

# VIOLENCE AND DISPLACEMENT IN THE NORTHERN TRIANGLE

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Atrocities committed by the Assad Regime in war-torn Syria and the resulting migration issues in Europe have captured the attention of the international community. But approximately twelve thousand miles away – widespread violence, extortion, and corruption continue to define an equally pressing humanitarian crisis that is still unknown to many. (Cantor, 2016) The Northern Triangle of Central America, formed by the countries of Guatemala, Honduras, and El Salvador, is currently overrun by organized criminal gangs with a history going back to the bloody civil wars of the 1980s. (Katel, 2015) The region has the highest murder rate in the world, and the epidemic of gang violence has caused far-reaching displacement issues both internally and externally. (Kuek, 2017) As the region desperately searches for a solution, effects of the violence have reached the U.S.-Mexico border, forcing U.S. policy makers and migration experts to shift their attention from Europe to Latin America.

In 1996, United States immigration reform resulted in the mass deportation and repatriation of incarcerated noncitizens, primarily young men from Central America. This trend continued, and an estimated 300,000 criminals have been deported to the Northern Triangle during the last fifteen years. (Farah, 2012) Fueled by high unemployment, poverty, and the inability of local authorities to respond to rising violence - gangs flourished in their new homes. In 2012, the rate of violent deaths in the region was surpassed only by Syria, exceeding the rate of violent deaths in countries currently involved in brutal armed-conflicts like Afghanistan and the Democratic Republic of Congo. (Cantor, 2016) In El Salvador, the average rate of violent deaths per day rose to 18 in 2015, surpassing the average rate of 16 violent deaths per day during their civil war in the 1980s. (Cantor, 2016) While children and youth are the primary victims of violence in the Northern Triangle, the area also reports the world's highest rates of "femicide," or the brutal killings of women and girls. (Cantor, 2016) The most prominent gangs in the region, Mara Salvatrucha (MS-13) and 18<sup>th</sup> Street (Barrio 18), have transformed from cliques in the streets of Los Angeles into two of the most dangerous multinational criminal organizations in the world.

The bitter rivalry and ongoing conflict between the two gangs creates difficult problems for local authorities. For example, a prison segregation system established to keep Barrio 18 and MS-13 members separated inadvertently turned jails into coordination centers for those detained. (Katel, 2015)

Efforts by the respective State authorities to combat gang violence in the region have proven largely ineffective. The *Mano Dura* (firm hand) method has been the policy of the last decade, but fighting fire with fire has only motivated gangs to restructure and expand. On top of this failing policy, the States are also plagued by extensive corruption at the highest level, and scandals of gang infiltration into the military have become regular occurrences. (Cantor, 2016) Public suspicion in the States are also crucial to gang survival. Extortion is the backbone of illegal financing in the Northern Triangle, and a recent study reported that 84% of local businesses in El Salvador refused to report extortion demands for fear that their complaints would filter back to the gangs. (Cantor, 2016) For countless individuals in the region, migration is the last hope for a future.

Attempting to escape the violence, however, is a dangerous decision. Central American refugees often encounter abuse and manipulation while travelling north, as they lack proper documentation that would give them safe passage. The northern route through Mexico is controlled by cartels and traffickers, often searching for vulnerable women and children to exploit. (Medina, 2014) Yet tens of thousands of people, while aware of the risks, choose to uproot their families in an attempt to make the journey. Over 100,000 asylum seekers, many of them unaccompanied children from the Northern Triangle, crossed over the U.S.-Mexico border during 2013 and 2014. (Katel, 2015) Internal displacement, while much more difficult to measure, is also extremely prevalent in the area. An academic survey conducted in El Salvador in 2012 showed that 2.1% of respondents had been displaced internally in that year alone. As a comparison, even the worst years of the Colombian conflict never produced an annual rate of population displacement over 1.4%. (Cantor, 2016)

Steps taken by the Obama Administration to boost relief funding for the region, as well as framework adopted by Latin American and Caribbean governments recognizing the problem, are promising signs of improvement. (Cantor, 2016) However, the appeal of gang membership in the Northern Triangle will only diminish when safe alternative opportunities exist for at-risk youth and women. U.S. President Donald Trump's direct involvement in the region remains to be seen, but without a permanent solution in place, it is likely that the violence and chaos will continue to escalate. Policy reform to reduce the high level of displacement is necessary, but with the current epidemic of gang violence in the region – forcing families to stay could serve as a death sentence. As the geopolitical climate of the Northern Triangle continues to deteriorate, it will be up to the careful coordination of the Americas to end the crisis and implement lasting reform.

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