans and Salvadorans, and later Guatemalans and Nicaraguans, left their countries of origin and travelled north, fleeing from the daily reality of endemic violence, poverty and human rights violations, in groups known as the 'migrant caravans'.

Over the course of 2018, the figures of how many people made the journey from the North of Central America (NCA) to Mexico and the United States are difficult to establish, however, it is known that 196'061 people were deported back to the region, a 38% increase compared to 2017¹. In general, people who need to move north have two options: go alone and risk the perilous journey without assistance, or pay up to 10,000 USD to use a people smuggling network². Both options are dangerous, with risks of kidnapping, homicide, abuse and exploitation. In contrast to the usual patterns of migration and displacement, the 'migrant caravans' stood out due to people travelling collectively in large groups. While travelling with a caravan is not without its own risks, it is often seen as a protection strategy, or as an opportunity to travel without having to pay the prohibitive costs.

Although it was not the first time that collective displacements have occurred in the region, what was particularly striking was the size of the caravans, and consequentially the challenges that this created for the humanitarian sector and for the overall response to displacement in the NCA. Given the current protection situation in the region, it is highly probably that this phenomenon will be repeated in 2019.

Reflecting on the humanitarian response to the caravans in late 2018, what lessons can be drawn for future displacements in the region?

Highlights:



From the 13th of October to the 21st of November, between **12'000 and 16'000 people** crossed the borders between Guatemala and Mexico³ in four caravans⁴. 48% of those traveling in the caravan came from Honduras and 39% from El Salvador⁵.



By the end of November, the Estado Benito Juárez shelter in Tijuana, Mexico, hosted **6'000 people waiting to cross the border** with the United States⁶. The shelter lacked in sufficient food, water and health services⁷.



By December, 3'700 people had sought **asylum in Mexico**⁸. Between the 15th of October and the 15th of December, **7'225 people had been returned to Honduras, and 1'275 to El Salvador**⁹.



Displaced people travelling with the caravan faced a multitude of risks and obstacles en route, including border closures, militarised responses from states, returns in involuntary conditions, including cases of non-refoulement, a lack of shelters available (including for children and non-accompanied minors), xenophobia, sexual violence, and organised crime, including kidnappings, abuse, exploitation and trafficking.



Protection for displaced people in countries of destination is seriously lacking, due to: long waiting times at borders (in particular at the Guatemalan/Mexican border and the Mexican/US border), a progressive hardening of border and migration policies, and various attempts to limit the right to asylum in the United States.



In Honduras and Guatemala, the humanitarian response was led by local and community organisations, and was supported by international organisations and UN agencies. Several local authorities worked to meet basic needs. In Mexico, the response was led by the Mexican state, and was supported by local and international organisations. However, in all of the transit points the **collective capacity to respond was overwhelmed by the needs**.



Without the official declaration of a humanitarian emergency in Honduras and Guatemala, many teams and organisations on the frontline increased their capacity to respond on an ad hoc basis, **working double shifts** and overnights, **without receiving extra funding or support**.



Despite efforts from the humanitarian sector, displaced people needed **more information on services and rights**.



Stronger coordination to advocate against the **increasing criminalisation and stigmatisation of migrants and displaced** people is necessary.



This report is the third snapshot on protection in the North of Central America; an initiative of the Regional Protection Group of the REDLAC, led by the Norwegian Refugee Council. The analysis is based on information provided by humanitarian organisations operating in Honduras, El Salvador and Guatemala, as well as from monitoring of official statistics, press, academic studies and reports from civil society. The document includes inputs from a variety of organisations of the Protection Group, but does not reflect messages approved by each organisation.

Displacement and migration triggers: the protection crisis in the NCA

Multiple factors, including in particular generalised violence, family reunification, poverty and the lack of opportunities, are behind the current displacements in the NCA. The most recent statistics demonstrate the intolerable situation for many individuals and families in the region:



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1. Violence and insecurity

In Honduras, 3'670 homicides were registered in 2018; a **daily average of 10 homicides per day**¹⁰ and a rate of **40 homicides per 100'000 persons**¹¹. Honduras is one of the 12 countries in Latin America where 25% of women are survivors of sexual violence¹².

In **Guatemala**, 3'881 homicides were reported in 2018, a rate of **22.4 homicides per 100'000 inhabitants**¹³. Between January and August, 7'593 reports of sexual violence were made¹⁴, and every day two women die due to violent events¹⁵. The Office of the Public Prosecutor reported that on average **four women disappear each day**, and that women between the ages of 21 and 30 are most vulnerable, representing 42% of all cases¹⁶.

In **El Salvador**, in 2018 the Police registered 3'340 homicides¹⁷, averaging 9 homicides per day¹⁸, and a rate of **51 per 100'000 inhabitants**¹⁹. Violence against women prevails, with 357 femicides reported between January and November²⁰. Ten people disappear per day in El Salvador; 3'221 cases of disappeared persons had been registered by the end of 2018²¹.

LGBTQIA people are at high risk in the NCA²². Between 2009 and 2018, 302 LGBTQIA persons were assassinated in Honduras²³. 28 attacks on the community in El Salvador were made in 2017²⁴, and in Guatemala, violence goes hand in hand with increasing marginalisation²⁵.

The number of Honduran **children and adolescents** who travelled north to the United States was higher in 2018 than in the previous four years²⁶. A recent report also showed that the high levels of trafficking of children on the route north may be down to the fact that people smugglers charge less money for groups travelling with children²⁷. In El Salvador, 1 in 4 of all minors deported back to the country state that they left because of violence²⁸. El Salvador and Honduras are within the top 10 ten countries with the highest global child homicide rates²⁹; in El Salvador 365 children were assassinated in 2017, and in Guatemala, 94³⁰. In El Salvador, 40% of young male teenagers between 15 and 17 years old are out of school due to insecurity and violence³¹.



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2. Human rights violations

Corruption and impunity: In the NCA, criminal organisations have infiltrated state structures and high levels of corruption and impunity have become the norm in political spaces³². In Guatemala, political repression continues against social movements defending environmental and land rights³³. One example of this is the recent prosecution of a Q'eqchi activist, who according to their community is being prosecuted just because they are defending the preservation of a river from a hydroelectric project³⁴. In Honduras, the judicial process for the assassination of the environmental defender Berta Cáceres finally reached a verdict after almost three years of delays, but the case has been plagued with allegations of negligence, lack of transparency and bias³⁵.

Extortion: People living in areas controlled by gangs are subject to high levels of extortion on a daily basis, and the inability to pay can result in violent threats or even homicide³⁶. Guatemala is experiencing rising levels of both victims and people accused of committing extortion³⁷. In El Salvador, according to the Police, 1'194 reports of extortion had been filed from January to September 2018³⁸.

Political violence: The caravan leaving Honduras must also be analysed in the context of the political crisis of late 2017, characterised by violent protests and high levels of political repression³⁹. In November 2018, a protest against the government took place in Choluteca, Honduras, leaving between 7 and 11 people wounded⁴⁰.

Evictions: In Guatemala, the Inter-American Court on Human Rights granted precautionary measures for evicted people and displaced families of the indigenous communities: Chaab'il Ch'och', Q'ueqchi "Nueva Semuy Chacchilla" and Q'ueqchi "La Cumbre Sa'kuxhá"⁴¹.

3. Poverty, lack of opportunities and public services

El Salvador and Honduras are classified by the World Bank as lower middle-income countries and Guatemala as an upper middle-income country, but all three countries face high levels of inequality⁴². The formal economy lacks opportunities for many young people⁴³. UNICEF estimates that 74% of minors in Honduras live in homes classified as poor, as do 68% in Guatemala and 44% in El Salvador⁴⁴.



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In Honduras, school attendance levels of adolescents is at less than 50%⁴⁵.

4. Climate change, drought and natural hazards

Climate change influences migration over the long term in the region, however the recent droughts, floods and other events related to climate change, impacting agriculture and food security have had a significant impact on displacement in the NCA recently⁴⁶. In August 2018, an emergency was declared in the 'dry corridor' due to severe drought, causing a reduction in harvests and a worsening of food security in affected communities⁴⁷. In October, flooding affected several zones in El Salvador⁴⁸ and Honduras⁴⁹.

'The Migrant Caravans' – key facts

Profiles:

- Up until November, 48% of people travelling were Hondurans, 39% were Salvadorans⁵⁰, subsequently the numbers of people travelling from Guatemala and Nicaragua grew⁵¹.
- **2'300 children and minors** were travelling with the caravan at the end of October⁵². A significant number of **single mothers** were travelling with children under the age of 5.
- Approximately 100 **LGBTQIA persons** were identified; there remains significant gaps on the numbers of displaced people with disabilities⁵³.
- Surveys conducted by UNHCR in Guatemala showed that between 60% and 71% of people declared that they were fleeing gang violence. 50% of these people were travelling with their families, and 70% said they were afraid to go back to their country⁵⁴. According to a survey taken with people leaving El Salvador, 46% **migrated due to insecurity and violence**, but only 12% knew anything about the system of asylum or other forms of protection⁵⁵.



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Solidarity and shared strategies:

For many people, collective displacement can be seen as a protection strategy, or can provide a possibility to travel without having to pay the prohibitive costs of people

smuggling networks. Several shared strategies were documented in the media, in particular organisation through social media (Facebook and Whatsapp) to coordinate departures⁵⁶, breaks to strengthen the unity of the group⁵⁷ and collective requests to transit freely through Mexico⁵⁸. When Mexico launched the campaign 'You're at home' (Estás en tu casa) – offering shelter in exchange for the caravan staying in southern states of Oaxaca and Chiapas, the majority of Hondurans rejected the plan, maintaining the collective target of getting to the United States⁵⁹.

Obstacles en route:

- **Closed borders and the militarisation of state response:**
 - › In the first days of the crisis, the Honduran government **closed the border** with Guatemala for several hours⁶⁰.
 - › In Guatemala, private vehicles transported migrants and displaced people for part of the route, until the National Police stopped the practice⁶¹.
 - › The Honduran and Guatemalan government declared that they would **prosecute the organisers** of the caravans⁶².
 - › The Mexican government attempted to close the border with Guatemala in Tecún Umán. On the 19th of October, people waiting to cross the international border pushed through the police cordon, who then used **tear gas** to disperse the crowds⁶³. During this confrontation, one person died and several were wounded⁶⁴, and minors were used as human shields⁶⁵.
 - › While people tried to cross irregularly over the River Suchiate, the Mexican authorities employed a **helicopter as deterrence**, approaching the river, creating waves and wind⁶⁶.
 - › In Tapachula, Mexico, the authorities set up a temporary shelter for large groups of people. While this space was offered as a shelter, more than 1'700 people were detained for several days⁶⁷. People were then offered the possibility to apply for asylum, under the condition of staying in Chiapas during the status determination process⁶⁸. At the beginning of November, the facility

was shut, and UNHCR had to seek alternative shelter to host those needing to stay⁶⁹. For many, this situation generated uncertainty and a distrust in the authorities.

- › Several reports highlighted the **detention of children** in Mexico⁷⁰.
- › In Veracruz, the government offered transportation to the members of the caravan, but then retracted its offer. Due to the frustration ensued, the caravan **divided into several smaller groups** and took a variety of routes (increasing the risks of falling victims to criminal networks, trafficking, disappearances and abuse)⁷¹.
- › In the United States, the Department of Homeland Security sent troops to the border with Mexico⁷². At the end of November, people trying to cross the border with the US were attacked with **rubber bullets and tear gas**⁷³.

• **Crime and violence on the route:**

- › At least eleven Hondurans have died since October 13.⁷⁴
- › Cases of victims of **people trafficking** were identified, as well as reports of traffickers promising transport only to hand displaced people over to the migration authorities⁷⁵.
- › One week after the departure of the first caravan, the Honduran authorities announced that they were looking for **30 missing persons**⁷⁶.
- › There is a lack of reliable data on sexual abuse, but studies from 2015 and 2016 show that at least 30% of women in transit through Mexico suffer from **sexual abuse**⁷⁷.
- › Although the communities in Guatemala and Mexico were fundamental in the reception and the humanitarian response to the caravans, in some places, such as the border in Tijuana, the caravans were met with **hostility and xenophobia**⁷⁸.
- › Vigilante groups gathered at the US border to support the US soldiers deployed by the US government⁷⁹.
- › Despite being seen by many as a protection strategy,

traveling in a group does not necessarily ensure safety. Risks include the possibility of politicized leaderships, or with motives that are not clearly communicated, the presence of trafficking networks, or abuse of vulnerable people, including women and girls. Reports showed that some of the caravan leaders propagated false information, in particular about asylum processes, and the conditions and necessary documentation for entering Mexico. Some people were instructed not to talk to UNHCR, as well as pressured to stay in the group⁸⁰.



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Dispersion: asylum, return or continuation?

1,700 people applied for asylum in Tapachula in southern Mexico in October⁸¹. By the end of November, 3,331 people had applied for **asylum in Mexico**⁸². Yet earlier in 2018, the National Human Rights Commission noted that the **asylum system in Mexico was about to collapse**: of the 14,600 applications filed during 2017 at the Mexican Commission for Refugee Aid (COMAR), about 60% had not been taken care of⁸³.

In October, the governments of Honduras and Guatemala initiated the **Safe Return plan**⁸⁴. The objective was to respond to the migration and political crisis, particularly after the United States threatened to withdraw financial aid to the countries of the region if they did not slow down the flow of people to their borders⁸⁵. As of November 29, an estimated

7,136 Hondurans returned to their country as part of the plan, 80% by buses from Mexico and Guatemala, and 20% by plane⁸⁶. Further analysis on the voluntariness of these returns is needed.

Despite being a 'safe' return plan, humanitarian organisations in Honduras attended cases of people who reported being **forcibly deported**. According to testimonies made to several humanitarian organisations, in Mexico deportees were promised shelter and food, and then under the pretext of vaccinations, they received sedatives, and woke up in buses transporting them to Honduras, deported against their will⁸⁷. In addition, it was reported that due to the increased deportations via airplane, the attention centre for deportees in San Pedro Sula, Honduras, received arrivals at all hours of the day and night. This returnee centre does not have trained personnel during the night, and as a result, the deportees **did not receive food or medical attention**. In addition, since the centre does not have beds, deportees were transferred to the bus terminal in San Pedro Sula. The latter is closed at night, meaning that recent arrivals had to wait outside the terminal until it opened, despite the **serious dangers and protection risks**. According to a humanitarian organisation working in San Pedro Sula, the 'Safe Returns' plan was highly irresponsible.

By the beginning of November, **2,435 children from the caravans had been deported** to Honduras, of whom 518 were unaccompanied⁸⁸. 234 were separated from their families and needed temporary housing⁸⁹. Nevertheless, in Mexico, a judge banned the deportation of children and adolescents who arrived with the caravans during certain dates. He also requested the Federal Attorney's Office for the Protection of the Rights of Children and Adolescents, as the relevant authority, to activate the necessary mechanisms and procedures so that minors had their rights upheld in Mexico, regardless of their migratory status⁹⁰.

Arrival:

Asylum seekers were, and - at the time of finalising the report - are, being **blocked at the border** with the United States. Through the practice of 'metering', people are being put on informal, or quasi-formal, waiting lists before being allowed to cross the border to seek asylum. These lists are

being managed by different actors, ranging from authorities, to NGOs, to asylum seekers themselves, depending on the crossing point^{91,92}. By the end of November, up to 7,000 people were waiting in Tijuana to cross the border, while the authorities were accepting an average of only 30 people a day⁹³. Applicants are at risk of **extortion and manipulation** by the Mexican authorities (encouraged by the United States border authorities⁹⁴) with the threat of deportation in the case of non-compliance⁹⁵. It is estimated that migrants will have to **wait 3 months** before being assisted by immigration authorities⁹⁶. Until the beginning of December, up to 6,000 people were being housed in the shelter of the Benito Juárez Stadium in Tijuana, where inadequate sanitary conditions and flooding were documented, and had a lack of differentiated spaces⁹⁷. In December, a new shelter was opened, however located 22 kilometres from the official border crossing⁹⁸.

Those who do manage to cross the border and apply for asylum, face increasingly **restrictive US immigration policies**. Over the past two years, under the 'zero tolerance' policy, US authorities separated 8,000 family units in 2017 and 6,000 between April and August 2018⁹⁹. The **detention** of migrants for indeterminate periods, as well as sexual abuse have been documented by human rights organisations¹⁰⁰. Furthermore, without legal representation, acceptance rates for asylum applications are extremely low: a 2015 study showed that without legal support, only 1.5% of women applicants with a well-founded fear were granted asylum in the United States¹⁰¹. In June, the United States Attorney General announced that domestic abuse and gang violence would no longer be considered a legal basis for seeking asylum in the United States¹⁰².

In November, President Trump tried to further restrict the right to seek asylum, prohibiting requests from people who cross irregularly¹⁰³. However, on November 20 a federal judge blocked this decision¹⁰⁴. At the end of December, the US government declared its intention to apply a new policy of returning people to Mexico while their cases are processed in US courts (which can take between 2 and 5 years)¹⁰⁵.

Humanitarian response:

Guatemala



In Guatemala, the humanitarian response fell on the shoulders of civil society and local organisations, with support from international organisations. The response by the authorities was given mainly by the Municipality of Ayutla (Tecún Umán), which reported several times not having received support from the central government. The Municipality supported the caravans with spaces for shelter, food, drinking water, sanitation, health, among others. Other state entities, including the Ministry of Health, the Attorney General's Office, among others, were also present providing services, information on rights and obligations, as well as follow-up on cases of children and adolescents.

The Human Mobility Pastoral and Casas del Migrante (Esquipulas, Guatemala City and Tecún Umán) were responsible for the management of the **shelters**, providing spaces for sleeping and eating, as well as transforming schools into shelters, and monitoring the situation¹⁰⁶. The agencies of the United Nations supported with donations and technical support. **Local communities showed solidarity by providing food**¹⁰⁷, and were supported by implementing partners of the UN. Oxfam donated cots, mats and other supplies to the shelters. However, despite the existence of shelters on the route, their capacities were surpassed by the number of refugees and migrants^{108 109}.

In terms of **health**, the Ministry of Health, the Guatemalan Red Cross and Doctors of the World, offered pre-hospital care, transfer to health centres, psychosocial support, accompaniment and referral to the Migrant shelters, enabling contact between family members, and monitoring of the caravans with ambulances en route¹¹⁰. In particular they worked on the route from Esquipulas to Chiquimula, and they established a medical point on the border between Guatemala and Mexico¹¹¹. The ICRC delivered pre-hospital assistance, medical supplies and medicine at the Honduras-Guatemala border, in Guatemala City, at the western border, and the northern border between Guatemala and Mexico, and along parts of the migratory routes¹¹². UNICEF and Oxfam carried out **WASH** actions, installing portable toilets, showers, and drinking water

points¹¹³. The Guatemalan Red Cross and the Human Mobility Pastoral, with the financial support of UNHCR, also distributed water on the route¹¹⁴. Although some organisations had prepositioned stocks, these were not enough to meet the needs, and many organisations had to carry out triage in order to distribute basic services.

Regarding **protection**, the Human Rights Ombudsman with the accompaniment of OACNUDH, the Human Mobility Pastoral and La Casa del Migrante **monitored the human rights** of refugees and migrants. The Guatemalan Migrant Civil Society Group presented public petitions and gave press conferences on the rights of migrants¹¹⁵. Agencies of the United Nations and their partners were in charge of disseminating information on the rights of migrants and refugees. UNHCR and its partners provided information on the asylum procedure in Guatemala and Mexico, identifying cases of people with international protection needs that were subsequently referred to the asylum system¹¹⁶.

Mexico



In Mexico, local governments and religious institutions played an essential role in the response, particularly in providing shelters. However, many displaced persons did not want to stay in INM centres due to the complaints about family separations and detention¹¹⁷. At the end of the route, in Tijuana, due to the **limited capacity of the shelters** and the large number of people, the migrants and displaced people were living in unhygienic conditions¹¹⁸. On the 23rd of November, the mayor of Tijuana requested humanitarian assistance from the Mexican federal government and the United Nations¹¹⁹.

Some of the **poorest communities** opened their homes to migrants and refugees, offering shelter, medical treatment and donations¹²⁰. In Mexico City, hundreds of local workers and volunteers distributed **food, water, diapers** and other basic elements¹²¹. The Representative of the UN High Commissioner for Human Rights in Mexico stressed that *“the civil society organisations are the ones that have ensure solidarity and responded with food, health and dignified housing conditions”*¹²².

In terms of **health**, the government of Mexico City provided emergency treatment in cases of skin diseases, respiratory

and intestinal problems and dehydration¹²³. En route, faced with the risk of people contracting respiratory diseases such as tuberculosis and influenza, the emergency system of the Ministry of Health in Mexico provided medical assistance¹²⁴. The Mexican Red Cross established medical points on the border with Guatemala, and 40 volunteers were deployed to deliver basic aid, water and support to re-establish contact with family members¹²⁵. UNICEF Mexico, in coordination with the government and civil society, offered psychosocial support for children; books, relaxation exercises, drawing therapy to reduce stress levels among children¹²⁶. In addition, they also delivered sanitation kits and carried out **WASH** actions, including support with breastfeeding and nutrition for early childhood¹²⁷. In Mexico City, UNICEF, the authorities of Mexico City, and other public organizations, planned to establish a “humanitarian-aid bridge”¹²⁸. ACT Alliance Forum carried out a regional effort to request money with the goal of providing food, sanitation kits, psychosocial support and protection to 2,000 people¹²⁹. Volunteer firefighters delivered pre-hospital help¹³⁰. The Beta Groups distributed water¹³¹.

In legal assistance and protection of rights: UNHCR was responsible for disseminating information on the rights of migrants and refugees, the asylum procedure in Mexico and Guatemala, and the monitoring of the human rights of displaced persons¹³². UNHCR reported a 128% rise in web visits to its ‘Jaguar’ Facebook page, a tool designed to share information and assistance for displaced people in the region¹³³. In order to provide legal assistance and meet the increase in asylum applications, they also deployed 36 officers to Tapachula and Mexico City, gave training for COMAR staff and supported the hiring of 45 COMAR staff¹³⁴. At protection stands at strategic points along the routes (such as in Mexico City and Guadalajara), UNHCR worked on **identifying needs** and referring people to specialized services for children and survivors of SGBV¹³⁵. In Tapachula, UNHCR provided financial humanitarian assistance to asylum seekers, and supported those who requested asylum to access reception conditions to facilitate the follow-up of the procedure. The Government of Honduras installed a mobile consulate in Tijuana, Mexico, to provide documentation to displaced persons who did not carry their personal documents¹³⁶. In Tijuana, UNHCR supported the COMAR and the INM to access the asylum application procedure. However, despite these efforts, several local organisations

mentioned that people travelling with the caravan were not sufficiently informed, and that it was common for people not to know where they were, or what their rights were.

“They didn’t have correct information, and when the border was closed there was total panic”

“We worked with children in Guatemala who thought they were still in Honduras. Pregnant women did not want to go to the hospital for fear of being deported”

Honduras / El Salvador



In **Honduras**, UNHCR monitored the situation on the border with Guatemala¹³⁷ and with its partners, supported the reception of returnees¹³⁸. In Honduras, UNICEF supported the presence of child protection workers on the western border to support returnee children with information, contacts with families and the identification of special protection needs. These workers also provided immediate humanitarian assistance with hygiene packages, diapers, food and water.

In **El Salvador**, UNHCR also supported the returnees, IOM monitored the profiles of people leaving, the ICRC worked on the search for missing persons, UNICEF distributed information to children and families about their rights and the risks of the migration route, and the Red Cross provided medical assistance and hygiene packages, among others. Caritas provided information on how to apply for asylum, and delivered milk and medicine, at key points such as bus terminals and at borders. UNHCR El Salvador and UNHCR Guatemala exchanged information about vulnerable people crossing the border during the different caravans

Obstacles and lessons for the humanitarian response

Based on semi-structured interviews carried out in November with seven international and national humanitarian organisations working in Guatemala, Honduras and El Salvador, there are several lessons to be taken into account ahead of the next collective movements from the NCA.

In Guatemala, **the lack of political will from the central government** to activate an emergency and respond to the displacement was highlighted. The organisations interviewed mentioned in particular the lack of recognition of a crisis,

and the lack of presence of the relevant authorities in the humanitarian response. On the contrary, the Guatemalan government facilitated deportations, and during the first caravan it closed the border on some occasions. In addition, the protection system for children remains inadequate to support child deportees (a protocol is currently being prepared, and is expected to be ready in 2019).

In this context, the humanitarian response was especially challenging. The **response of civil society**, in particular from the Mobility Pastoral and the Scalabrinian Missionaries, was very strong and was recognised by all the organisations interviewed. In Guatemala and Honduras, some organisations interviewed mentioned that the protection groups were delayed in coordinating their response, but that subsequently they were important forums to avoid the non-duplication of efforts.

Several organisations interviewed mentioned that they were overwhelmed by the situation. This was particularly the case in shelters across the route. For example, one shelter went from housing 40 people one day to 3'000 the next, forcing employees and volunteers to work double shifts, and during the night. Several mentioned the **emotional and mental impact** that this crisis has had on the emergency teams, who **did not receive enough support**. Although some received additional funds at the beginning of the crisis, these were not enough. Others had trouble securing additional funds, without an official emergency declaration.

Several of the organisations interviewed stressed the need to improve **advocacy efforts to fight against the criminalisation and stigmatisation** of displaced people in the region. Considering that it is probably not the last time there is a mass displacement along this route, several interviewees mentioned the dangers of the normalisation of the phenomenon, and the fatigue of host communities. They also highlighted that the monitoring of conditions, profiles and needs is essential information for advocacy with the governments of El Salvador and Honduras. They also stressed the need to work on the issue of raising awareness of the reasons for the displacement and migration from the NCA, in particular with the local governments of Guatemala and Mexico.

In El Salvador it was mentioned that the assistance provided was ad hoc. In Honduras, humanitarian organisations said the crisis was proof that neither the humanitarian sector nor the government **have the capacity to respond to mass displacements**. Few organisations were able to respond beyond their existing programs. Similarly, in Guatemala, without the declaration of emergency, some mentioned the confusion over whether emergency funds could be sought or not. Likewise, **without contingency plans**, the organisations responding to the increase of deportees arriving in Honduras found themselves working double shifts to support arrivals at night, without greater financial or institutional support.

Humanitarian organisations in the region recommend that the states of origin, transit and destination:

- Refrain from closing their borders and guarantee the right to seek asylum.
- Ensure that all procedures related to returns comply with international standards and human rights, allowing for access to legal advice and adequate information about the process.
- Respect the principle of non-refoulement.
- Ensure the safety of people on the move, and investigate cases of human rights abuses of migrants and displaced persons.
- Update the protocols and procedures for the immediate response to this type of crisis, as well as effective reporting and case-referral routes, in particular to ensure the protection of persons with specific needs, such as children, women, elderly people, LGBTQIA and persons with disabilities.
- Promote awareness campaigns for local governments, the press, as well as transit and receiving communities.
- Establish institutional contingency plans for this type of situation, identifying budgets and personnel to support a greater demand for emergency services, and to provide a rapid, and integral response.

- Improve infrastructure that can be used as shelter to improve the protection of migrants and refugees and ensure adequate care that meets minimum humanitarian standards (Sphere standards).
- Strengthen consular offices to provide correct information to displaced persons about their migratory and asylum options.
- Avoid immigration detention, and in particular, prioritise modalities of alternative care for children and adolescents.
- Together with the humanitarian sector, preposition stocks of non-perishable items (food, water, hygiene items, etc.).

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Methodology

This report is based on a systematic monitoring of the media, operational reports of national and international agencies, and academic documents, as well as semi-structured interviews carried out in November with 7 humanitarian organisations.

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