

# ISSUE BRIEF **08.05.16**

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## **Mexico's Not-So-Comprehensive Southern Border Plan**

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### **BACKGROUND**

Mexico's southern border is increasingly becoming part of the U.S.-Mexico bilateral agenda due to broader regional concerns over illegal activities with a transnational scope, such as drugs and human trafficking and arms and human smuggling. In particular, migration flows from Central America are on the rise, and most of the migrants passing through Mexico are destined for the United States. In an effort to abate the chaos that characterizes the management of in-transit migration through the area, where human mobility has become a main fixture in daily social and economic activities, a public policy instrument called the Comprehensive Plan for the Southern Border (CPSB) was implemented in July 2014. However, after two years, the plan has yet to live up to its avowed purpose of managing migration flows in an orderly manner while at the same time securing the border. Thus far, the prevailing approach has involved mainly the policing of migrants, which in turn has provoked several negative outcomes. This issue brief offers insights into the evolution of the CPSB and what may lie ahead for the plan.

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### **CENTRAL AMERICAN MIGRATION FLOWS AS AN ISSUE**

While the United States historically has been a prime destination of Central American migration, Mexico in recent years has become both a transit and endpoint country for many of these migrants. Thus, the ongoing exodus of Central Americans due to economic hardship and various forms of violence in their societies is a pressing issue of concern to all nations involved. More recently, Mexico has begun to address the management of Central American migration flows, partly in response to diplomatic pressure from the United States to act on this key regional issue. While the migration of Central Americans passing through Mexico on their way to the United States is

a long-term, well-established phenomenon, what constitutes a new development in this regard is the arrival of hundreds of thousands of people who are fleeing from violent conditions in their societies of origin.

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### **CONDITIONS ON THE GROUND**

Prevalent economic crises, poverty and inequality, weak political and government institutions, lack of social support systems, and rampant corruption contribute to failing economies and poor governing in Nicaragua, Honduras, El Salvador, and Guatemala. In addition, social, domestic, and structural violence, among others, ravage the social fabric of the latter three countries, which form the so-called Northern Triangle.

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These ills fuel outward migration from the area. In many instances, this flight is in fact triggered by both attempted and successful instances of assault, kidnapping, and extortion by common delinquents and organized criminal networks. Notably, gangs known as *Maras* engage not only in the aforementioned practices but also resort to forced recruitment among youth. Youngsters, and even children, currently constitute a high percentage of the population that is escaping violence.

### A WATERSHED YEAR: 2014

It is against this backdrop that a shift in the dynamics of migration from the Northern Triangle to the United States evolved into a “crisis” in 2014, one that, in turn, induced emergency responses both from Mexico and the United States. Thousands of mothers and their children, as well as unaccompanied minors,<sup>1</sup> set out northbound. Even though children and women had been part of the migrant flow for years, the number that arrived at the U.S.–Mexico border in 2014 was unprecedented. Fears of an uncontrolled, continuous outpouring of newcomers provoked a reaction at the highest levels of the U.S. government. In early July 2014, President Barack Obama asked Congress for as much as \$3.7 billion in emergency funds to deal with the situation at the U.S. southern border.<sup>2</sup> Presumably, the United States, in turn, would have exerted pressure on President Enrique Peña Nieto’s administration to reinforce Mexico’s own southern border region to halt the growing number of undocumented migrants entering the country and heading north.<sup>3</sup> According to many analysts, this call materialized in the Comprehensive Plan for the Southern Border (CPSB), most commonly known in Spanish as *Plan Frontera Sur*.

### THE PLAN FRONTERA SUR

On July 7, 2014, Enrique Peña Nieto publicly announced the creation of the CPSB. At least part of the funding needed to launch

and run the program in 2014 possibly came from U.S. sources, purportedly through the Merida Initiative.<sup>4</sup> In 2015, the CPSB had a Mex\$102 million operating budget and 94 staff members.<sup>5</sup>

The stated purpose of the program was to tend to migration issues at the southern border and to foster the social and economic development of the 23 municipalities that border Guatemala and the one adjacent to Belize.<sup>6</sup> In practice, the CPSB concentrated on security, most notably interdicting undocumented migrants passing through the area. In contrast to recent historical trends, at the peak of the program—between the second half of 2014 and the first six months of 2015—Mexican authorities apprehended more Central American migrants than in the same period the previous year.<sup>7</sup> In tandem, between October 2014 and April 2015, more Central Americans were detained in Mexico than the total number caught at the U.S. southern border.<sup>8</sup> Consequently, the number of people deported from Mexico went up. The CPSB included a number of components:

- a. The governing body of CPSB, the *Coordinación para la Atención Integral de la Migración en la Frontera Sur* (CAIMFS, or the Agency for Comprehensive Attention to Southern Border Migration) was to have two main headquarters, one in Villahermosa (Tabasco) and another in Tapachula (Chiapas).<sup>9</sup>
- b. The program envisioned the implementation of three “security belts”: the first was comprised of 11 official entry points already in existence at the Guatemala–Mexico international borderline; the second belt would be set up inland from the border, at Huixtla, La Trinitaria, Catazajá, Palenque (all in Chiapas), and Frontera (Tabasco); a third was to be located across the Isthmus of Tehuantepec (Oaxaca).
- c. A total of 187 economic projects were planned for states at the southern border.
- d. There would be five “mirror” programs across the border, in neighboring Guatemala, aimed at having “high” social impact.

It is worth noting that items C and D have not been implemented to this day.

operational in 2014–2015, and plans to build two more through 2016 and 2017 are already under way.<sup>11</sup>

## EVALUATING PLAN FRONTERA SUR

The CPSB, however, has not been without controversy. Key developmental components have not been implemented, as mentioned above. Also, according to a July 2015 official report, the achievements of CAIMFS's leadership team thus far include:

- a. Numerous working meetings between high-level CPSB representatives and Mexican federal, state, and municipal authorities and with embassy personnel from Canada, Guatemala, and the United States between July and December 2014.
- b. The issuance of 112,050 visiting permits to Guatemalan and Belizean border residents (*Tarjetas de Visitante Regional*) and 15,391 work permits to border laborers (*Tarjetas de Trabajador Fronterizo*) by INM (Mexico's immigration authority) as part of CPSB's strategy to facilitate the movement of (certain) border residents.
- c. The director of CAIMFS commissioned a series of monographs for the 24 municipalities neighboring Guatemala and Belize in an effort to build a database and information system with updated information on the following topics: population, migration, security, governability, and human rights.
- d. The establishment of Prosecutor Offices to Solve Crimes Committed Against Migrants (*Fiscalías especializadas para atención de delitos contra migrantes*) in Campeche, Tabasco, and Quintana Roo during the first half of 2015.<sup>10</sup> These offices fulfill the CPSB's mission to infuse migration management with a humanitarian approach.
- e. The creation of Centers for Comprehensive Management of Border Traffic (CAITF by its acronym in Spanish), which featured customs and border facilities to manage the movement of goods and people. Three CAITF became

Yet, the CPSB has raised considerable criticism from numerous sectors of Mexican society, particularly migrant advocate groups. One of these criticisms deals with the source of funding for the program. As pointed out, there is speculation that initial resources for the CPSB may have come through the Merida Initiative,<sup>12</sup> or that Merida Initiative funding was delivered right before Peña proclaimed CPSB's creation.<sup>13</sup> Merida Initiative funds are primarily intended to combat drug trafficking, not to address migration and border issues. Yet, evidence points to the use of Merida funding to contain Central American migrants at Mexico's southern border.<sup>14</sup>

The most salient critique about the CPSB is that the program has made the journey through Mexico more perilous for migrants because it has forced them to seek alternative routes, many of which are much more dangerous to traverse. Various sources<sup>15</sup> concur that the CPSB effectively hardened Mexican migration policy because of the consequences associated with increased control at or near the southern border. Worse, it also has made it more difficult for migrants to report abuses from both private individuals and members of various enforcement agencies, notably Mexican immigration officials, for fear of being jailed and deported. Some of these outcomes are the result of several initiatives:

1. New infrastructure, checkpoints, and roadblocks have been set up along the main routes migrants use. Of particular note are the already mentioned CAITF facilities to control the movement of people and goods. The CAITF were originally entrusted to the Department of Treasury (*Secretaría de Hacienda*), but President Peña mandated that these centers broaden their scope to include migration management.<sup>16</sup>
2. For about one year beginning in August 2014, migrant raids were conducted jointly between INM agents and members of the military and the

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federal police. Excessive use of force has characterized many roundups, leading to allegations of human rights violations.<sup>17</sup>

3. The freight train—known popularly as The Beast—that used to be a main means of transportation for many migrants is traveling with fewer riders, reportedly because some companies have trains running at a higher speed, others have hired private guards, and others have set up concrete posts alongside the train tracks. Authorities are also harassing migrants who use the trains during their trek north. All of these measures make it more difficult for people to climb on the trains. Also, there has been an increase in the number of joint busts on the railroads.<sup>18</sup> As a result, migrants have to walk, often through dangerous, isolated paths.
4. As Javier Urbano, a migration scholar at Universidad Iberoamericana, has pointed out, migrants are not deterred by increased policing and detention measures; rather, the flows have been dispersed, forcing people to seek alternative routes. This puts more migrants at risk of injury or death, gives free license to migration authorities to abuse them, and makes it easier for criminals to rob, rape, and extort them,<sup>19</sup> in addition to other negative side effects such as skyrocketed smugglers' fees.

### THE CURRENT OUTLOOK

With the disappearance of CAIMFS in mid-2015, the CPSB entered a new phase. According to a 2015 newspaper article, the Mexican Department of Treasury exerted pressure to make other government agencies take over the work of the CPSB, arguing that such change was needed due to fiscal cuts.<sup>20</sup> Apparently, it was simply meant as a statement of intended changes that were never fulfilled, because in actuality, joint policing practices in checkpoints and raids continue, with INM

acting as the de facto agency in charge. In fact, government officials are reluctant to talk about the CPSB extensively or in detail.<sup>21</sup> Any mention of the way the plan will move forward is rarely reported. For instance, on May 19, 2016, the governor of Chiapas and the Secretary of the Interior met to discuss several issues, among them how to reinforce *Plan Frontera Sur*. The press brief released after the rendezvous emphasized that discussions centered on how coordinated efforts among government agencies to secure the border would continue, but no specifics were provided.<sup>22</sup> The one area offering some insight into the current state of affairs of the plan is its finances, which are perceived as skewed, and thus the object of added criticism. Based on information disclosed in response to an official request to authorities in Mexico, a source indicated that out of the Mex\$102 million allocated to CAIMF for 2015 calendar year, only Mex\$51 million had been spent during that period. (The amount earmarked for 2016 was close to Mex\$93.5 million.) It should be noted that the same source pointed out that nearly 95.7 percent of the aforementioned sum went to pay for administrative expenses, and only a negligible amount of approximately Mex\$20,400 was funneled into field operations costs.<sup>23</sup>

Like similar policy initiatives previously implemented in Mexico, the CPSB is fading into oblivion, but not without leaving negative consequences on Mexico's migration policy. Even though the program did delay for some time the flow of migrants and potential asylum applicants to Mexico, a process that was already underway prior to 2014, the problem has not been solved. The latest numbers show that people continue to arrive, and, in consequence, show up at the U.S. border, too. In the summer of 2015, reports emerged again about the upsurge of migrants reaching the U.S.–Mexico border,<sup>24</sup> a concern echoed once more toward the end of the year.<sup>25</sup> Recent news reports have stated that the number of migrants seeking asylum in the United States is on the rise again (NPR, May 31, 2016).<sup>26</sup>

As the situation worsens in the Northern Triangle nations, the United States

and Mexico will have to closely monitor conditions on the ground, not only on the Guatemala–Mexico border but in the Northern Triangle itself. To make things right, all concerned parties need to shift the current focus of the CPSB as well as their respective immigration and border agendas. Mexico and the United States have to continue exerting pressure on Central American governments to do something internally to stem the flow of migrants. At the same time, they must coordinate efforts to help these countries to improve internal, local–level economic and public safety conditions. In addition, Mexico should enforce measures that protect migrants transiting through the country and ensure that its enforcement policies are more compassionate in their approach to migrants instead of the current securitized conditions that victimizes migrants and enables those who would abuse them. Policy should respond to the particular plight of “humanitarian migrants” and the conditions that expel them from their communities. On the U.S. side, part of the resources within the Merida Initiative would be better utilized for social programs to overcome the problems that are forcing Central Americans, particularly the young, to escape.

## ENDNOTES

1. Defined here as a person under 18 years of age who is not accompanied by an adult relative or legal guardian.

2. White House, Office of the Press Secretary. “Fact Sheet: Emergency Supplemental Request to Address the Increase in Child and Adult Migration from Central America in the Rio Grande Valley Areas of the Southwest Border,” July 8, 2014, <https://www.whitehouse.gov/the-press-office/2014/07/08/fact-sheet-emergency-supplemental-request-address-increase-child-and-adu>.

3. José Knippen, Clay Boggs, and Maureen Meyer. “An Uncertain Path. Justice for Crimes and Human Rights Violations Against Migrants and Refugees in Mexico,” Research report, 2015, p. 60.

4. The Merida Initiative is described by the U.S. State Department as “an unprecedented partnership between the United States and Mexico to fight organized crime and associated violence while furthering respect for human rights and the rule of law.” (See: <http://www.state.gov/j/inl/merida/>). A recent report from the Congressional Research Service acknowledged that the U.S. government has supported “the Mexican government’s effort to secure its porous southern border” through Merida Initiative funds. See Clare R. Seelke, “Mexico and U.S. Relations,” Congressional Research Service/R42917, March 30, 2016, p. 22, <http://fas.org/sgp/crs/row/R42917.pdf>.

5. See “Zar migratorio, un fantasma que cuesta 102 mdp,” *El Universal*, July 16, 2015, <http://www.eluniversal.com.mx/articulo/estados/2015/07/16/zar-migratorio-un-fantasma-que-cuesta-102-mdp>; Fabiola Martínez, “Hacienda desaparece programa de atención a migrantes en la frontera sur,” *La Jornada*. Aug. 6, 2015, <http://www.jornada.unam.mx/2015/08/06/politica/007n1pol>.

6. SEGOB–CAIMFS, “Informe de Actividades, julio 2014–julio 2015,” Mexico, July 2015, p. 3–4.

7. Washington Office on Latin America, “Increased Enforcement at Mexico’s Southern Border. An Update on Security, Migration, and U.S. Assistance,” Report, November, p. 36, [https://www.wola.org/files/WOLA\\_Increased\\_Enforcement\\_at\\_Mexico's\\_Southern\\_Border\\_Nov2015.pdf](https://www.wola.org/files/WOLA_Increased_Enforcement_at_Mexico's_Southern_Border_Nov2015.pdf).

8. Washington Office on Latin America, “Mexico Detains More Central American Migrants than the United States,” Press Release, June 11, 2015. [http://www.wola.org/news/mexico\\_now\\_detains\\_more\\_central\\_american\\_migrants\\_than\\_the\\_united\\_states](http://www.wola.org/news/mexico_now_detains_more_central_american_migrants_than_the_united_states).

9. This coordinating body managed the program for one year. After the politician serving as its head resigned in August 2014, CAIMFS, for all practical purposes, disappeared.

10. The government of Chiapas had already set up such Prosecutor Offices prior to the CPSB’s creation.

**Policy should respond to the particular plight of “humanitarian migrants” and the conditions that expel them from their communities.**

11. SEGOB-CAIMFS, "Informe de Actividades, julio 2014-julio 2015."

12. Joseph Sorrentino, "How the U.S. 'Solved' the Central American Migrant Crisis," *In These Times*, May 12, 2015, <http://inthesetimes.com/article/17916/how-the-u.s.-solved-the-central-american-migrant-crisis>.

13. Roxana González, "EU apoya con programas de Plan Mérida el plan para la frontera sur," *El Financiero*. July 8, 2014, <http://www.elfinanciero.com.mx/politica/eu-apoya-con-programas-de-plan-merida-el-plan-para-la-frontera-sur.html>.

14. For some more specific details on this issue, see: Human Rights Watch, "Closed Doors: Mexico's Failure to Protect Central American Refugee and Migrant Children," March 2016, pp. 41-43. ISBN: 978-1-6231-33306 <https://www.hrw.org/report/2016/03/31/closed-doors/mexicos-failure-protect-central-american-refugee-and-migrant-children>.

15. See, among others: Centro de Derechos Humanos Fray Matías de Córdova, FM4-Paso Libre, Casa del Migrante Saltillo, Instituto de Derechos Humanos Ignacio Ellacuría-Universidad Iberoamericana, Sin Fronteras, 2015, "Derechos Cautivos. La situación de las personas migrantes y sujetas a protección internacional en los centros de detención migratoria: siete experiencias de monitoreo desde la sociedad civil" *Informe*, Mexico, [http://redtdt.org.mx/wp-content/uploads/2015/07/DerechosCautivos\\_2015\\_WEB.pdf](http://redtdt.org.mx/wp-content/uploads/2015/07/DerechosCautivos_2015_WEB.pdf); Knippen, Boggs, and Meyer, "An Uncertain Path. Justice for Crimes and Human Rights Violations Against Migrants and Refugees in Mexico"; REDODEM (Red de Documentación de las Organizaciones Defensoras de Migrantes), "Migrantes invisibles, violencia tangible," Report, 2014, p. 76.

16. SEGOB. "El Secretario de Gobernación, Miguel Ángel Osorio Chong, en el marco del Programa Frontera Sur," Conference, May 12, 2015, [http://www.gobernacion.gob.mx/es/SEGOB/Sintesis\\_Informativa?uri=http%3A%2F%2Fwww.SSEGOB.swb%23swbpress\\_Content%3A5805&cat=http%3A%2F%2Fwww.SGOB.swb%23swbpress\\_Category%3A2](http://www.gobernacion.gob.mx/es/SEGOB/Sintesis_Informativa?uri=http%3A%2F%2Fwww.SSEGOB.swb%23swbpress_Content%3A5805&cat=http%3A%2F%2Fwww.SGOB.swb%23swbpress_Category%3A2).

17. Seelke, "Mexico and U.S. Relations."

18. Sorrentino, "How the U.S. 'Solved' the Central American Migrant Crisis."

19. ibero 90.9. "Desaparece la Coordinación para la Atención Integral de la Migración en la Frontera Sur," August 10, 2015, <http://ibero909.fm/desaparece-la-coordinacion-para-la-atencion-integral-de-la-migracion-en-la-frontera-sur/>.

20. Fabiola Martínez, "Hacienda desaparece programa de atención a migrantes en la frontera sur," *La Jornada*, August 6, 2015, <http://www.jornada.unam.mx/2015/08/06/politica/007n1pol>.

21. When this researcher requested an interview with the former head of CAIMFS to talk about the CPSB, he hinted that he would be willing to discuss anything but the plan (email communication, May 2016). Researchers and journalists alike are confronting the same problem. See: Georgetown Law Human Rights Institute, "The Cost of Stemming the Tide: How Immigration Enforcement Practices in Southern Mexico Limit Migrant Children's Access to International Protection," Fact-finding project, Washington D.C., 2015, p. 5.; Stephanie Nolan, "Southern exposure: the costly border plan Mexico won't discuss," *Globe and Mail*, June 15, 2016, <http://www.theglobeandmail.com/news/world/the-costly-border-plan-mexico-wontdiscuss/article30397720/>; Lorne Matalon, "'Programa Frontera Sur:' US Intercedes in Southern Mexico," *Arizona Public Media*, June 8, 2016, <https://www.azpm.org/p/featured-news/2016/6/7/89501-programa-frontera-sur-interceding-in-southern-mexico/>.

22. "Acuerdan Manuel Velasco y Osorio Chong Reforzar la Seguridad en la Frontera Sur," *El Orbe*, May 19, 2016, <http://elorbe.com/portada/2016/05/19/acuerdan-manuel-velasco-y-osorio-chong-reforzar-la-seguridad-en-la-frontera-sur.html>.

23. Daniela Barragán, "Plan Frontera Sur usa 95% de su gasto 2015 en administración y no en migrantes: transparencia," *Sinembargo.mx*, April 8, 2016, <http://www.sinembargo.mx/08-04-2016/1645563>.

24. Julia Preston, "Number of Migrants Illegally Crossing Rio Grande Rises Sharply," *New York Times*, Nov. 26, 2015, [http://nytimes.com/2015/11/27/us/number-of-migrants-illegally-crossing-rio-grande-rises-sharply.html?\\_r=0](http://nytimes.com/2015/11/27/us/number-of-migrants-illegally-crossing-rio-grande-rises-sharply.html?_r=0).

25. "Surge in Central American migrants at US border threatens repeat of 2014 crisis," *The Guardian*, January 13, 2016, <http://theguardian.com/us-news/2016/jan/13/central-american-migration-family-children-detention-at-us-border>.

26. John Burnett, "U.S.-Mexico Border Sees Resurgence of Central Americans Seeking Asylum," *NPR*, May 31, 2016, <http://www.npr.org/2016/05/31/480073262/u-s-mexico-border-sees-resurgence-of-central-americans-seeking-asylum>.

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