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Introduction

The dramatic spike in the number of unaccompanied minors arriving at the U.S.-Mexico border in the summer of 2014 raised public awareness in the United States of a tendency that had in fact been underway for a number of years. Since the late 2000s, as Mexican undocumented migration to the United States entered into steady decline, a growing number of Central American migrants have been making their way through Mexico towards the United States. This transmigration phenomenon reflects increasingly harsh and violent conditions in many of the countries of Central America, as well as growing desperation brought about by poverty and the failure of national economies, as noted in previous Senate HSGAC hearings.

Partly in response to this phenomenon, and partly in response to the intense criticism that was aimed at the Mexican government in the wake of ongoing abuses of Central American migrant rights, in July 2014, Mexican President Enrique Peña Nieto launched the *Programa Frontera Sur* (PFS or South Border Program) with two main official objectives: first, to protect migrants who enter Mexico, and second, to manage the ports of entry in a way that promotes the security and prosperity of the region. The PFS involves a massive investment in infrastructure and procedures that represents a credible attempt to impose some sense of order in Mexico's southern region, and gives the Mexican state a highly visible presence in an area that has traditionally been ignored or neglected by Mexico City.

It is important to recognize here the complexity of the task at hand. Mexico's southern border region is a varied and complicated area, with mountains and jungle, extreme poverty but great natural riches, and an extraordinary diversity of indigenous cultures. The border itself is defined by both river and land crossings, with three major rivers on the southern border: the Rio Suchiate and Rio Negro/Usumacinta along the border with Guatemala, and the Arroyo Azul/Rio Hondo with Belize. The topography of the region alone makes complete control of cross-border traffic an impossible task. To complicate matters further, there are a number of small urban centers at the border, with uncontrolled border crossings existing right beside the formal border management facilities.

Indeed the number of formal crossing points that exist along the border is dwarfed by informal crossings. Many of these are crucial for local commerce and support the local economy. One of the most important observations from recent Wilson Center tours of Mexico´s southern border is that official strategies to contain illegal flows need to take into consideration the needs of the local community, so as to not interrupt these economies and trade. In addition to protecting the livelihoods of local families, this is important for two further reasons. First, local communities have a history of protesting projects that damage their interests, and this can force governments to back down. There are stories of this on both sides of the border, in a number of cases. Second, securing the cooperation of the local community is crucial to the effective gathering of intelligence about illicit flows and routes in the vicinity. In these cases, a military or police presence to deter the trafficking of weapons, arms

and people is preferable, as most of the traffic is back and forth, a perfectly natural phenomenon for neighboring communities.

The case of Ciudad Hidalgo-Tecun Uman is illustrative. The presence of both an official border crossing on the Mexican side and multiple informal crossings allows those who wish to cross formally into Mexico to do so, while those who prefer to circumvent Mexican authorities face few barriers. After the devastation of Hurricane Stan in 2005, Mexico's national water commission, CONAGUA, built strong and high levees on the Mexican side of the Rio Suchiate in the Ciudad Hidalgo area. Although appreciative of the protection against the devastation of future natural disasters, the local community protested that their access to the river and its informal crossings had been impeded. In response, the CONAGUA built a pedestrian and small, light vehicle pathway over the levee, so that the informal commerce could continue. This was a story that was repeated several times during the Wilson Center tours of the border regions: if local community concerns are not heeded, then authorities have come to expect that protests and blockades of official crossings and border installations will result.

Furthermore, it is crucial to recognize that Mexico's attempts to begin to assert some control over its southern border are still at a preliminary stage. Although impressive progress has been made over the past few years, the *Program Frontera Sur* is very much a work in progress, and we should not expect it to provide a comprehensive solution to undocumented migration nor flows of illicit goods. However, the work undertaken thus far has delivered significant results, and it is at last possible to talk about meaningful action taking place on North America's southern border.

Mexico eyes its southern border

Until very recently, Mexico's border with Guatemala and Belize was poorly marked, with inadequate attention paid to demarcating the exact border. However, in recent years, the Mexico-Guatemala *Comision Internacional de Limites Y Aguas* (CILA or International Boundary and Waters Commission) has made an impressive effort dedicating resources to tracing and marking the border, building and maintaining border monuments that definitively show the limit of Mexican territory. It is vital to emphasize the central role played by the CILA: not only is it the government agency that handles most of the day-to-day border management in the south, it is a vitally important repository of on-the-ground knowledge and understanding.

In 2013, the CILA carried out an impressive survey of Mexico's southern border that represents the best effort to date at recording both formal and informal border crossings. The survey identified eight formal border crossings with Guatemala, as well as fifty-seven informal crossing points; with Belize, it noted two formal crossings, and one informal (near the Mexican town of La Union). This latter figure is likely inaccurate; the border between the two countries is 288 kilometers in length, and the only formal crossings are near the Mexican city of Chetumal and the Belize city of Corozal at the extreme east of the border. Although the rest of the

border region is sparsely populated, it is likely that there are other informal crossing points that have not been identified to date.

The 2013 CILA survey also gave an estimate of the daily traffic crossing the border at the formal crossing points. Although these figures are based on the best guesses of border personnel, rather than a scientific study, they offer a useful estimate of infrastructure and staffing needs at the official border points. Furthermore, the survey recorded each of the Mexican government agencies that are represented at each official crossing, along with their current staffing levels. Most importantly, the survey identified the most important challenges and problems at each of the formal crossings, on both sides of the border. It is hoped that this survey is taken into consideration when future investment decisions are made.

The *Programa Frontera Sur* focuses on five different goals to be able to assert greater control over the southern border region. These goals are:

- Regular and Ordered Migration
- Improvements in Infrastructure, for border security and migration
- Protecting Migrants
- Regional Shared Responsibility
- Interagency Coordination

The recent Wilson Center tours of the southern border have verified that there has been significant progress in each of these areas, and the result has been a much higher visibility of Mexican government agencies throughout the south.

New efforts to control migration

As part of the PFS, the Mexican migration authorities have been implementing a number of new initiatives to try to impose some order on the transmigration phenomenon. First, two new visas have been issued for Guatemalan and Belizean citizens who wish to visit Mexico. The *Tarjeta de Visitante Regional* (TVR or Regional Visitor Card) allows visitors to cross into border municipalities with an unlimited number of entries, each of which is limited to a 72 hour period and is valid for up to 5 years. Since 2014, this visa has been free of charge (prior to this it cost 295 pesos). For those people who wish to work in the border region, the government issues a *Tarjeta de Visitante Trabajador Fronterizo* (TVTF or Border Worker Visitor Card) which costs 305 pesos. In 2015 thus far, almost 80,000 people were granted the TVR visa, and around 11,000 TVTF visas. The PFS mandated simpler application procedures and new offices for issuing the permits. These permits allow those who wish to cross formally into Mexico to do so in an entirely legal way. More importantly, the regional visa system is an attempt to formalize what had hitherto been a largely unsupervised phenomenon. They do not, however, address the issue of those who are crossing Mexico to get to the United States.

Table 1: Regional Visitor Permits (TVR) issued in 2015 by state and place of issue

País de residencia/ Entidad federativa/ Punto de expedición	Enero	Febrero	Marzo	Abril	Mayo	Junio	Julio	Agosto	Total
Total general	**9 110**	**9 420**	**12 832**	**9 133**	**9 334**	**11 220**	**10 149**	**8 552**	**79 750**
Total Guatemala	**8 808**	**9 238**	**12 599**	**8 943**	**9 084**	**10 994**	**9 930**	**8 345**	**77 941**
Chiapas	**8 177**	**8 717**	**11 915**	**8 445**	**8 580**	**10 313**	**9 408**	**7 807**	**73 362**
Carmen Xhan	435	637	696	597	589	635	446	773	**4 808**
Ciudad Cuauhtémoc	1 499	1 283	1 663	1 558	1 601	1 550	1 828	1 550	**12 532**
Ciudad Hidalgo	2 597	2 818	3 961	2 686	2 701	3 483	2 713	2 421	**23 380**
Talismán	3 159	3 541	5 136	3 241	3 430	4 207	4 161	2 997	**29 872**
Unión Juárez [2/]	487	438	459	363	259	438	260	66	**2 770**
Tabasco	**631**	**521**	**684**	**498**	**504**	**681**	**522**	**538**	**4 579**
El Ceibo	631	521	684	498	504	681	522	538	**4 579**
Total Belice	**302**	**182**	**233**	**190**	**250**	**226**	**219**	**207**	**1 809**
Quintana Roo	**302**	**182**	**233**	**190**	**250**	**226**	**219**	**207**	**1 809**
Chetumal, Subteniente López	302	182	233	190	250	226	219	207	**1 809**

Table 2: Visiting Border Worker Program (TVTF) permits issued 2015 by state and place of issue

País de residencia/ Entidad federativa / Punto de expedición	Enero	Febrero	Marzo	Abril	Mayo	Junio	Julio	Agosto	Total
Total general [2/]	**2 352**	**1 339**	**1 358**	**1 332**	**1 323**	**1 392**	**973**	**773**	**10 842**
Total Guatemala	**2 349**	**1 339**	**1 357**	**1 332**	**1 323**	**1 392**	**973**	**771**	**10 836**
Chiapas	**2 345**	**1 336**	**1 355**	**1 331**	**1 308**	**1 392**	**969**	**769**	**10 805**
Carmen Xhan	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	**-**
Ciudad Cuauhtémoc	462	117	86	198	184	166	204	118	**1 535**
Ciudad Hidalgo	1 034	947	1 092	734	762	807	535	411	**6 322**
Talismán	849	272	177	399	362	419	230	240	**2 948**
Unión Juárez	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	**-**
Tabasco	**4**	**3**	**2**	**1**	**15**	**-**	**4**	**2**	**31**
El Ceibo	4	3	2	1	15	-	4	2	**31**
Total Belice	**3**	**-**	**1**	**-**	**-**	**-**	**-**	**2**	**6**
Quintana Roo	**3**	**-**	**1**	**-**	**-**	**-**	**-**	**2**	**6**
Chetumal, Subteniente López	3	-	1	-	-	-	-	2	**6**

The Mexican government's attempts to address transmigration have focused on building new infrastructure, both at the border itself and at inland locations. Under the PFS, the ten border crossings are being enhanced, and five *Centros de Atención Integral al Tránsito Fronterizo* (Comprehensive Border Crossing Attention Centers), are being built at remote locations, on major routes northward. These new, multimodal, interagency facilities are impressive, with multiple government agencies working side by side. At each facility Mexican customs, immigration, health, agriculture, police and military agencies are represented.

In addition to border-control infrastructure, Mexico has also undertaken the construction of new migrant holding centers (*estaciones migratorias*) where migrants who have been detained in Mexican territory can be processed for

"assisted return" or deportation. The difference between these two categories in Mexico is a legal matter. Migrants are only deported if they have broken Mexican laws, whereas migrants who lack the proper papers are repatriated with the help of Mexican government agencies. The speed of this varies enormously, and much depends on the cooperation of the consuls from Central American states to expedite the process.

Table 3: Central American returns (Belize, Costa Rica, El Salvador, Guatemala, Honduras, Nicaragua, Panamá) 2015 Jan-Aug

Deportations	Assisted Returns
780	88636

Source: Government of Mexico, Boletin Mensual de Estadisticas Migratorias 2015, INM

Table 4: Number and percentages of deportations and assisted returns by country of origin 2015 Jan-Aug

Country	Number of deportations	Percentage	Assisted Returns	Percentage
Belice	12	1.54%	19	0.02%
Costa Rica	3	0.38%	1	0.00%
El Salvador	119	15.26%	16996	19.18%
Guatemala	473	60.64%	39851	44.96%
Honduras	171	21.92%	30883	34.84%
Nicaragua	2	0.26%	884	1%
Panama	0	0.00%	2	0.00%
Total	780	100.00%	88636	100.00%

Source: Government of Mexico, Boletin Mensual de Estadisticas Migratorias 2015, INM

Despite many complaints and some damning reports from civil society groups about the conditions and treatment of migrants in these centers, a Wilson Center research group was favorably impressed by a tour of the *Estacion Migratoria Siglo XXI* in March of 2015. However, on a later visit to a smaller processing center at La Trinitaria, Chiapas, there appeared to be a brazen disregard for migrant rights where registration forms were pre-filled before being given to the migrants, including the section of the form that asks whether the individual is requesting refugee status.

Naturally, migrants have learned quickly about the location of these centers, and alternate routes have been identified to circumvent them. Often, these other routes are well known to the authorities, and Mexico is investing in mobile checkpoints that can cover some, but not all, of the alternative paths. As is the case with migration around the world, shutting off one route simply pushes migrants to take different, often more difficult and dangerous paths though southern Mexico.

During our research, we asked both authorities and civil society groups about the unaccompanied minors phenomenon. We were told that the dramatic rise in numbers last year was not being repeated in 2015, but that there are still significant numbers moving northwards.

Table 5: Number of Unaccompanied Central American Minors,2015 Jan-Aug

Country	January	February	March	April	May	June	July	August	Total
Belize	0	0	0	0	0	1	0	0	1
El Salvador	94	155	189	195	263	243	299	308	1746
Guatemala	471	600	629	631	726	751	803	748	5359
Honduras	181	251	321	285	337	351	377	315	2418
Nicaragua	0	3	0	1	2	1	2	1	10
Panama	0	1	1	0	0	0	0	0	2
Total	746	1010	1140	1112	1328	1347	1481	1372	9536

Source: Government of Mexico, Boletin Mensual de Estadisticas Migratorias 2015, INM

The advances that have been made in Mexican border infrastructure are especially impressive when compared with the relative lack of order on the Guatemalan side. At all of the formal crossings between Mexico and Guatemala, the Mexican government is investing heavily in developing border control capacity, while its Guatemalan counterpart appears to be doing nothing to improve its own measures.

The investment in infrastructure and procedures on the part of the Mexican government is indeed impressive, and can be understood both as an attempt to gain control of illicit and licit flows of goods and people north from Central America, as well as a clear effort to deter illicit flows by raising the costs of transportation of drugs and weapons. There is also clearly an effort to diminish the flows of undocumented migrants, and the existence of more, and better-equipped migration stations and offices is surely pushing migrants crossing from Central America to find other routes.

In the case of Guatemala, the Mexican government appears to have placed a heavy bet on its counterpart following through on commitments to complete border infrastructure projects, with little evidence that those commitments will be honored in the near future. However, in the case of Belize, the Mexican government has found a partner that has thus far cooperated ably, and there appears to be a common desire to regularize flows.

Despite this spirit of cooperation and the infrastructure and procedural achievements by the Mexican government, our journey along the border revealed that there are still major challenges to be overcome. First, the sheer number of informal crossings from both Guatemala and Belize almost beggars belief, with trails, roads, and river crossings either policed infrequently by just the military (to impede the flow of weapons and drugs) or not at all. Some informal crossings are

signposted by locals who hope to derive an income by permitting access to paths through the jungle; others are hidden away from view. These informal crossings often thwart the efforts of the Mexican government to control flows as they lead to other routes that circumvent border controls, both at the border itself and inland. In fact, we saw a number of examples where roads provided short cuts that bypassed the largest control centers on major highways. The solution clearly lies in a combination of fixed-location controls and more mobile units that can be used to deter the use of alternative routes.

Overall, the recent Wilson Center tours of Mexico's southern border observed a considerable and increasing formalization of traffic and a much more visible presence of government agencies. This involves multi-million dollar investments in infrastructure, as well as considerable planning. An important recognition is that this is an evolving situation. As Mexico invests more in border infrastructure, and also learns and adapts according to its experience and interaction with foreign governments, migrants, businesses, communities and organized crime, we will see many changes, But there is certainly a strategy in place, one that seeks to assert the authority, and more importantly, the presence, of the State along Mexico´s southern border lands. It is encouraging to see how far Mexico has come, but it is also daunting when one considers how many challenges remain, many of which are outside of Mexico's control, especially when one considers the weakness and many problems facing its southern neighbors.