Changing Landscape Prompts Mexico's Emergence as a Migration Manager

Mexico’s migration realities are changing. Once the source of the largest number of international migrants worldwide, Mexico has become a country of transit, and increasingly an immigrant destination. Tens of thousands of unaccompanied Central American children crossed Mexico en route to the United States during fiscal year (FY) 2014, bringing into sharp relief questions about Mexico’s ability to balance border enforcement and migrant protection.

Changing Landscape: Mexico as a Country of Transit and Destination

Mexico’s emigration rates have fallen steadily in recent years, dropping from 73 migrants per 10,000 people in 2007 to 29.9 in 2012. A stable Mexican economy (that contrasts with a sluggish economic recovery in the United States) coupled with the establishment of a robust middle class, changing demographics, and heightened security along the U.S.-Mexico border have slowed the rate at which Mexicans are emigrating.

Simultaneously, Mexico’s economic stability has attracted an increasing number of international migrants, mostly from the United States. Between 2005 and the first trimester of 2014, the stock of foreigners living in Mexico increased by 68 percent, reaching almost 1 million people.

Mexico has long been a country of transit for immigrants aiming to enter the United States, and the pace has quickened. In FY 2014, the number of non-Mexican migrants apprehended by the U.S. Border Patrol reached record highs, surpassing 250,000 people.

Increased transit flows are highlighted in the number of unaccompanied children from El Salvador, Guatemala, and Honduras apprehended by the U.S. Border Patrol after making the long, and often perilous, journey through Mexico. More than 51,700 of these children were intercepted by the U.S. Border Patrol in FY 2014, up from approximately 2,300 in FY 2009. The sharp rise in the number of child migrants provoked strong reactions in the
United States and throughout the region, and accentuated the need for Mexico to invest in its migration management capacities.

**Mexico Becomes More of a Migration Manager**

Mexico deployed a more aggressive immigration enforcement strategy during 2014. The government stepped up deportations of Central Americans, repatriating more than 63,000 during the first eight months of 2014, a 13 percent increase from the same period in 2013. Internal checkpoints also were opened on the main highways and migrant routes close to the Guatemalan border. Partly funded by the Merida initiative, the interior checkpoints are modeled on the San Ysidro port of entry in San Diego, California and equipped with gamma ray detectors to inspect shipping containers and carriers, infrared sensors, police dogs, customs and military personnel, and immigration agents. Mexican authorities also cracked down on migrants stowing away on freight trains known as “La Bestia,” a long-standing transit method to the U.S.-Mexico border, and stepped up immigration raids on bus stations, hotels, and restaurants.

The increased enforcement comes against a backdrop of increasing legislative and other steps to establish a migration management and humanitarian protection framework. Mexico’s Congress approved sweeping changes in 2011 to the country’s immigration system aimed at facilitating the movement of people in a more structured and organized way, respecting the human rights of migrants, and meeting labor needs. This year, Mexico’s lower house of Congress approved changes to the general migration law to strengthen enforcement against the recruitment of migrants by organized-crime organizations and to provide a clear legal framework for asylum claims. Additionally, the recently approved Law for the Rights of Boys, Girls, and Adolescents stipulates that Mexican institutions must provide appropriate psychological and medical services as well as legal and consular assistance to all migrant children. In April, President Enrique Peña Nieto underscored the importance of adapting to the changing migration landscape, announcing a Special Migration Program to consolidate immigration policies promoting human rights, regional and local development, and access to judicial remedies.

The Peña Nieto administration, which made strengthening border security a priority upon taking office in 2012, in July launched an unprecedented effort to secure Mexico’s 753-mile southern border with Guatemala and Belize. The Southern Border Program has an ambitious agenda, designed to promote orderly border crossings and ease legal temporary migration from neighboring countries. The program relaxes requirements for citizens of Guatemala and Belize to obtain regional visitors’ cards allowing a temporary 72-hour stay in the border states of Campeche, Chiapas, Quintana Roo, and Tabasco. As of October 10, more than 88,000 cards had been issued in Mexico and Guatemala. The plan allocates more resources to surveillance along migrant routes, with special emphasis on stopping people from traveling on freight trains, and on strengthening intelligence work to dismantle criminal groups profiting from human smuggling and trafficking. It also aims to better protect migrants’ rights by operating five medical care units for migrants and establishing facilities for the care of unaccompanied migrant children in collaboration with civil-society organizations. In addition, the program increases bilateral and regional collaboration with sending countries by leading efforts that address regional migration challenges, and opening more Central American consulates in Mexico. Lastly, it creates a new unit within
the Ministry of the Interior to seek to improve coordination among state agencies that manage migration throughout Mexico. While it is too early to assess the long-term impacts of these policies on transmigration flows, most of the program’s elements have been implemented and appear in the 2015 Interior Ministry budget.

Mexico’s Migration Future: A Challenging Balance

Mexico has an opportunity to change the bilateral agenda with the United States and become a strong regional partner with strengthened capacity to put order to its migration flows. Mexico also is maintaining strong relationships with its southern neighbors through initiatives such as the Agreement on Binational Cooperation for Migrant Workers recently signed with Guatemala, which protects and extends benefits to Guatemalan workers in Mexico, and the organization of regional fora like the Regional Conference on Migration, scheduled to take place in Mexico in 2015.

Mexico’s new role brings risks and responsibilities. Increased enforcement capability risks increased abuse of migrants’ human rights in institutions where corruption is high and the rule of law continues to be weak. Between January and July 2014, Mexico’s National Human Rights Commission (CNDH) recorded 268 complaints filed against the National Migration Institute for violations of human rights at migrant detention centers. And civil-society organizations have decried the lack of enforcement of migrant protection laws.

Mexico’s challenge is to consolidate its role as an effective migration manager. The Mexican government will need to strike a balance between border security and migrant protection as well as between strengthening its security collaboration with the United States and helping its Central American neighbors alleviate the root causes of migration and reintegrate large numbers of repatriated migrants. In the long run, Mexico’s success in migration management will depend on its ability to reconcile the tension of enforcement and protection.

Features

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Sources
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