WELCOME TO TIJUANA

THE EXODUS FROM THE NORTHERN TRIANGLE

EL SOL BRILLA PARA TODOS (Spanish for "the sun shines for everybody") can be seen painted in sprawling white letters on the northern concrete banks of the Tijuana River. Directly behind lies the world’s busiest land border crossing—and one of the most militarized—with American outlet stores, and San Diego visible in the distance.

The message rings hollow as you walk west along the banks of the mostly-dried up river. To the immediate south, clusters of colorful tents occupied by would-be asylum-seekers fill a small plaza at the foot of El Chaparral bridge, which leads to the crossing of the same name. To the north, abandoned shoes and articles of clothing are sporadically entangled in the barb wire that lines the steel fence. As you pass by, the unmistakable H&M logo flickers through the moiré pattern of the layered barriers. Follow the border six miles through undulating terrain and you reach Playas, a sleepy beach crudely interrupted by the western extremity of the fence that slices into the Pacific Ocean.

This is Tijuana—the last stop separating thousands of migrants from their ultimate goal. For dozens of years, the majority of people crossing were Mexican. Today the overwhelming majority of them make the journey from the Northern Triangle, the cluster of countries consisting of Honduras, El Salvador, and Guatemala. Although unauthorized Mexicans crossing the border fell to its lowest level in more than a decade, the Northern Triangle was the only region experiencing a surge during the same time period.

The anti-immigrant fear-mongering espoused by the Trump administration paints the people fleeing the Northern Triangle as a grave threat to American society: "It’s an invasion of our country, of not only people, not only gangs and criminals and human traffickers; it’s an invasion of drugs into our country. It’s an invasion like you’ve never seen before!"

Countless studies have found that undocumented migrants are no more likely than U.S. citizens to commit crime. In fact, a larger body of academic research suggests that immigrants, regardless of legal status, commit crime at a lower level than U.S.-born Americans. Charis Kubrin, a University of California-Irvine criminologist, continues to find that "areas with higher concentrations of immigrants have lower violent crime rates."

The reality is that most of the migrants leave everything behind not only for hopes of a better future but often just to survive. The rates of violence, poverty, and corruption in the Northern Triangle are alarming and endemic, even by bleak Latin American standards. Murder rates are among the highest in the world while gang recruitment of children, extortion, and sexual violence are also on the rise.
For Paulina*, (pictured with lipstick) it was her son being killed and a demand she enter a relationship with one of the gang leaders who was her deceased son’s age. For Eduardo*, (pictured holding the empty tear gas canister shot into Mexico by Border Patrol) it was his younger brother being murdered, and fear for his own life. He offered me the canister to return to U.S. custom agents when I crossed the border back to the US. For Marcelo*, it was the crackdown and increased violence against the LGBTQ community after a coup in 2009 installed Juan Orlando Hernandez. Speak to enough migrants and it becomes clear that most are leaving for valid reasons.

The plight of the migrant caravan dominated headlines at the end of last year, especially (and too conveniently) in the weeks leading up to the midterm elections. With the endless stream of stories ranging from the widely condemned policy of family separation, to deployment of troops at the border**, the murder of 20-year-old Claudia Gomes Gonzales by a Border Patrol agent, and the recent deaths of children in US detention centers, it’s easy to overlook the root causes that are driving this mass exodus from the region in the first place.

*Names have been changed to protect privacy.

**At the time of writing, February 3rd, 2019, the Pentagon announced it would send an additional 3,750 troops to the border, bringing the total up to 4,350 and estimated cost to American taxpayers to $600 million, with the number likely to climb higher.

To understand the current crisis in the Northern Triangle, it is important to understand the legacy of U.S. intervention in the region that has directly contributed to political instability and gross economic inequality. Guided by the Monroe Doctrine, the United States has meddled across Latin America to protect economic and political interests for nearly two centuries. After decades of unjust land tenure, labour coercion, unequal political representation, and disproportionate influence of large corporations that forced lower-class workers into harsh living conditions, communist insurgencies flourished throughout Central America. The region was transformed into one of the frontlines of American foreign policy and proxy wars during the height of the Cold War. In Honduras, U.S. presence began around 1900 with American-based banana companies, with the U.S. intervening militarily in 1907 and 1911 to protect interests and ensure the Honduran elite’s reliance on Washington. Later on, despite not experiencing a civil war like its neighbours, Honduras was used as a base for the Contras, the far-right rebel group supported by the Reagan administration in Nicaragua’s own civil war after the U.S. backed dictatorship was overthrown by the Sandinistas. In 2009 Honduras underwent another coup against democratically-elected Manuel Zelaya which unleashed a wave of violence and repression against popular movements across the country. Similarly, the 2017 election, widely perceived as fraudulent, plunged the country into another political crisis resulting in 30 deaths, most of them opponents of U.S.-endorsed Juan Orlando Hernandez.
In Guatemala, the U.S. orchestrated the overthrow of the democratically elected government of Jacobo Arbenz in 1954 in favour of a military junta, after policies seeking to end exploitative labour practices, redistribute land, and expand access to education angered the likes of the American-owned United Fruit Company. The U.S. then spent decades supporting a series of military dictators despite well-known systematic repression against all opposition, which included dropping napalm on Indigenous villages.

In El Salvador, the U.S. spent billions of dollars backing the government, training their military, and the provision of arms over the course of the dozen-year war against a left-wing insurgency, which left about 75,000 dead, many killed by U.S.-trained paramilitary groups and death squads.

The legacy of these wars and resulting volatility subjected generations to a cycle of extreme poverty and violence, and resulted in massive displacement. This displacement eventually led to the propagation of the gangs that control vast swaths of the region today. The likes of MS-13, frequently referred to by the current administration to demonize all Central American refugees, were born and bred in Los Angeles jails, with U.S. immigration policy playing a fundamental role in their formation. Originally created to protect largely undocumented Salvadoran immigrants from other L.A. gangs, MS-13 morphed into its current form under the tutelage of Ernesto Deras, who happened to be trained in Panama by U.S. Green Berets. When the U.S. deported 4,000 gang members back to the Northern Triangle in the ’90s, the conditions were ripe for the recently exported gang culture to multiply and expand, and eventually return to the U.S. more powerful than ever.

The exodus fleeing the Northern Triangle is the culmination of several crises that have been manifesting themselves over time with the implementation of an unjust economic model—the world which they flee is one American policy helped create. It is imperative to reckon with the fact that Central America’s instability does not reside outside the orbit of U.S. influence, but rather firmly in its shadow—and has for centuries.

As long as this history is overlooked and the root causes are not addressed—including the major role the U.S. has and continues to play in the violence, terror, and systemic poverty—Central Americans will continue to flee and make the perilous trek north.

Americans must come to terms about their own country’s contribution to this ongoing exodus and demand that their elected officials end the U.S. proliferation of inequitable trade practices, border policies, and oppressive regimes. Only when these issues are acknowledged and tackled in a meaningful way that provides justice, safety, and dignity at home, will the inhabitants of the Northern Triangle no longer need to seek an alternate future outside their borders.

For the extended story with more photos and in-depth interviews, check the online version @ freqmagazine.com

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