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The American continent on the move: the yearning for a better life

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Abstract:

In the last two years, the American continent has faced an unprecedented migration crisis, both in terms of volume, the characteristics of those on the move and the number of countries they travel through. In 2021, record numbers were reached, with an estimated 84 million people leaving their countries in the hope of improving their life expectancy.

The change in migratory trends is mainly related to social, economic, political and environmental aspects that have an impact on sending and receiving countries, all combined with the incidence of the Covid-19 pandemic, making it a similar scenario to that faced by Africans or Syrians in Europe or in recent months by Ukrainians.

Key words:

Migration, refugees, immigrants, violence, borders, conflicts, American continent, Latin America, Biden

***NOTE:** The ideas contained in the *Analysis Papers* are the responsibility of their authors. They do not necessarily reflect the thinking of the IEEE or the Ministry of Defence.

Resumen:

El continente americano ha enfrentado en los dos últimos años una crisis migratoria sin precedentes, tanto por el volumen, por las características de los que se desplazan y por la cantidad de países que recorren. En 2021 se alcanzaron unas cifras jamás conocidas, estimándose que 84 millones de personas salieron de sus países con la esperanza de mejorar sus expectativas de vida.

El cambio de tendencias migratorias se relaciona principalmente con aspectos sociales, económicos, políticos y medioambientales que impactan en los países emisores y receptores, todo ello combinado con la incidencia de la pandemia de Covid-19, convirtiéndose en un escenario similar al que tienen africanos o sirios en Europa o en los últimos meses los ucranianos.

Palabras clave:

Migración, refugiados, inmigrantes, violencia, fronteras, conflictos, continente americano, Latinoamérica, Biden

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Introduction:

The territorial displacement of human beings has been a constant in the history of societies and is of great importance if we want to understand today's globalised world in continuous transformation, becoming one of the geopolitical phenomena of our time. In the case of Latin America, these migrations have been inextricably linked to its progress and evolution.

Without going back to the first moments of the conquest, where migration was a constant associated with the colonisation of the new territories and was maintained on a regular basis, from the end of the 19th century and during the first third of the 20th century, the South American continent became a prominent region where Europeans, Chinese and Japanese arrived in this part of the world fleeing economic depression, European wars or religious persecution, in short, millions of people arrived in search of a better future. However, this migratory trend was reversed from the 1960s onwards, and it was these former receiving countries that became the place of origin of emigrants, with this trend increasing especially from the new millennium onwards.

Although for years Latin Americans have been migrating northwards or to Europe, in recent years a large number of people have left some of these countries, such as Haiti, Nicaragua or Venezuela, for other countries in the same region. Migration patterns have changed considerably. This is the case of those who, lacking resources in their countries of origin, are forced to make short journeys to neighbouring countries. Thus, by simply crossing a border, they can radically change their living conditions.

Today, however, it is no longer just people who are relocated in the neighbouring country; today we find thousands of them crossing the continent from south to north along unknown roads and settling in nations that neither know nor have the tools to respond to this flood of migrants and refugees.

What is going on?

The migration scenario in Latin America and the Caribbean has changed dramatically over the last decade. Not only people crossing deserts, jungles, dangerous places at the risk of dying in the attempt. Entire families moving to other countries in the hope of finding a better life.

Although the region has always experienced movements across its borders, the current circumstances reach an extraordinary magnitude, given the number of migrants, the

multiplicity of their origins and the number of countries they travel through to reach their final destination.

This change is reflected in some very impressive growth figures when compared to the rest of the migrations that have taken place in recent years from the Middle East to Europe.

A study conducted last September by the Inter-American Development Bank (IDB) and the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD)¹, shows that between 2015 and 2019, the number of international migrants residing in Latin American and Caribbean countries grew from an estimated 8.4 million to 12.8 million, representing an increase of more than 50%.

By mid-2020, according to the International Organization for Migration (IOM), international migrants accounted for 2.6% of the total population of South America, a significant increase from less than 1% in 2015².

This migration has ceased to be invisible and has become a scenario similar to that of Africans or Syrians in Europe or, in recent months, Ukrainians. But the big difference is that while they leave low-income countries to enter high-income ones, in the Americas the movement is mostly from one poor country to another more or less identical one, because few manage to reach the borders of the United States or Canada. In the last two years, not even COVID-19 has stopped the conflicts, insecurity and most of the reasons that force these people to leave their place of origin, not even the pandemic affected the migratory phenomenon in the region, although daily life was disrupted in all areas.

Nearly 80% of them originated elsewhere in South America and many are now on the move because of increasingly rigid restrictions on immigration in several countries, and because the pandemic has worsened already difficult living conditions and jobs have become scarce.

The South American continent has experienced an unparalleled migration crisis in 2021, both in terms of the volume of people, their diversity of nationalities and the number of borders they have to cross to reach their final destination.

¹ Inter-American Development Bank and the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development. *Migration Flows in Latin America and the Caribbean: Statistics on Permits for Migrants* September 2021. [accessed 20 November 2021] Available at: <https://publications.iadb.org/es/flujos-migratorios-en-america-latina-y-el-caribe-estadisticas-de-permisos-para-los-migrantes>

² IOM. *World Migration Report 2020* [Online]. Geneva: International Organization for Migration, 2020 [accessed 10 November 2021] Available at: https://publications.iom.int/system/files/pdf/wmr_2020_es.pdf

These migration trends are mainly related to social, economic, political and environmental changes that impact on migrant-receiving and migrant-sending regions. All this combined with the impact of the Covid-19 pandemic, which is much more alarming in Latin America than in other parts of the world.

The region is changing its migration profile, especially with the unparalleled surge of displaced persons in 2021 that has produced an unprecedented crisis.

In addition to this, there are migratory flows with a vocation for permanence, which impose new challenges and demands on the countries of transit and destination in terms of their capacity to adapt in order to offer a response, not only in terms of care and humanitarian assistance, but also in terms of integration processes.

For some, the world has not understood the dimensions, causes or impact of intra-regional migration in Latin America, making it a major challenge for the region's governments.

Why abandon one's roots for an uncertain future

Although the causes of migration may vary from country to country of origin and no single cause drives migration, **economic factors** increasingly come into play, given that we are in the region of the world with the greatest inequalities in the distribution of wealth.

The economic recession and job destruction, which has been ongoing since 2014, has pushed thousands of people to leave their places of origin in search of economic opportunities in other countries. Especially in 2020, when the biggest economic slump in the last 120 years took place, with a 7.7% reduction in GDP, according to the Economic Commission for Latin America and the Caribbean (ECLAC) ³ and a 7% increase in poverty. This means that 4 out of 10 Latin Americans were left vulnerable.

In addition, this year, inflation resulting from the Russian invasion of Ukraine has reduced growth on the South American continent by 1.8%.⁴

In much of Latin America, most jobs are in the informal sector, with low wages, precarious employment and an almost complete absence of social protection. This vast labour pool

³ ECLAC. *Preliminary Overview of the Economies of Latin America and the Caribbean*. 2020. [accessed 10 March 2022]. Available at: https://repositorio.cepal.org/bitstream/handle/11362/46501/1/S2000990_es.pdf

⁴ CEPAL. *Repercussions in Latin America and the Caribbean of the war in Ukraine: how should the region face this new crisis?* 6 June 2022. [Online] [accessed: 7 June 2022. Available at: https://www.cepal.org/sites/default/files/presentation/files/220603_ppt_pb_ucrania_version_3.pdf

comprises more than two-thirds of the workforce and the business sector, unabated over the last 40 years, has become a chronic and systematic problem⁵.

Similarly, it can be observed that the majority of people living in poverty and extreme poverty are found in rural areas, causing a dramatic increase in rural-urban migration, which also leads to work in the informal sector.

All these issues point to the structural weaknesses of these economies, which are unable to respond to this multiple crisis.

Faced with a sense of helplessness and hopelessness about the immediate future, people prefer to risk everything and go to look for a better destination in another country because they feel that there are no economic opportunities in their own country.

Violence is another major driver of emigration. Most of the new internal displacement in Latin America and the Caribbean was due to conflict and violence: threats from guerrillas or paramilitaries in Colombia, common crime in Venezuela, gangs in Central America or drug trafficking in Mexico. Approximately one in five residents in these countries report being a victim of crime each year. And nearly one in ten Hondurans and Salvadorans report experiencing extortion annually, paying local gangs and criminal groups just to be able to live in their homes or run small businesses.

El Salvador and Colombia recorded the highest numbers of new internal displacement in Latin America and the Caribbean in 2018, mainly as a result of violence and conflict in both cases.

In El Salvador there were 246,000 new displacements related to this cause (equivalent to almost 4% of the country's population), while Colombia registered 145,000 and Mexico ranked third in the region with 11,000 new displacements⁶.

This trend has continued to rise in the following two years with 381,000 movements, mainly in Colombia due to delays in the implementation of the 2016 peace agreement between the government and non-state armed groups, and the increase in criminal violence that led to the highest number ever recorded in Haiti. Data is also available for the first time on displacement due to violence in Brazil⁷.

⁵ CENTRAL AND NORTH AMERICAN WORKING GROUP ON MIGRATION. *Economic and Environmental Drivers of Central American Migration. Interim report and recommendations.* World Refugee & Migration Council (WRMC). February 2022. [Online] [accessed: 15 March 2022]. Available at: https://wrmcouncil.org/wp-content/uploads/2022/02/NA-CA-Grupo-de-Trabajo-Impulsores-Economicos-y-Ambientales_ES.pdf

⁶ IOM. *World Migration Report 2020* Opus citatum.

⁷ IDMC. *Report on Internal Displacement.* (GRID) 2022. [accessed: 20 April 2022]. Available at: <https://www.internal-displacement.org/global-report/grid2022/>

Similarly, **political reasons**, caused by political crises or movements that often occur in some countries, are raised as reasons for immigration as people fear persecution or revenge. One of the most enlightening cases of these situations is Venezuela, which in recent years has become one of the countries with the highest number of refugee applications outside its borders due to ideological and power struggles.

Climate change is playing an increasing role among the causes of voluntary and forced displacement. The recent report of the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC)⁸, states that 42-46% of the world's population currently lives in contexts of high vulnerability to climate change. Its increasingly profound impacts are not distributed equally, but are concentrated in those sectors of society that have historically been victims of social, economic, cultural, ethnic and gender marginalisation, with Latin America being one of the areas most exposed and sensitive to this vulnerability.

Climate change is also increasingly acting as a multiplier of the root causes of conflict, given the high susceptibility of many parts of the region to changes in weather patterns and dependence on agriculture, the Northern Triangle being a case in point.

Climate hazards interact with poverty, violence, land concentration and food security in a reciprocal way, creating a vicious cycle that can lead to internal and international migration⁹.

In fact, UNHCR data show that, over the past decade, climate-related crises have caused more than twice as many displacements as conflict and violence. Since 2010, extreme weather conditions have forced an average of 21.5 million people to move each year: "Storms, cyclones, hurricanes, floods, fires and droughts force more people to flee their homes than any war"¹⁰. 95% of new displacement due to conflict in 2020 occurred in countries highly vulnerable to climate change, such as Venezuela.

The Central American Dry Corridor¹¹ is one of the most obvious examples where, along with other causes, migration could be directly attributed to environmental factors as since

⁸ *Climate Change 2022: Impacts, Adaptation and Vulnerability*. [accessed 10 April 2022]. Available at: <https://www.ipcc.ch/report/sixth-assessment-report-working-group-ii/>

⁹ IOM. Human Mobility, Natural Disasters and Climate Change in Central America. Geneva: International Organization for Migration, 2021 [accessed 15 January 2022] Available at: <https://publications.iom.int/es/node/2706#:~:text=La%20Movilidad%20Humana%20Derivada%20de%20Desastres%20y%20el,acad%C3%A9micos%20y%20en%20la%20agenda%20de%20cooperaci%C3%B3n%20internacional.>

¹⁰ UNHCR. *Emergencia climática*. [accessed: 28 February 2022] Available at: <https://eacnur.org/es/labor/emergencias/emergencia-climatica>

¹¹ It is an area 1,600 kilometres long and 100 to 400 kilometres wide that runs parallel to the Pacific coast from Chiapas (Mexico) to western Panama, leaving arid lands also in Guatemala, El Salvador, Honduras, Nicaragua and part of Costa Rica.

1960 there has been an increase in the frequency and regularity of extreme events, increasing poverty in the area and where meteorological droughts are expected to increase throughout this century¹².

The devastating hurricanes Eta and Iota that hit Central America in November 2020 contributed greatly to the deterioration of already vulnerable populations in Nicaragua, Guatemala and Honduras, as did the earthquake and tropical storm Grace in Haiti.

This is why we could consider disasters as one of the main triggers of internal displacement in the region in 2021, accounting for almost 1.7 million, more than half of which were the result of storms and floods. The region was also significantly affected by forest fires and geophysical hazards.

The availability and accessibility of data varies significantly between countries as smaller-scale disasters tend to go unrecorded, but should not be ignored given their impacts on local communities, particularly in Latin America and the Caribbean.

The World Bank estimates that Mexico and Central America will have 3.9 million internal climate migrants by 2050, representing 1.19% of the region's population¹³.

The **coronavirus pandemic** has further complicated the conflict landscape in Latin America, exacerbating inequality and poverty, eroding the already limited effectiveness of government and the rule of law, and boosting the power, reach and legitimacy of criminal groups with local populations.

From a migration perspective, **COVID-19** came at a time already characterised by involuntary migration and increasing intra-regional movements. This situation has been marked by increased emigration from Venezuela, a new migration route from Haiti to South America, and various vulnerabilities associated with the route through Central America, Mexico and the United States¹⁴.

The socio-economic impact it has had on refugees and migrants, leaving them without jobs or resources to survive, has been devastating, thus intensifying social inequalities in an already weak and unprotected population.

¹² DEPSKY, N. and PONS, D. *Meteorological droughts are projected to worsen in Central America's dry corridor throughout the 21st century*, in: Environmental Research Letters, Vol. 16, Num. 1. December, 2020. [accessed: 6 April 2022] Available at: <https://iopscience.iop.org/article/10.1088/1748-9326/abc5e2>

¹³ IOM. Human Mobility, Natural Disasters and Climate Change in Central America. Opus citatum.

¹⁴ ECLAC. *The impact of COVID-19: An opportunity to reaffirm the central role of migrants' human rights in sustainable development* November, 2020. https://repositorio.cepal.org/bitstream/handle/11362/46353/4/S2000618_es.pdf

The most immediate and visible effects of the pandemic on migration have been in countries of transit and destination alike, such as the closure of many businesses, layoffs and thus loss of purchasing power.

However, the prolonged lockdowns imposed around the world hurt all workers, but those in developing countries were, again, extraordinarily hard hit. Richer countries cushioned the blow by increasing financial supports for formal and informal workers, while in low-income countries these supports decreased between 2020 and 2021¹⁵.

Although such movements of people is not a new phenomenon in this region, the combination of all these causes has now created an unprecedented phenomenon in which it is no longer a question of seeking a better life, but a question of survival.

Migratory flows and the risks they entail

As we have been examining, Latin America and the Caribbean are experiencing substantial changes in their migration patterns. The scenario has become more complicated in the last five years with increasing inter-regional movements, moving from being a predominantly migrant-sending region to one where internal flows within the region are prominent.

One of the main movements has been the outflow of Venezuelan migrants and refugees, the vast majority of them emigrating to other countries on the continent, mainly Colombia, Peru, Ecuador and Chile.

The crisis in Venezuela has been the determining factor in inter-regional migration over the last five years. Since Nicolás Maduro took power almost a decade ago, political turmoil, hunger, violence and the constant violation of human rights have led the country to disaster.

At first, Venezuelan migration began with highly qualified professionals, who had the means to travel and settle in other countries without many problems. Most of those who left the country did so to study, had high professional qualifications and in many cases a life plan outside Venezuela. They came to be called "balseros del aire" (rafters of the air) because they migrated by plane and with some comforts. It was only later that poor working-class people were increasingly included, and it was then that, because of the

¹⁵ UNITED NATIONS. UN News. *La falta de equidad en la distribución de las vacunas contra el COVID-19 incrementa las desigualdades.* [Online] [accessed: 30 March 2022] Available at: <https://news.un.org/es/story/2022/03/1506362>

high costs of travelling to Europe or the United States, Venezuelans opted for Latin American destinations, especially from 2014 onwards.

It is estimated that almost 6 million people moved to other countries in the region¹⁶ and more than 1.75 million permits were issued to Venezuelan citizens. This phenomenon has drastically affected not only the migration statistics of destination countries, but also their migration systems and related policy frameworks, as new types of residence permits and new procedures were created to integrate these huge numbers of migrants into the formal economies and societies concerned.

Some experts believe that the volume of this migration is comparable to the Syrian refugee crisis, as stated by the United Nations High Commissioner's Office for Refugees, Filippo Grandi.

Residence permits granted to Venezuelans in Latin American countries

Destination	2015	2016	2017	2018	2019	Total
Argentina	5,803	12,865	31,173	70,545	65,094	185,480
Barbados	49	23	115	42	27	256
Bolivia	499	837	1,167	1,899	2,259	6,661
Brazil	877	869	6,894	32,494	90,194	131,328
Chile	9,730	26,625	85,259	173,825	192,996	488,435
Colombia	10,662	14,884	86,981	498,704	60,094	671,325
Costa Rica	990	949	1,200	1,094	1,060	5,293
Ecuador	8,682	12,336	23,229	43,028	55,108	142,383
El Salvador	48	63	110	158	101	480
Mexico	6,531	7,854	12,258	17,533	16,074	60,250
Panama	6,501	4,881	17,799	24,923	21,450	75,554
Paraguay	34	92	182	219	499	1,026
Peru	635	3,543	51,649	286,393	90,351	432,571
Suriname	6	6	17	55	29	113
Uruguay	43	79	166	49	38	375
Total	51,090	85,906	318,199	1,150,961	595,374	2,201,530

Source: Inter-American Development Bank DataMig database

¹⁶ IDB and OECD. *Migration Flows in Latin America and the Caribbean: Statistics on Permits for Migrants*. 2021. [Online] [accessed: 20 December 2021] Available at: <https://blogs.iadb.org/migracion/es/una-region-en-movimiento-nuevos-flujos-migratorios-en-america-latina-y-el-caribe/>

In the table above we can see the residence permits granted to this population, although hundreds of thousands of Venezuelans continue without any kind of documentation or permission to stay regularly in nearby countries, which makes them more vulnerable to all kinds of abuse¹⁷.

Another notable influx is from Haiti, one of the poorest countries in the Americas. Last year Haiti suffered the assassination of President Jovenel Moïse, a devastating earthquake and the passage of tropical storm Grace, creating uncertainty in a country where poverty and violence persist. According to the UN, as of mid-2020, there were 1,769,671 Haitians in other countries, one-fifth of the Haitian population, ranking third among countries of origin of refugees in the Americas¹⁸. The main destinations for Haitians have been visa-free countries, the neighbouring Dominican Republic, where an estimated half a million Haitians live, and also Brazil and Chile, where an estimated 230,000 are currently settled in the Andean country. However, the difficulties they encountered in these countries due to the lack of employment, the crisis generated in Latin America by the pandemic, as well as a worsening of inequality indices in the region and the obstacles they had to overcome to obtain legal status, have led Haitians to look again towards the United States, with Brazil and Chile becoming transit countries¹⁹. Large numbers are moving from the Northern Triangle of Central America to Mexico and the United States, and from Nicaragua to Costa Rica.

At the same time in migration from the Caribbean, in recent years there has been an increase in people from the Dominican Republic and Cuba. According to the IOM data portal, some of them transit from Colombia to Panama through the Darién Gap en route to the US and Canada²⁰.

Another main flow is from the northern Central American countries, mainly Guatemala, Honduras and El Salvador to the US-Mexico border, according to a report by the United Nations World Food Programme (WFP)²¹, the desire of Central Americans to migrate to

¹⁷ Ibid.

¹⁸ IOM. *World Migration Report 2020* [accessed: 12 January 2022] Available at: https://publications.iom.int/system/files/pdf/wmr_2020_es.pdf

¹⁹ DE LOS REYES RAMÍREZ, Rocío. Haiti, the country nobody cares about. Analysis Paper IEEE 47/2021.

https://www.ieee.es/Galerias/fichero/docs_analisis/2021/DIEEEA47_2021_ROCREY_Haiti.pdf

²⁰ <https://www.migrationdataportal.org/es>

²¹ WFP. <https://onu.org.gt/onu-en-guatemala/agencias/programa-mundial-de-alimentos/>

another country, especially to the United States, increased fivefold in 2021 compared to the previous two years.

There has also been an increase in the movement of citizens from South American countries, including Ecuador, Brazil and Venezuela, to the US-Mexico border as a result of the economic impact of the pandemic, and in recent months the number of Nicaraguan refugees and asylum seekers in Costa Rica has doubled, surpassing the number in 1980 with the Central American civil wars²².

Mexico has become a destination country as well as a transit nation to the United States, with more than 116,000 asylum applications in 2021. As Mexican migration to the United States slowed and more Mexican migrants returned home, both voluntary and involuntary irregular migration from Central America increased rapidly²³.



Source: The Vision

In early December, UNHCR called for the creation of a mechanism to coordinate the displacement of people in Mexico and Central America.

²² UN. UN News (*/es/*) UNHCR: *El número de refugiados nicaragüenses en Costa Rica se ha duplicado en los últimos meses.* [Online] [accessed: 30 March 2021] Available at: <https://news.un.org/es/story/2022/03/1506222>

²³ SELEE, Andrew et al. *Laying the Foundation for Regional Cooperation: Migration Policy & Institutional Capacity in Mexico and Central America* Migration Policy Institute, April 2021. https://www.migrationpolicy.org/sites/default/files/publications/mpi-latam_foundation-regional-cooperation_esp-final.pdf

But these cross-border journeys pose major obstacles for migrants, who, when unable to cross the border at legal crossings, use illegal border routes known as "trochas", often risking their lives.

The corridor from Mexico to the US is considered the hottest migration hotspot on the continent and also quite dangerous, the southern states of Mexico are important transit areas for irregular migrants, mostly from Central America, such as El Salvador, Guatemala and Honduras. The most dangerous parts are those through the states of Veracruz and Tamaulipas, controlled by the Zetas cartel, where migrants face all kinds of mistreatment, extortion, threats, kidnapping and physical or sexual abuse.

In a particularly significant development, on 9 December, at least 55 people were killed in Chiapas in a truck that crashed with 160 migrants crammed into two containers. Survivors from Guatemala, Honduras, Ecuador and the Dominican Republic were reported to have paid up to 3,500 dollars just to get to Puebla, making it the deadliest migrant tragedy in Mexico in recent years.

Some use the dreaded death train they call 'La bestia' (The beast), a goods train that travels thousands of kilometres from southern Mexico to the US border. Every year thousands of undocumented migrants board this train as stowaways, most of the time on the move to evade the police, travelling on the roof of the carriages, exposing themselves to the danger of a moving train and the inclement weather. In some cases the risk is increased by the threat of criminal organisations dedicated to robbing and kidnapping passengers in order to extort money from their families.

These migrants are the most defenceless, those who cannot afford a means of transport or a "coyote". According to the UNDP, in the last five years more than half of Central American migrants, 55%, reportedly hired a smuggler or "coyote" at an average cost of \$7,500 per person, almost a quarter travelled irregularly on their own or in a caravan and only a fifth travelled through regular channels, with an estimated \$2 billion spent on irregular movements²⁴.

Faced with the growing flow of migrants from Central America, López Obrador's government has continued with a policy of containment, detention and militarisation of

²⁴ United Nations World Food Programme. *Report: To stop the increase in migration from Central America, its root causes and immediate needs must be addressed.* Migration Policy Institute, Civic Data Lab Massachusetts and UNDP. [Online] [accessed: 27 November 2021] Available at: <https://es.wfp.org/noticias/informe-para-detener-el-aumento-de-la-migracion-desde-centroamerica-se-deben-abordar-sus>

the southern border, so much so that 2021 was the year with the highest number of arrests of undocumented migrants since records began²⁵.

In October, Mexico reached a new all-time high in asylum applications with more than 100,000, according to figures from the Comisión Mexicana de Ayuda al Refugiado (Mexican Commission for Refugee Aid)(Comar)²⁶. In the first ten months of the year, the number of applications tripled compared to the same period in 2020 when nearly 41,000 applications were registered.

The Darién Gap, the natural border that separates Panama from Colombia, between the town of Necoclí and the village of Bajo Chiquito, is the gateway to Central America, almost the final stretch to the North, and at the same time, the deadliest point on the continent: it is considered one of the most dangerous routes in the world due to the jungle climate and the presence of armed groups. More than half of the 4,700 people who crossed into Panama through the Darién in January were Venezuelan, according to Panamanian government figures in a report by the UN Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs²⁷. Already in the first months of 2021, 100,000 migrants had passed this way irregularly, tripling the previous record of 30,000 in 2016.



Source: euronews

²⁵ Report of the Ignacio Ellacuría Human Rights Institute. S.J. and the Department of Social Sciences of the Universidad Iberoamericana de Puebla. January 2022. Available at: <https://repo.iberopuebla.mx/pdf/2022/informeIDHIE.pdf>

²⁶ COMAR. Government of Mexico. <https://www.gob.mx/comar>

²⁷ Latin America & the Caribbean Weekly Situation (31 January - 6 February 2022) at 7 February 2022. OCHA. <https://reliefweb.int/report/panama/latinoam-rica-el-caribe-resumen-de-situacion-semanal-31-de-enero-6-de-febrero-2022-a1>

Much further south, the vast Atacama Desert is the last hurdle for migrants who want to settle in Chile. They enter through irregular routes without taking into account the complicated geography, such as the town of Colchane, located a few kilometres from the Bolivian border, with an altitude of 3600 m. and extreme temperatures almost all year round.

And here came Biden...

Although dozens of countries have signed up to the **Global Compact for Migration**, which addresses all aspects of international migration, including humanitarian, development, human rights and aims to improve comprehensive international coordination and cooperation on migrants and human mobility²⁸, unfortunately very few have committed to objective eight of saving people's lives.

Following Donald Trump's administration, with its heavy-handed policy against migration, the change of administration generated expectations among migrants by taking a stand against some of his predecessor's most restrictive migration policies, such as halting the wall on the border with Mexico, protecting the status of undocumented youth who arrived without papers in the United States as children, and suspending the order forcing asylum seekers to remain in Mexico. This encouraged the arrival of undocumented migrants at the US border in unprecedented numbers, more than the previous three years, in the hope that the new government would be more sensitive to their needs.

But Biden has maintained the foreign entry restriction that Trump activated, the so-called Title 42²⁹, at the start of the SARS-CoV-2 pandemic. Although the aim was to stop the spread of the virus, it ended up destroying the right to asylum as the order allows for the immediate expulsion of those who enter the country irregularly, to Mexico if they are nationals of that country or to Central America. The others are sent on deportation flights to their place of origin or to the nations from which they set out on their journey.

Adding to the problem is that the Biden administration was forced to reinstate the controversial "Stay in Mexico" border control programme after losing a lawsuit filed in federal court by Republican states, with the approval of his counterpart, López Obrador.

²⁸ IOM. UN Migration. Global Compact for Migration. [accessed: 10 January 2022] Available at: <https://www.iom.int/es/pacto-mundial-sobre-migracion>

²⁹ A Guide to Title 42 Expulsions at the Border. American Immigration Council. <https://www.americanimmigrationcouncil.org/research/guide-title-42-expulsions-border>

This forces those seeking asylum in the US to remain on the other side of the border until the immigration authorities approve their application.

This has provoked criticism from immigrant rights advocates and some lawmakers have reproached the US president for maintaining the Trump-era pandemic policy, calling it a violation of human rights.

The only exception the White House has made has been for refugees from the war in Ukraine. Mexico has seen some 12,000 Ukrainians arrive in the country after the US government promised in late March to receive more than 100,000 Ukrainians.

The Ukrainian diaspora usually does not spend more than a week in Mexico and their applications are processed in an expedited manner to enter US territory. Preferential treatment for Ukrainians has raised tensions with groups of other nationalities, who have been waiting in Mexico for months.

The latest news suggests that the United States is on the verge of concluding an agreement with Spain to send Central American refugees to our country. This pact began to take shape on 25 May in Madrid, with the constitution of a working group that will meet periodically to study proposals and define actions by Spain and the United States with the aim of tackling irregular migratory movements from Central America³⁰.

On the occasion of the Summit of the Americas, Joe Biden hopes to conclude a regional cooperation agreement on immigration, an issue that has earned him fierce criticism from the Republican opposition.

Immigration is one of the major themes of this Summit, which opened on the 6th of this month in Los Angeles, with Mexican President López Obrador absent because the United States did not invite Cuba, Nicaragua and Venezuela due to violations of democracy and human rights.

Coinciding with this circumstance, a "caravan" of several thousand migrants, mostly Venezuelan but also Central American and Caribbean, left Tapachula on the Guatemalan border last Monday for southern Mexico with the intention of reaching the United States and thus drawing the attention of the continent's leaders to the migration problem.

³⁰ALANDETE, David. EE.UU. reconoce contactos con España para derivar refugiados centroamericanos. ABC 7-06-2022 . . [Online] https://www.abc.es/espana/abci-eeuu-reconoce-contactos-espana-para-derivar-refugiados-centroamericanos-202206071117_noticia.html

Conclusions

The extraordinary increase in migration from Latin America and the Caribbean is largely due to very specific circumstances in some countries, although the impact has been felt throughout the region, prompting the need to put migration policies on the table for inter-regional cooperation.

The migration issue has increasingly become a central regional development challenge rather than a temporary crisis. The change has been significant in the last five years, with the number of extra-regional movements dropping, which may indicate that this region is no longer attractive to migrants from other parts of the world, especially due to the impact of COVID-19 which has led to a drastic reduction in residence permits.

In contrast, inter-regional and return migration has increased in recent years, with more and more migrants choosing countries close to their places of origin. This poses a major development challenge for Latin America and the Caribbean in facilitating the integration of this influx of people, but it can ultimately be beneficial to draw on people with new and different skills to boost local economies.

COVID-19 came at a time of tremendous global change, when systems, standards and assumptions about security, politics and economics that were decades old, were already being challenged.

The spread of the pandemic forced governments to respond to contain it, disproportionately affecting the most vulnerable populations and thus migrants.

If we ask what migration and mobility systems might look like in the future, it is important to situate ourselves within broader systemic change, which is acting to shape, facilitate and hinder the responses of governments and non-state actors.

While it is still too early to determine the keys to migration in the decades ahead and the extent to which these systems have been reshaped by COVID 19, the response should be cross-sectoral but consider different territories, expanding coordination capacity between neighbouring countries, and even with non-neighbours, since as we have seen, displaced people's journeys span multiple borders across the Americas and the Caribbean. Consequently, no single country will be able to handle this situation on its own. A more effective partnership strategy will have to be devised, but above all with a focus on people.

The migration process on this continent requires action not only from international bodies and regional governments to achieve social inclusion, but also from a society committed

to providing the conditions and opportunities for which many of its citizens have had to emigrate to developed countries³¹.

This unprecedented migration has become the trigger for a new form of multilateralism in Latin America, a phenomenon that will have to push governments into a new form of cooperation and irremediably walk together.

As the world's population grows and people are increasingly on the move, migration will continue to be central to economic health, cultural vitality and politics itself.

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³¹ MORFFE PERAZA, M.A. *Migración e inclusión social en América Latina y el Caribe: Una oportunidad para reflexionar*. November 2020. In: LA NETWORK. [Online] [accessed: 24 April 2022] Available at: <https://la.network/migracion-e-inclusion-social-en-america-latina-y-el-caribe-una-oportunidad-para-reflexionar/>