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# SNAPSHOT 14

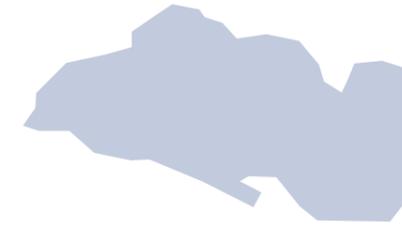
## PROTECTION CRISIS IN NORTHERN CENTRAL AMERICA, MEXICO, AND PANAMA.

**Key Data January to March 2021**

This fourteenth bulletin provides an update on the protection crisis in Northern Central America, Mexico, and Panama, consolidated through the monitoring of criminal violence indicators, protection needs, and migration policies. The panorama shown for the first quarter of 2021 is based on government information sources, civil society, and the media.

The protection crisis indicators' bulletins in the countries of Northern Central America, Panama and Mexico will be published quarterly. The analysis of the most important events for the topics of these bulletins that took place in April, May and June 2021 can be consulted in the second bulletin.

Photo: European Union/ECHO/A. Aragon 2016



## An update on the protection crisis from January to March 2021

### CRIMINAL VIOLENCE



registered by the National Civil Police in the first quarter of 2021, an **increase of 7.7%** compared to the same period of the previous year. <sup>i</sup>



were reported in the first quarter of 2021, an **increase of almost 20 cases** compared to the same period of the previous year. <sup>ii</sup>



were registered in the first quarter, a **reduction of 59%** compared to the same period of the previous year. <sup>iii</sup>



have been reported in the first quarter, an increase of 80 cases over the same period of the previous year: **6 disappearances per day on average.** <sup>iv</sup>



are confirmed by the “Ángel Desaparecido” Alert as of March 21, 2021. <sup>v</sup>

### PROTECTION NEEDS



(1.54% of the total population). <sup>vi</sup>

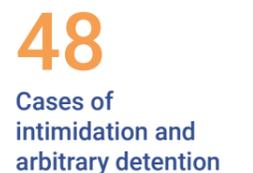


Approximately, among which there would be the participation of public officials and uniformed services. <sup>xxi</sup>



registered in 2020 by The Office of the Prosecutor for the Defense of Human Rights (latest data available). <sup>vii</sup>

#### The most frequent violations were:



### BALANCE OF MIGRATION POLICIES



during the first quarter of 2021, a **decrease of 84%** was reported compared to the same period of the previous year. (IOM-NTMI, Returnees January-March 2021)



#### The main reasons reported to migrate were:



The rate of returnees per 100,000 inhabitants is especially concentrated in the municipalities of Las Vueltas and San Luis del Carmen, both in the Department of Chalatenango. <sup>viii</sup>



Projections indicate that last year's number of applications, which closed with 4,052 applicants, could be exceeded. <sup>ix</sup>

# El Salvador

## An update on the protection crisis

### NATIONAL ANALYSIS

#### CRIMINAL VIOLENCE

Femicides registered in the first quarter of 2021 increased by 67.8% compared to the same period in 2020. In addition, 70% of the bodies of the murdered women were in homes, streets, land, and public roads, verifying that there are no safe spaces for women. These data on violence against women are especially worrisome considering that the *Juzgado Especializado Segundo de Instrucción para una Vida Libre de Violencia y Discriminación para las Mujeres* (Second Specialized Court of Instruction for a Life Free of Violence and Discrimination for Women) did not start working until April 12, 2021, aggravating impunity for this type of crime.<sup>xii</sup>

On the other hand, the details of the public policies aimed to fight disappearances are still unknown, despite the existence of news about the creation of a tripartite technical bureau to address this phenomenon, which would even include the participation of state agents.<sup>xiii</sup>

Some research indicates a correlation between the decrease in homicides and the increase in forced disappearances by gangs as a mechanism that would strengthen their territorial control. The different truces or pacts with gangs concur with the increases in reported disappearances.<sup>xiv</sup> Therefore, despite the fact that 55% of the municipalities have not registered homicides in 2021, the situation of generalized violence continues to present many challenges for their attention.<sup>xv</sup>

#### PROTECTION NEEDS

##### **Covid-19**

The Vaccination and Immunization Program of the Office of Infectious Diseases of the Ministry of Health consists of four phases, the first phase is scheduled to be completed in April 2021 and then the other profiles will follow according to the schedule.<sup>xvi</sup>

El Salvador is one of the 92 countries in the world that are receiving vaccines free of charge through the *Alianza Global de Vacunas e Inmunizaciones del Mecanismo COVAX* (Global Alliance for Vaccines and Immunizations of the COVAX Mechanism). However, according to the Oxford University Observatory, there is little official information on the coverage figures in the application of the first and second doses of vaccination.

##### **Food security**

According to the Program on Information Systems for Food and Nutrition Security Resilience in the SICA (for its acronym in Spanish) region, by May 2021, there will be 985,000 persons in acute food insecurity crisis or emergency conditions, which could increase to 1.04 million for the period from June to August 2021. In addition, the impact of tropical storms Amanda and Cristóbal and hurricanes Eta and Iota caused the loss of basic grains, reducing the sources of income of 57% of households and limiting access to services, becoming factors that would exacerbate a probable food crisis.<sup>xvii</sup>

The departments most affected by this phenomenon will be Ahuachapán, La Unión and San Miguel. <sup>xviii</sup> Historically, these departments have the highest homicide rates in the country, limiting not only the right to food of the affected population, but also the right to a life free of violence. This scenario may be an additional trigger for internal displacement due to the lack of socio-economic opportunities, the incidence of violence in these displacements and the impacts derived from climate change.

##### **Attack on journalists and human rights defenders:**

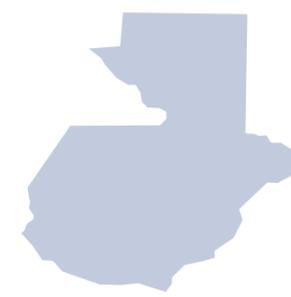
El Salvador ranked 82nd in the 2021 World Press Freedom Index, being part of the group of countries with “significant problems” for press freedom. The seizure of journalistic material by the Police, the prohibition of access to public spaces and the lack of access to public information are some of the obstacles faced by the media. This situation can be worrying since it would be affecting the exercise of a right such as freedom of the press and access to information by public opinion.

El Salvador was in this ranking as one of the countries in the region that saw its index drop the most compared to 2019. <sup>xx</sup> Women Human Rights Defenders Network in El Salvador has registered approximately 100 attacks on journalists and defenders, where public officials and uniformed services are involved.<sup>xxi</sup>

##### **Political panorama:**

The legislative and municipal elections of February 28, 2021 resulted in a unanimous victory for the current government’s political party.<sup>xxii</sup>

Analysts in the region have warned that this concentration of power could represent risks to ensure the exercise of democracy, due to the absence of counterweights and that it could favor a climate of polarization, or the restriction of civil liberties and freedom of expression.<sup>xxiii</sup>



## An update on the protection crisis from January to March 2021

### CRIMINAL VIOLENCE

**15** **Homicides**

per 100,000 inhabitants  
(669 cases)

**21%**

less in relation to the rate of March 2020.<sup>xxiv</sup>

Number of homicide reports to the PNC (for its acronym in Spanish)



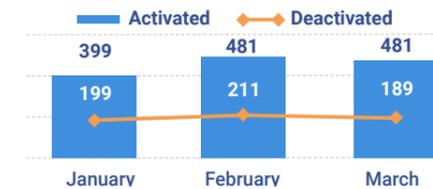
Source: Technical Secretariat of the National Council for Security, statistical report, March 2021

**150** **Violent deaths of women**

due to causes associated with criminal acts.<sup>xxv</sup>

**1,351** **Alba-Keneth Alerts activated**  
of which 44% were deactivated.<sup>xxvi</sup>

Number of Alba-Keneth Alerts activated and deactivated, January to March 2021



Source: Alba-Keneth Alert, March 2021

**479** **Isabel-Claudina Alerts activated**<sup>xxvii</sup>  
An increase of 14% in relation to the same period of the previous year.

Claudina Alerts activated, January to March 2021



Source: The Women Observatory /pm, alerta isabel-claudina alert, March 2021

**1,693** **Allegations of sexual violence**

before the Public Ministry during the first two months of 2021.<sup>xxviii</sup>

**1,173** **Medical examinations for sexual crimes**

carried out by the National Institute of Forensic Sciences in January and February 2021.<sup>xxix</sup>

### PROTECTION NEEDS

**174,152** **Persons received the first dose of the Covid-19 vaccine.**<sup>xxx</sup>

**Persecution of human rights defenders and journalists**

**15** **HRD were killed during 2020.**<sup>xxxi</sup>

**39** **Attacks and restrictions against journalists. During 2020, 149 attacks were registered.**<sup>xxxii</sup>

### BALANCE OF MIGRATION POLICIES

**2,141** **Deported Persons**<sup>xxxiii</sup>

**52%** Less than the same period of the previous year

**13%** United States

**87%** Mexico

**86%** Men

**14%** Women

**26%** Girls

**74%** Boys

Deported Persons, June 2020 to March 2021



Source: Based on Management Initiative

From June 2020, due to the relaxation of the control measures for the spread of Covid-19, deportations increased exponentially.<sup>xxxiv</sup>

# Guatemala

## An update on the protection crisis

### NATIONAL ANALYSIS

#### CRIMINAL VIOLENCE

During the first quarter of 2021, homicides have remained at an average of 223 per month (total 669), with January being the month with the most homicides reported by the National Civil Police.<sup>xxxv</sup> On the other hand, The National Institute of Forensic Sciences (INACIF, for its acronym in Spanish) reported 945 homicides, of which 84% were men and 16% women, and 81% were due to gunshot wounds.<sup>xxxvi</sup> It is important to highlight that Guatemala does not have a unified crime registry, therefore, the data of homicides and other criminal acts can vary from one institution to another.

The acts of violence against women reported to the Public Ministry (PM) amount to 22,095, of which 59% were due to psychological violence, 39% physical violence and 2% economic violence; This presents an approximate of 233 daily allegations (data from January to May 2, 2021).<sup>xxxvii</sup> Girls, adolescents and young women are the most vulnerable to violence against women, this can be corroborated with the medical evaluations carried out by INACIF in 718 cases of injuries compatible with mistreatment of women, of which 21% they corresponded to girls and adolescents aged 10 to 19 years, 26% to young women aged 20 to 29 years and 21% to women aged 30 to 39 years.<sup>xxxviii</sup>

The previous trend is even more worrisome regarding sexual violence. The PM reported 5,105 allegations for sexual crimes against women (from January to May 2)<sup>xxix</sup> y el INACIF (de enero a marzo) and the INACIF (from January to March) carried out 1,893 evaluations for recognition of sexual crimes, of which 91% were women and of them, 63% were girls and adolescents between the ages of 10 and 19.<sup>xl</sup> In addition to this, the National Registry of Persons reported 487 births of babies whose mothers are girls between the ages of 10 and 14.<sup>xli</sup>

#### PROTECTION NEEDS

Humanitarian needs in the country have been aggravated by constant socio-political conflicts, containment measures of the Covid-19 pandemic and extreme weather events. As of March 2021, acute food insecurity reached approximately 40% of the population (6.7 million inhabitants), in the ten departments most affected by storms Eta and Iota 1.8 million persons were affected and economic losses amount to around USD 90M.<sup>xlii</sup> xlii On the other hand, given the prolonged closure of schools, the

average number of years of studies could decrease from 6.3 to 4.8 years, increasing the risk of functional (NN who do not read or write well after having finished primary school) and school dropout.<sup>xliii</sup>

#### Covid-19

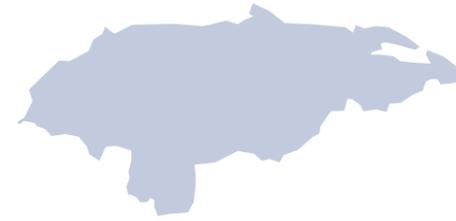
The vaccination plan has advanced slowly before a third wave of infections. As of May 4, 176,102 doses had been administered and there are approximately 16.6 million inhabitants in the country. In addition, negotiations to purchase more vaccines with pharmaceutical companies began late and with complaints of little transparency.<sup>xliii</sup> In the first phase of vaccination, mainly health personnel were included, and in the second, persons over 70 years of age. It is still unknown if at some point migrants, asylum seekers, or refugees with international protection needs will be able to access immunization within the country.

#### Attack on journalists and human rights defenders

Despite the recommendation issued in 2014 by the Inter-American Court of Human Rights to formulate a public policy to protect human rights defenders, the rights of indigenous and peasant organizations that defend their territory and the environment continue to be violated. The elimination of the Presidential Coordinating Commission for Executive Policy on Human Rights (Copredek, for its acronym in Spanish,) July 30, 2020, represents a setback since this was the institution in charge of the elaboration and implementation of a protection policy for human rights defenders. The Observatory for the Protection of Human Rights Defenders and The Unit for the Protection of Human Rights Defenders (UDEFEQUA, for its acronym in Spanish) have underlined the need to “end the impunity that exists around the violence exercised against those who defend the land, territory and the environment, as well as to take all the necessary measures to guarantee the physical and psychological integrity, and the safety of all human rights defenders in Guatemala”.<sup>xliii</sup>

#### Political panorama

After the election of the new Magistrates of the Constitutional Court, the requests for protection filed by civil society organizations regarding the reforms to the NGO Law were denied.<sup>xliii</sup> Regarding the reforms, a group of United Nations experts stated that: “These new requirements and controls could be used, in practice, to limit the work of human rights defenders and civil society in general, so that these NGO cannot fully carry out their activities, particularly in the promotion and protection of human rights and democracy “furthermore,” when the law comes into force, its provisions will open the way to the discretionary and arbitrary limitation of the rights to freedom of peaceful assembly, association and expression, as well as to the criminalization of defenders of human rights”.<sup>xliii</sup>



## An update on the protection crisis from January to March 2021

### CRIMINAL VIOLENCE

**860**   
Homicides

registered by The Secretary of Security of the National Police, representing **an increase of 28 homicides** regarding the same period of the previous year.<sup>xlvi</sup>

Homicides by month

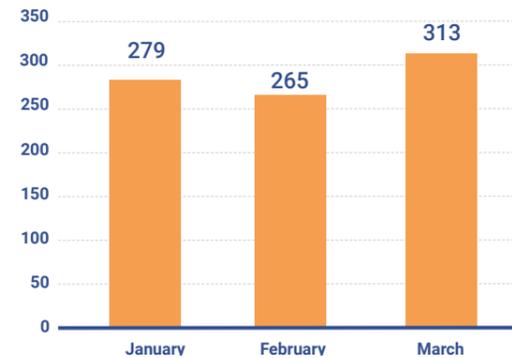


Chart based on data published by Sistema Estadístico Policial en Línea

**73**   
Femicides

50% of these crimes occurring in February.<sup>xlix</sup>

**891**   
Alerts for missing persons

keeps active the *Organización Internacional de la Policía Criminal de Honduras* (International Organization of the Criminal Police of Honduras)

**87%**  
minors<sup>l</sup>

### PROTECTION NEEDS

Covid-19

**52,361** 

Persons received the first dose of the Covid-19 vaccine  
0.53% of the total population.

**2,639** 

Persons vaccinated with the complete scheme.<sup>li</sup>  
0,03% of the total population.

**20** 

murders of human rights defenders in 2020.<sup>lii</sup>

(Latest available data)

**151** 

In the World Press Freedom Index 2021.

(Latest available data)

Honduras is part of the group of countries with “significant problems” for press freedom. Aggressions, death threats, intimidation and harassment campaigns would be some of the situations denounced by journalists who work for opposition or community media, who would have the Public Force as the main responsible. This union has also been denouncing that, open judicial processes have been characterized by having little transparency, which violates access to the proper process. In Honduras, the penalties stipulated for the crime of defamation, which is the main accusation against journalists, range from deprivation of liberty to prohibition of practicing journalism.<sup>liii</sup>

### BALANCE OF MIGRATION POLICIES

**12,471** 

Persons were returned<sup>liv</sup>

**27%**

less than the same period in 2020

**86%**  
United States

**14%**  
Mexico

**92%**  
Men

**8%**  
Women

**73%**  
Boys

**23%**  
Girls

**11,574** 

Honduran people requested refuge in Mexico.

Predictions indicate that the number of total applications from last year, when **15,471 Hondurans applied for asylum**, will likely be exceeded. They represent the nationality with the highest number of new applications in Mexico on these dates.<sup>lv</sup>

# Honduras

## An update on the protection crisis

### NATIONAL ANALYSIS

#### CRIMINAL VIOLENCE

In the first quarter of 2021 there were 13 massacres where 57 persons died. These data represent a 69% increase in these criminal acts and a 53% increase in the number of victims compared to the same period in 2019. 60% of these massacres were in urban areas and 40% in rural areas.<sup>lvi</sup>

On the other hand, in 35% of femicide cases the age of the victims has not been clarified, which is a serious obstacle to formulating public policies aimed at preventing gender-based violence and access to justice.<sup>lvii</sup>

The Commission of the National Coordinator of the Amber Early Alert System informed that they would activate the mechanism of “Amber Early Alert”, to help locate and recover missing and/or kidnapped minors and at risk of serious harm. The mechanism will be made up of a set of coordinated and articulated actions between institutions that will speed up and achieve the search, location, and protection of a missing, abducted, subtracted and/or kidnapped girl, boy or adolescent.<sup>lviii</sup> In 2015, the regulatory framework for the implementation of this alert was approved, which was published through legislative decree 199-2015. The activation of this alert is of vital importance given the situation of vulnerability and the protection risks faced by girls, boys, and adolescents. Between 2016 and 2019, more than 1,000 minors disappeared due to recruitment by organized crime, co-optation to collect extortion, kidnapping, trafficking for sexual exploitation and child pornography.<sup>lix</sup>

#### PROTECTION NEEDS

##### *Covid-19*

The country has received 428,800 doses of the AstraZeneca vaccine through the COVAX mechanism. On May 6, the fourth vaccination session began, and from May 24 to 28, the vaccination of older adults will be carried out. The hospital system is saturated: the Intensive Care Units (ICU) reported at the end of this bulletin an occupation of 100% and more than 80% of the Covid-19 care rooms of public hospitals were occupied. In addition, only 0.53% of the population has been vaccinated, prioritizing people who work in the health sector.<sup>lx</sup>

##### *Food security*

According to the Programme on Information Systems for Food and Nutrition Security Resilience in the SICA region, for the period from December 2020 to March 2021, an estimated 2.9 million people were in a food crisis. The entire country was classified in crisis or emergency conditions of acute food insecurity and for the period from April to June 2021 the population in this situation would increase to 3.1 million. The most affected departments will be Cortés, Yoro, and Valle. This escalation in the numbers could be a consequence, in part, of the economic and livelihood losses caused by the Eta and Iota natural disasters. It cannot be omitted from mentioning that the situation could be even more critical for the coming months, if factors such as the increase in unemployment, the depletion of food reserves, the increase in food prices, the arrival of a new hurricane season and a slow vaccination process.<sup>lxi</sup>

##### *Attacks on journalists and human rights defenders*

Attacks against environmental rights defenders and indigenous peoples have increased, with state forces as the main alleged aggressor. According to Bertha Oliva Nativí, coordinator of The Committee of Relatives of the Disappeared in Honduras (COFADEH, for its acronym in Spanish), All sectors that have a hint of starting an organizational process are strongly violated. From 2020 to date, there has not been a demonstration that has not been repressed. Honduras has become a country of death”. According to Front Line Defenders, in July 2020, five Garifuna leaders were forcibly taken away by armed men in police uniforms, who remain missing. Likewise, in March 2021 the Honduran environmentalist and indigenous Lenca leader and president of the Movement in Opposition to the “El Tornillito” Hydroelectric Project, Juan Carlos Cerros Escalante, was assassinated.<sup>lxii</sup>



## An update on the protection crisis from January to March 2021

### CRIMINAL VIOLENCE

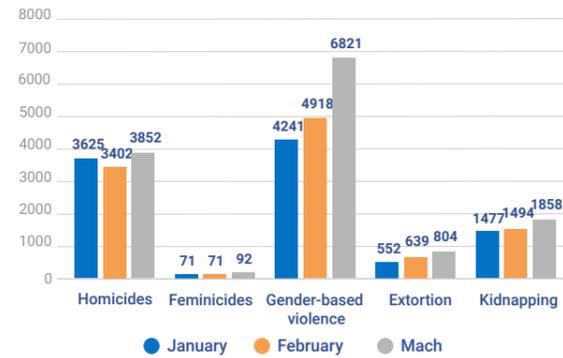
**8,399**

Homicides registered, assuming a **4.6% decrease** compared to the same period of the previous year.<sup>lxiv</sup>

**239**

registered femicides, **decreasing the figures by 2.4%** regarding the same period of the previous year.<sup>lxv</sup>

Indicators of Criminal Violence in Mexico, by type of crime



Source: Incidencia Delictiva, Secretariado Ejecutivo del Sistema Nacional de Seguridad Pública, April 2021.

### PROTECTION NEEDS



**2,244,268** Persons received the first dose of the Covid-19 vaccine

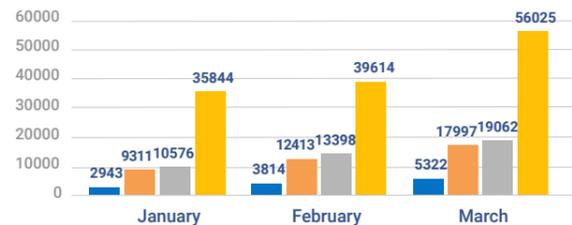
The incidence rate of accumulated cases is **1,740 per 100,000 inhabitants**.<sup>lxvii</sup>

**1,485**

people were forced to internally displace due to episodes of violence and human rights violations in Mexico, particularly in the states of Oaxaca and Tamaulipas.<sup>lxvix</sup>

### BALANCE OF MIGRATION POLICIES IN THE UNITED STATES

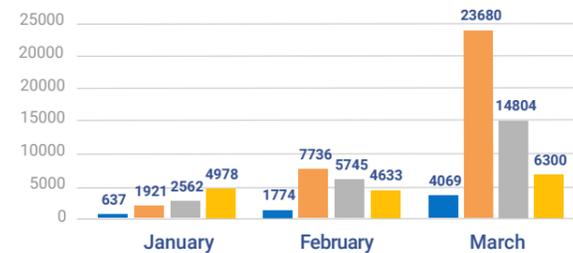
Expulsions by Title 42 according to country of origin



● El Salvador ● Honduras ● Guatemala ● Mexico

Source: Southwest Land Border Encounters, U.S. Customs and Border Protection, April 2021.

Inadmissible by Title 8, according to nationality of inadmissible person



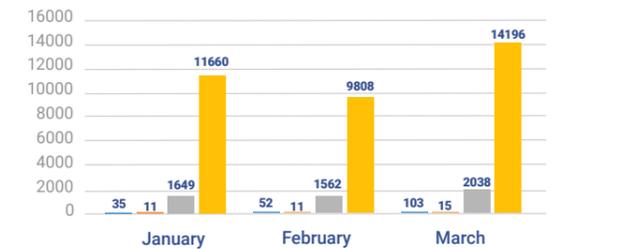
● El Salvador ● Honduras ● Guatemala ● Mexico

Source: Southwest Land Border Encounters, U.S. Customs and Border Protection, April 2021.

The Expulsions by Title 42 U.S.C. 265. refer to people found by the Office of Field Operations and the Border Patrol who are expelled to the country of last transit or country of origin in the interest of the public health of the United States.

Refers to inadmissible persons under the criteria stipulated in Title 8 of the United States Federal Code, which codifies the statutes related to foreigners and nationality in that country.

Repatriations of Mexicans from the United States

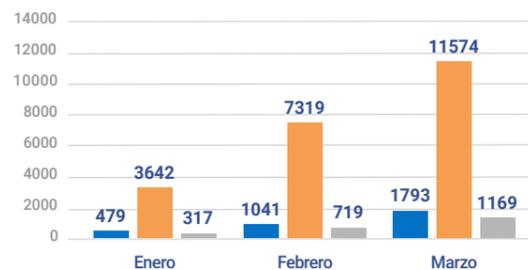


● Children in company ● Children unaccompanied ● Teenagers ● Adults

Source: Repatriation of Mexicans, Migration Policy Unit, Registry and Identity of Persons, April 2021.

### BALANCE OF MIGRATION POLICIES

Applications for Refugee Status in Mexico by Country of Origin



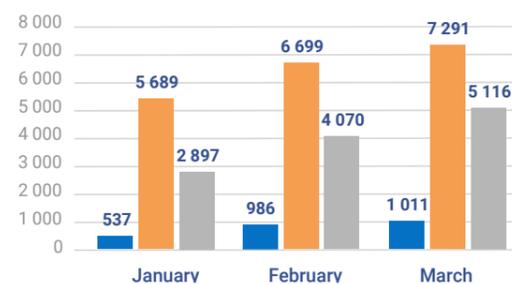
● El Salvador ● Honduras ● Guatemala

Source: Refugee Status Applications, Mexican Commission for Refugee Aid, April 2021.



In the context of the migrant caravan of January 2021, The National Institute of Migration uploaded videos of the militarized southern border to its social media with deterrents. For its part, the Ministry of the Interior announced that it would enforce the Migration Law, referring to the fact that there would be no free passage for people without the corresponding immigration documentation and that the best interests of children would be taken care of.<sup>lxviii</sup>

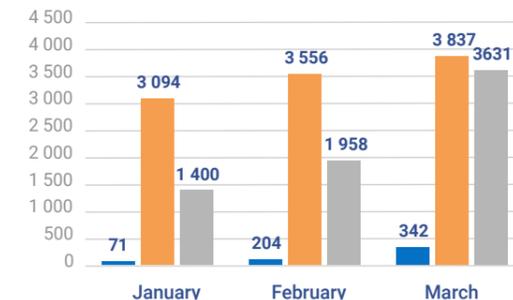
Foreigners presented to Mexican authorities



● El Salvador ● Honduras ● Guatemala

Source: Foreigners presented and returned, Migration Policy Unit, Registry and Identity of Persons, April 2021.

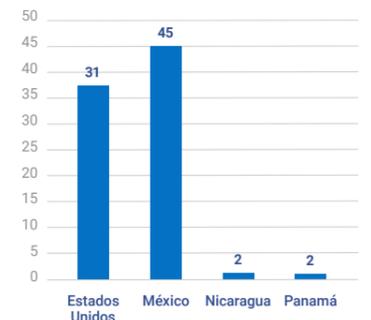
Foreigners returned by Mexican authorities according to nationality of the returned person



● El Salvador ● Honduras ● Guatemala

Source: Foreigners presented and returned, Migration Policy Unit, Registry and Identity of Persons, April 2021.

Deaths and disappearances of migrants along the route



Source: Missing Migrants Project Data, Organización Internacional para las Migraciones, April 2021.

# Mexico

## An update on the protection crisis

### NATIONAL ANALYSIS

#### CRIMINAL VIOLENCE

Although homicide levels in the first months of 2021 are lower than 2020, March was the most violent month, registering a 12% increase in homicide victims. This crime manifests a territorial concentration, since 6 states accumulate 50.6% of homicides: Guanajuato, Baja California, Jalisco, State of Mexico, Michoacán, and Chihuahua. However, the context of citizen security presents an irregular and heterogeneous scenario: femicides have decreased, but cases of human trafficking and rapes have increased by 21.3% and 8.3% respectively, compared to the first. 2020 quarter.<sup>lxx</sup>

On the other hand, based on the 6,596 women, girls and boys treated during the first quarter of 2021, The National Network for Immigrant and Refugee Rights stated that 3 out of 10 women stated that they had been victims of attempted femicide, and 40 women indicated that they had been victims of domestic violence. 60% of the calls answered in this network corresponded to psychological violence, 39.2%, physical violence, 15% sexual violence and 17.3% suffered all these types of violence. 3 out of 42 women who were accompanied by this network had already requested help in an institutional program without obtaining a response. These data are a confirmation of the limited institutional capacity to provide effective and timely responses that guarantee the life and safety of women and girls and put an end to the serious impunity that exists in the justice system.<sup>v</sup>

#### PROTECTION NEEDS

##### *Covid-19*

The vaccination strategy against Covid-19 recognizes health as a universal right and, therefore, includes as beneficiaries the migrant population in transit through the country. However, the details of this process have not been made public. It is unknown how a registration of this population will be maintained, as they do not have a defined legal status or a unique population registration key. A specific vaccination strategy is expected to be announced shortly.<sup>lxxii</sup>

##### *Attacks on journalists and human rights defenders*

According to Reporters Without Borders, Mexico is one of the most dangerous countries for people who practice journalism. It is estimated that approximately 120 journalists have been murdered in the last 20 years in Mexico, half of which took

place since 2012. In addition to these murders, many journalists are forced to leave their workplace due to the threats they receive, and disappearances have even been documented. Although there are fewer cases of attacks on women journalists, they are in a position of greater vulnerability to suffer physical and sexual attacks, as well as cyber-harassment and publication of data without the consent of the victim.<sup>lxxiii</sup>

On the other hand, state, and municipal police forces violently repressed citizen protests against the sharp increase in the rate of femicides and the level of gender violence. Arbitrary detentions, violent evictions, and lack of access to legal assistance have been recorded, violating the right to the proper process.<sup>lxxiv</sup>

##### *Increase in arrests and refugee requests in Mexico*

In the case of the United States, Title 42 expulsions of people from Northern Central America increased between 80 and 93% for the first quarter of the year. While the rejections due to Title 8 were done between 477 and 1133% for people from that region in the same period. For their part, deportations to Mexico increased by around 22% for adults and adolescents.

In the case of Mexico, for the first quarter of the year, the filings before the authorities of migrants increased 20% for Honduras, 77% for Guatemala and 88% for El Salvador. While deportations increased 24% for Honduras, 159% for Guatemala and 382% for El Salvador. Finally, refugee applications from people from Northern Central America also increased, 218% in the case of Hondurans.

The increase in the figures of all the immigration policy indicators of the United States and Mexico allows us to observe that neither the restrictions due to the Covid-19 pandemic, nor the actions to stop migratory flows, particularly those against migrant caravans, have stopped the movement of people. Showing, in turn, that the displacement of migrants continues to occur under the usual forms of mobility, which, as is known, entails many effects.

From 2006 to January 2021, more than 82,000 people have disappeared. Last year there was a decrease of 22.39% in reports of disappearances.

**BALANCE OF MIGRATION POLICIES**



An average of **390 migrant persons** were housed daily at the four Immigration Reception Stations (ERM, for its acronym in Spanish) located in the Darién province (border with Colombia): San Vicente, La Peñita, Lajas Blanca and Bajo Chiquito. (between September 2020 and February 2021)



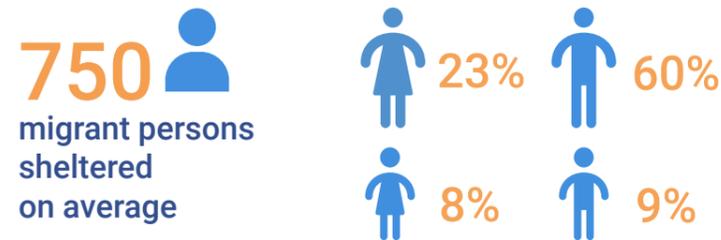
**61%** of the population concentrated in La Peñita.

**78%** Men **22%** Women

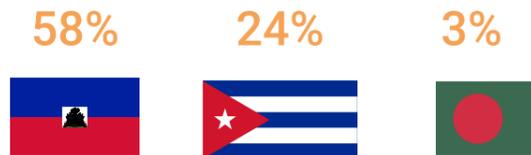
**22%** Girls and boys

**59%** Haitian origin.

**Immigration Reception Station Bajo Chiquito**

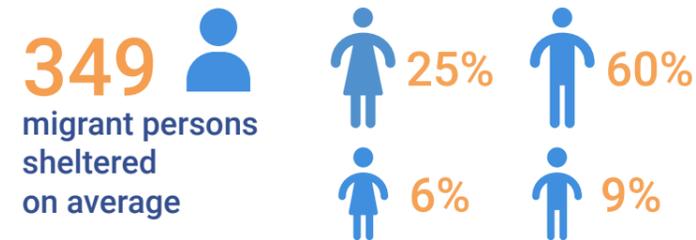


Countries of origin

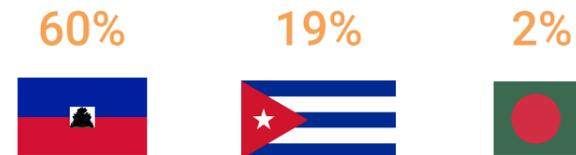


Countries of origin: 39% percent corresponded to other nationalities from various countries such as Angola, Afghanistan, Benin, Brazil, Burkina Faso, Cameroon, Chile, Ivory Coast, Ecuador, Egypt, Eritrea, Ghana, Guinea, India, Mauritania, Mali, Mexico, Nepal, Niger, Nigeria, Pakistan, Palestine, Peru, Bolivarian Republic of Venezuela, Democratic Republic of the Congo, Dominican Republic, Senegal, Syria, Somalia, Sri Lanka, Sudan, Togo, and Yemen.

**Immigration Reception Station San Vicente**



Countries of origin

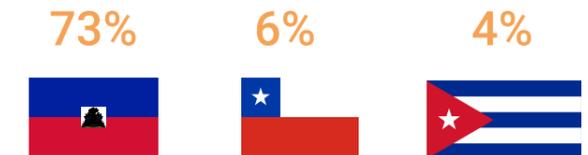


Countries of origin: 33% percent corresponded to other nationalities from various countries such as Angola, Afghanistan, Benin, Brazil, Burkina Faso, Cameroon, Chile, Ivory Coast, Ecuador, Egypt, Eritrea, Ghana, Guinea, India, Mauritania, Mali, Mexico, Nepal, Niger, Nigeria, Pakistan, Palestine, Peru, Bolivarian Republic of Venezuela, Democratic Republic of the Congo, Dominican Republic, Senegal, Syria, Somalia, Sri Lanka, Sudan, Togo, and Yemen.

**Immigration Reception Station Los Planes de Gualaca**



Countries of origin



Countries of origin: 17% percent corresponded to other nationalities from various countries such as Angola, Afghanistan, Benin, Brazil, Burkina Faso, Cameroon, Chile, Ivory Coast, Ecuador, Egypt, Eritrea, Ghana, Guinea, India, Mauritania, Mali, Mexico, Nepal, Niger, Nigeria, Pakistan, Palestine, Peru, Bolivarian Republic of Venezuela, Democratic Republic of the Congo, Dominican Republic, Senegal, Syria, Somalia, Sri Lanka, Sudan, Togo, and Yemen.

**383,992** Entry of migrants into the country according to The National Institute of Immigration **87% by air, 11% by land, 2% by sea.** <sup>lxxvi</sup>

**7,150** Migrant persons entered the country in an irregular situation during the first quarter of 2021 According to the Foreign Ministry of Panama: **62% only in the month of March.**

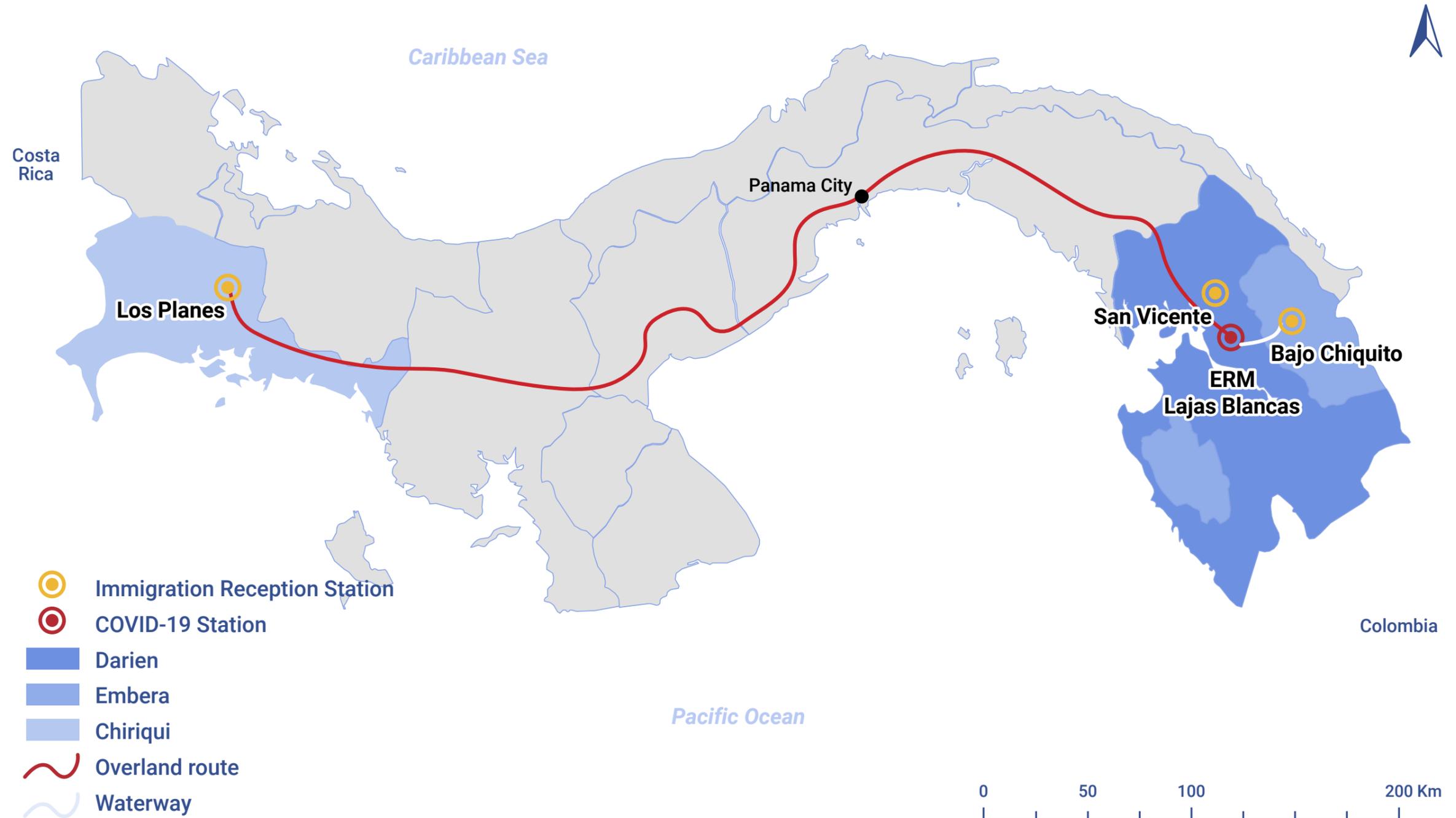
An estimated **10,000 persons** are waiting in Colombian territory to enter Panama. <sup>lxxvii</sup>

UNICEF recently warned that the number of boys and girls who make this route has gone from **109 in 2017 to 1,653 in 2020.**

**7** Persons requested refuge in the country and a case of sexual violence based on gender of a woman of Venezuelan nationality has been documented when she was making the journey through the Darién jungle.



BALANCE OF MIGRATION POLICIES



# Panama

An update on the protection crisis

## NATIONAL ANALYSIS

### CRIMINAL VIOLENCE

#### Covid-19

The National Vaccination Plan against Covid-19 has been organized in four phases and the second of these phases had already begun at the close of this bulletin. For its part, the Panamanian government has ensured that the foreign population residing in Panama, as well as the migrant population in an irregular situation will have access to the vaccine, since access to health is a right that does not depend on the immigration status of a person. In order to receive the vaccine, it is necessary to register in the so-called Covid-19 Vaccination Applicant Registration. In addition, the Ministry of Health enabled telephone line 177 only to provide details or information about the circuit that corresponds to vaccinate per week.<sup>lxxviii</sup> Despite the existence of these mechanisms, it is necessary to adapt them to the circumstances of the different migratory profiles. The migrant population in an irregular situation may be reluctant to register on a public platform due to fear of being deported and, therefore, face an obstacle to guaranteeing their right to health.

Regarding the vaccination data, 167,350 people have received the first dose (3.6% of the total population) and 101,722 people have received the complete vaccination scheme (2.4% of the total population).<sup>lxxix</sup>

#### *Analysis of the situation of the migrant population in an irregular situation*

The mobility restrictions applied due to the **incidence of Covid-19** has generated a **negative impact on the knowledge and exercise of human rights of the migrant population in an irregular situation that is in the Immigration Reception Stations of Chiriquí and Darién**, and they have aggravated their conditions of vulnerability, since these spaces do not have adequate hygiene measures, nor sufficient access to personal protection material (masks-alcohol), nor conditions to apply due distancing and constant hand washing due to lack of water.

In the **ERM of Bajo Chiquito**, a series of areas for improvement have been detected: at the sanitary level, the provision of electricity, and the closing system of showers and toilets, must be strengthened to guarantee the safety of the people housed, especially women and girls. The most frequently detected health problems are diarrhea, chronic diseases, malnutrition, and Covid-19. In addition, **there is no access to permanent health services** and the closest health centers are more than 3 km away, making the right to health difficult, especially in emergency situations. From the nutritional point of view, the effort to provide a special diet for pregnant women and nursing

mothers is recognized. However, organizations operating in the field have indicated that **capacities for systematic control and registration of food delivery can be strengthened**.

In terms of protection, situations of violence among migrants themselves have been documented because of the stress caused by the existing limitations in the provision of humanitarian assistance. Likewise, **the lack of safe spaces and of occupation of free time for girls and boys is worrying**. It is necessary **to strengthen the implementation of assistance protocols differentiated by profiles**.<sup>lxxx</sup>

In the **ERM of San Vicente**, none of the families have access to safe cooking facilities. Humanitarian organizations have pointed out **the need to provide differentiated feeding for pregnant women, nursing mothers, girls, and boys**. In terms of water and sanitation, there is availability of hand washing stations with soap and water near toilets and latrines. At the sanitary level, **support is required for permanent assistance in health services and provision of medicines**. It should be noted that there have been incidents of violence such as robberies, sexual violence based on gender and stress situations derived from the limitations in the humanitarian assistance provided to the migrant population.<sup>lxxxii</sup>

On the other hand, in May 2020 the **Lajas Blancas ERM** was enabled due to the emergency caused by the pandemic. Its purpose is the **detection and isolation of positive and suspected cases of Covid-19 in the migrant population**. Suspected cases of Covid-19 are taken care of by the Ministry of Health. As is the case in all ERM, there is a **need for support for permanent assistance in health services and provision of medicines**. In this sense, the Panamanian Red Cross has provided follow-up to the needs of nursing and expectant mothers. There have been **incidents of violence related to robberies, sexual violence based on gender, domestic violence against minors and abuse of psychoactive substances by the host community**. In addition, there have been situations of stress caused by the limitations in the humanitarian services that are provided.<sup>lxxxiii</sup>

Finally, in the **ERM of Los Planes de Gualaca**, the main source of drinking water is obtained through a local aqueduct. In terms of food, migrants have access to prepared food and special diets are provided for pregnant women and nursing mothers, as well as supplementary food for girls and boys. There have also been incidents of violence related to the abuse of psychoactive substances and cases of sexual violence based on gender in the migrant population.<sup>lxxxiv</sup>

**In terms of communication and information needs, the migrant population sheltered in these ERM need to know their options to access services, food distribution, housing conditions in the shelter, international protection, and access to health services.**

### CRIMINAL VIOLENCE

Restrictions on mobility, imposed by governments as one of the measures to control the spread of Covid-19, became one of the main factors that explained the decrease in crime incidence in the North countries of Central America and Mexico during 2020. The gangs that exercise territorial control in the North countries of Central America initially “forgave” the collection of extortion as a mechanism to obtain legitimacy from the local population. However, in the second half of 2020, with the reopening of economic activities, extortion returned to its former levels, as well as illicit drug trafficking and violent acts.<sup>ii</sup>

For the first quarter of 2021, it seems that the generalized violence has recovered the intensity and magnitude of previous years, leaving a balance of 1,842 homicides in the North countries of Central America and 8,339 in Mexico. Guatemala was the country with the highest incidence of homicides with an increase of more than 13.7% compared to 2020.<sup>lxxxv</sup>

On the other hand, femicides or feminicides in the region continue to be a critical indicator, with 272 cases in the North countries of Central America and 239 in Mexico, which constitutes a clear example of the high risk in which women are in these countries. El Salvador has been the country that increased its figures the most compared to 2020 (70 cases)<sup>lxxxv</sup> and, although Honduras has registered similar figures to the same period last year, one of the main institutional challenges continues to be access to justice and protection for the victims’ families, who commonly end up being threatened or forced to displace internally.

### PROTECTION NEEDS

#### *Covid-19 in the region:*

In general terms, El Salvador, Guatemala, Honduras, Panama, and Mexico did not take effective actions in 2020 to prevent the imminent arrival of Covid-19. Therefore, they faced the pandemic scenario with high social vulnerability and political and institutional weakness.<sup>lxxxvii</sup>

According to data published up to March 20 of this year, Guatemala is the country with the highest number of deaths from Covid-19 in Central America, followed by Panama, Honduras, Costa Rica, and El Salvador. In addition, Panama has a mortality rate of 139.3 per 100,000 inhabitants, almost more than double that of the second country in the subregion with the highest mortality rate (Belize with 77.9 per 100,000 inhabitants). Panama is the fourth country in the continent with the highest mortality rate after the United States, Peru, and Mexico.<sup>lxxxviii</sup>

Vaccination is an essential process to stop the spread of the virus and return to relative normality. However, people in a situation of human mobility, in general, have not been prioritized. Their exclusion from vaccination plans, in addition to implying a violation of human rights, puts the success of the entire process at risk, given that “no person is safe until all of us are”. Only Mexico and Panama specifically contemplate the vaccination of all people in their territory, regardless of their immigration status. On the other hand, Guatemala and Honduras do not explicitly include this population in their vaccination plans. In this sense, the United Nations Special Rapporteur on the Human Rights of migrants has underlined the need for all States to guarantee equitable vaccination to people in situations of greater vulnerability. The situation faced by migrants in an irregular situation deserves special attention, who, at times, fear going to health centers due to the risk of being deported and, in addition, are often more exposed to infection due to their dedication to informal jobs.<sup>lxxxix</sup>



Photo: European Union/ECHO/A. Aragon 2016

#### *Food security:*

The food insecurity situation has worsened in the first months of 2021. It is estimated that a total of 8.2-8.5 million people from Guatemala, Honduras, Nicaragua, and El Salvador are in this situation of acute food insecurity. The rural populations of the Dry Corridor are the most affected by this impact.<sup>xc</sup>

### BALANCE OF THE MIGRATION POLICIES

In the United States of America, the new administration of President Biden made the decision to expand the annual quota of refugees that the country hosts from 15,000 to 62,500 persons. However, in a statement they warned that this figure will probably not be reached during 2021, since reversing the setbacks of the previous immigration policy will be a gradual process. In the first quarter of 2021 there have been approximately 350,000 arrests of migrants between Mexico and the United States. This figure is the highest since 2001. In addition, the number of unaccompanied children and adolescents is also registering historical figures: in March 2021 alone, 18,000 arrived at the border of Mexico with the United States. However, some changes are beginning to be observed compared to the previous administration: Immigration and Customs Enforcement arrests decreased by 60% in the first quarter of 2021.<sup>xcii</sup>

In this sense, there is a growing interest from the new administration to implement a comprehensive strategy to address the structural factors that lead to the displacement of people in the Northern Central America countries and Mexico: generalized violence, corruption, poverty, lack of economic opportunities and the impact of climate change. The newly appointed special envoy for the Northern Triangle of Central America, Ricardo Zúñiga, has held meetings with government representatives, and Vice President Kamala Harris has been appointed to analyze the growing arrival

of migrants from these countries to the US border.<sup>xciii</sup>

On the other hand, at the end of February 2021 the United States Department of Homeland Security (DHS) announced the restoration of the safe and orderly processing of those who were returned to Mexico under the MPP Program, of which approximately 25,000 people have open cases.<sup>xciv</sup>

To ensure due process, the United States Government will be supported by the International Organization for Migration and the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees. Mainly through the operation of the Conecta website, through which active cases under the Migrant Protection Protocols (MPP) can register and continue their process in the United States.<sup>xcv</sup> So far, there are three cities from where these cases are crossing: Tijuana (Baja California), Matamoros (Tamaulipas) and Ciudad Juárez, Chihuahua.<sup>xcvi</sup>

### **Migrant caravan:**

The first caravan of migrants this year, formed in January 2021 mostly by people from Honduras, was repressed and dissolved by the National Civil Police and the Guatemalan Army. While, in Mexican territory, it was the National Guard and The National Institute of Migration who oversaw establishing immigration checkpoints at border crossing points, roads and highways in the country, to detain smaller groups that were able to circumvent the actions in Guatemalan territory.<sup>xcvii</sup>

### **Timeline of the caravan<sup>xcii</sup>**

- **January 1**  
The promotion of a migrant caravan is announced through social media.
- **January 11**  
Governments of Northern Central America and Mexico issue a statement on caravan.
- **January 13**  
Around 200 migrants are mobilized to Corinto two days before the official departure.
- **January 14**  
Guatemala decrees a State of Prevention for 15 days in seven departments near the border with Honduras.
- **January 15**  
Mexico deploys around 500 agents from The National Institute of Migration on its border with Guatemala to prevent the irregular passage of migrants.
- **January 17**  
Riot police and The Guatemalan Army fire tear gas and beat members of the caravan.
- **January 18**  
Honduran migrant caravan remains detained at kilometer 177 in Vado Hondo, Guatemala.

- **January 19**  
The Human Rights Attorney of Guatemala expresses his concern at the use of force by the Army and the National Civil Police.
- **January 20**  
Statement by National Human Rights Institutions of Guatemala, El Salvador, Costa Rica, Honduras, and Panama regarding the excessive use of force against the caravan.
- **January 21**  
The National Institute of Migration from Mexico uploads videos of the militarized southern border to its social media with the intention of dissuading the migrants from the caravan from continuing on their way.
- **January 22**  
The Ministry of the Interior communicates that it will enforce the migration law in Mexico.
- **January 22**  
The United States ambassador to Guatemala makes a statement regarding the Migrant caravan.
- **January 23**  
The president of the United States, Joe Biden, commits to allocate 4,000 million dollars to promote development in Northern Central America and thus curb irregular migration.

Even though, the following months of the year have had new calls for caravans, they have not convened a significant number of people, which might lead us to think that migrant people do not consider caravans as a protection mechanism on route to the United States.

### **Protection risks for persons in a situation of mobility:**

During 2020, 1,314 acts of violence against migrants and asylum seekers returned to Mexico were reported under the MPP, including homicides, kidnappings, torture and rapes, but these are only those reported by researchers and journalists, and it is very likely that underreporting be much higher "A.U.C. San Diego, in a study on MPP, found that about a quarter of the people returned to Tijuana and Mexicali had been threatened with violence, while waiting to testify in the United States immigration court."<sup>xcix</sup> In addition, federal authorities have declared a forensic crisis due to the existence of 87,000 people who are missing. The General Law on the Forced Disappearance of Persons demanded the Attorney General's Office to set up a National Bank of Forensic Data with genetic records, both of unnamed bodies and of relatives who are looking for their loved ones throughout the country, as well as a National Register of Unidentified and Unclaimed Deceased Persons, two fundamental tools that would expedite the identification of more than 38,500 bodies.<sup>c</sup>

It is worth highlighting the murder of a young Guatemalan on the southern border of Mexico, at the hands of a Mexican Army soldier on March 31, and likewise the murder of a Salvadoran woman with a humanitarian visa in Quintana Roo by four policemen.<sup>ci</sup> On January 23, the Tamaulipas State Attorney General's Office reported the discovery of 19 bodies inside two burned-out trucks that were located in the town of Santa Anita, adjacent to the Mexican state of Nuevo León and Texas, United States.<sup>cii</sup> Of the 19 persons, 16 were migrants from Guatemala, 2 people from Mexico and the last person is still unknown where he or she came from.<sup>ciii</sup> Regarding the aggressor agents, at the moment 12 police officers have been prosecuted who were linked for the crimes of qualified homicide, abuse of authority and false reports.<sup>civ</sup>

Recently, the president of Guatemala reported that there are five Guatemalan persons who survived the massacre and are protected and testifying in the United States about the events they experienced.<sup>cv</sup> The Foundation for Justice and the Democratic Rule of Law requested a special UN commission to investigate the murders of migrants in Mexico, <sup>cvi</sup> since these types of events are the latest in a series of massacres that occurred in San Fernando, Tamaulipas and Cadereyta, Nuevo León in 2010 and 2011, respectively.

On the other hand, The Mexican Commission for the Defense and Promotion of Human Rights has underlined the need to address the violation of human rights suffered by migrants from a comprehensive perspective and with a differential and human rights approach. The militarization of the border has led to more dangerous migration routes due to the presence of organized crime and the absence of humanitarian aid. In this sense, one of the most urgent challenges is the consolidation of a network of shelters that cares for people in a situation of mobility in all states and the development of a social inclusion agenda aimed at refugees in the country. However, these challenges seem difficult to address considering that the budget allocated to The Mexican Commission for Refugee Assistance has decreased in a 14.34% in 2021.<sup>cvi</sup>

In Central America, the situations of violence experienced by migrants in situations of vulnerability or in need of international protection during the migration route are documented on a smaller scale. However, Doctors Without Borders (MSF, for its acronym in Spanish/French) has verified the growing protection risks experienced by the extra-continental migrant population that arrives in Trojes, in the department of El Paraíso (Honduras), after months of hard route from the Darien in Panama. In this municipality it is estimated that between 50 and 1,000 people remain daily awaiting the processing of documents that will allow them to continue circulating in the country. The waiting time to obtain these permits can range from 3 to 15 days. In addition, they must pay approximately \$190 to the National Migration Institute of Honduras for irregular entry. 89% of this population surveyed by MSF claims to have been the victim of a situation of violence along the route and they do not have safe accommodation, food, their health condition is very unstable, and the management of their immigration procedures is very slow. This organization warns about the seriousness of the humanitarian situation, especially affecting pregnant women, girls, and boys.<sup>cvi</sup>

For its part, despite the reopening of Panama's land borders for the entry and exit of nationals, residents and foreigners on January 8, the Government of Costa Rica did not reopen its land borders until April 5, 2021. However, in these months of 2021 the influx of migrants between both borders has continued regularly (with bilateral authorization between both governments) and irregularly (with migrants who voluntarily withdraw from Operation Controlled Flow and cross the border between Panama and Costa Rica). On the other hand, the border between Panama and Colombia is qualitatively different due to the terrain conditions in Darien, the border area between the two countries, as it presents considerable levels of porosity. This scenario hinders the orderly and regular entry of extra-regional migrants to Panama.<sup>cix</sup>

The Darien Gap is dangerous not only due to the hostility of the climate, there is also the presence of organized crime and drug trafficking that pose a danger to migrants.<sup>cx</sup> On April 20, the Panama Prosecutor's Office began investigations regarding the rape of two migrant girls of 12 and 16 years on the trail between Panama and Colombia.<sup>cx</sup> On the other hand, in the framework of a virtual public hearing held on May 6 by the Inter-American Court of Human Rights (IACHR) in order to review compliance with the protection measures granted in 2020 in favor of migrants detained in the migration stations of the Darien Province in Panama, 10 years after the Vélez Lóor sentence, it was stressed that migrants continue to be detained without an individualized determination process that allows establishing the necessity and proportionality of that measure. Clear and precise information on the conditions and data of the different migratory reception stations is not presented, prolonging overcrowding situations. For example, the State has admitted that, at the Lajas Blancas Immigration Reception Station, in Darién, there is an occupation of 531 migrants, with a capacity for only 400 persons.<sup>cxii</sup>

Likewise, the infrastructures for the accommodation of this migrant population in an irregular situation do not meet the minimum requirements to guarantee dignified treatment, leading to overcrowding situations that not only hinder coexistence, but also affect the health condition, an aspect that especially affects migrant children. The absence of the governing authorities and guarantors for the protection of children's rights further aggravates this situation. In addition, a language barrier has been detected that hinders fluid communication between the authorities and the migrant population in an irregular situation. There are no staff who can attend Creole, Arabic and French speakers. Finally, the need to design reference routes for persons with specific protection needs when faced with the identification of cases of gender violence is underlined.<sup>cxiii</sup>

On the other hand, there are migrants in an irregular situation who continue to enter through Darien and decide to stay in Panama and start their asylum application process or other forms of regularization, who are uninformed about the legal processes, face other needs that make their integration processes and access to rights and durable solutions difficult. Within this group, applicants who have limitations in accessing RSD processes can be identified because there is no office to receive applications in Darien; transportation, food, and accommodation expenses to get to Panama City and request before the National Office for the Attention of Refugee (ONPAR, for its acronym in Spanish) are expensive.<sup>cxiv</sup>

Access to information and guidance on rights for people with international protection needs (transit and reception) constitutes a challenge due to the lack of access to effective regularization mechanisms in an agile manner. In addition, limitations have been identified in access to integration opportunities and durable solutions, work permits, opening bank accounts and leasing contracts. These challenges, added to discriminatory events and the weakness of government institutions to provide a quality response, pose serious obstacles to access and exercise rights that allow reaching durable solutions for people with international protection needs.<sup>cxv</sup>

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