

Migrant Caravan: Answers to Your Most Pressing Questions

There's a lot of fake news circulating about the caravan that started in Honduras earlier this month. And as opinions and actions fed by misinformation mount, **we're answering your most pressing questions with facts and information from human rights advocates** who accompanied the caravan in Central America and who are monitoring the events from Mexico.

How did it start?

Contrary to what some are saying, the caravan is not a left-wing conspiracy to push for “open borders.” It is not a right-wing conspiracy to hurt Democrats in the November elections. **It is is not about the United States. This is about life or death for these people.**

What **started as a small group of individuals** near the city of San Pedro Sula in Honduras posting on Facebook about their plan to leave together quickly grew as local news and social media spread the word. Soon, it became known that a group of Hondurans was leaving together, fleeing from gang violence, organized crime, government repression, and poverty. The gathering since snowballed organically, with some smaller groups still coming from El Salvador and Honduras. **There is no overall leadership and decisions are being made on an *ad hoc* basis.**

In general, **people band together in “caravans” to avoid extortion, rape, and paying thousands of dollars to traffickers known as “coyotes.”** This is particularly true for women and children, who are some of the most vulnerable along the route.

Who's in the caravan?

“You see mothers with their three kids. You see older folks with their grandchildren. You see young kids and teenagers traveling by themselves because they have no family left. You see some disabled people and some who have been targeted by the state.”
- Honduran human rights defender

Mexican organizations receiving the caravan along Mexico's southern border **emphasize** that many are families, and an estimated **one in four migrants are children**. There are also teenagers, women, LGBT persons, and elderly folks.

Men are not the plurality. However, as many photos depict, there are adolescent boys in the caravan. These **teenagers are not a threat but rather one of the most at-risk populations** because they are often fleeing forced recruitment into gangs.

Although **it began with as few as 100 individuals**, **reports** indicate it may have reached up to 7,000 at its peak. However, as some **seek asylum** in Mexico or decide the journey is too arduous to continue, **the caravan is diminishing in size.**

Why did they leave Honduras?

People joined this exodus from the country due to **violence, corruption, and poverty, as well as environmental disasters**, according to a Honduran human rights activist who took testimonies from those in the caravan.

Violence & Lack of Protection

- **Gangs and organized crime fuel violence** in Honduras, as well as in El Salvador and Guatemala. Small businesses and individuals often must pay extortion fees or face death threats. Adolescent boys are at risk of forced recruitment from gangs, and young women are at risk of sexual violence from gang members.
- **Gender-based violence** affects women and LGBTI individuals in Honduras. Thirty-two women per month were murdered in 2017, domestic violence has dramatically increased in the last decade, and killings of LGBTI leaders have escalated since the 2009 coup.
- **Journalists, social leaders, and environmental defenders face threats** and attacks from organized crime as well as government agents.
- The Honduran government is either **unable or unwilling to provide protection** to those targeted by violence—be it women denouncing domestic violence, human rights defenders facing threats, or families victimized by extortion and violence from gangs.

Repression

Violence from government security forces spiked after the **contested** presidential elections in November 2017. Since then, security forces have intimidated and silenced dissident voices, including **students, Honduran and international** journalists, and **human rights defenders**.

Poverty Exacerbated by Extortion & Corruption

The majority of Hondurans live in **poverty**, and many must pay extortion fees to gangs controlling their neighborhoods. They struggle to pay these illicit fees and **increased taxes** and still afford to live. Corruption continues and anti-corruption efforts are **stalling**, draining resources for health and other social services.

Environmental Factors

Honduras is **very vulnerable** to climate change. This year, it declared a **state of emergency** due to a drought affecting over 300,000 people, and **torrential rains** across the country left at least 13 people dead, thousands displaced, and crops damaged.

Can migrants be stopped from leaving Honduras or be detained before reaching Mexico?

Plain and simple: Absolutely not. Honduras **cannot** legally stop its citizens from leaving. No country can.

The caravan passed through Guatemala before reaching the southern border of Mexico, a typical route for migrants. **Guatemala can't legally detain migrants** because Guatemala, Honduras, El Salvador, and Nicaragua actually have **a migration agreement called the CA-4**. The agreement allows citizens of those countries to freely move between them without being stopped for papers.

Even without this agreement, the reality is that all individuals have the right to leave their country when they are fleeing persecution and seek protection elsewhere. **So, the United States shouldn't be pressuring countries to illegally block their citizens from leaving either.**

What has the Mexican government's response been to the caravan so far?

Right before the caravan reached the Mexico-Guatemala border, the outgoing President Peña Nieto said that Mexico would respect the rights of migrants and [partner](#) with the UN Agency for Refugees (UNHCR) to respond. **This is positive.** With [help](#) from UNHCR, over 1,700 migrants from the caravan were able to apply for asylum in Mexico.

On the other hand, there are reports that Mexican federal police **used excessive force** at the border and that migrants were **detained and abused in the detention center in Tapachula**. Some migrants also continue being detained in temporary shelters set up on fairgrounds in Tapachula, where NGOs aren't allowed to enter to survey their conditions. Mexican NGOs report a **steady presence of Mexican armed forces along the country's southern border**, and there have been incidents where immigration and federal police prevented migrants from moving by **blockading highways**. There are also concerns about individuals from the caravan being **deported without due process**.

Finally, the president [announced](#) the “**Estás en tu casa**” (“**You are home**”) **program** last week. It provides temporary ID papers, job permits, and access to medical care to members of the caravan if they remain in the country's southernmost states of Chiapas and Oaxaca. Individuals must also register and apply for asylum in those two states. As Mexican NGOs [point out](#), **the offer is incredibly limited**—it restricts migrants to two states and doesn't offer asylum seekers any benefits they weren't already entitled to under Mexican law. The plan also fails to address the [fact](#) that Mexico's asylum system is **overwhelmed and underfunded** and its immigration enforcement agency is **frequently abusive and corrupt**.

Neither the current Mexican government nor the new one that takes office in December should follow in the footsteps of the United States. **Mexico should not militarize its border with Guatemala and it should not abuse or limit the rights of migrants and asylum seekers.**

Where is the caravan now?

The caravan is still hundreds of miles from the U.S.-Mexico border, and the rest of its journey could take days or weeks. **It's hard to estimate when it'll arrive** because these people are traveling by foot and hitching rides in cars and trucks when they can. Plus, the caravan is not a single, consistent group—it is **continuously splintering and conjoining** with no formal leadership.

It is still unclear which route they will take to approach the border. Mexico's northern border area poses many [risks](#) for migrants, including threats from organized crime often in collusion with Mexican security forces.

What should the U.S. response be?

First and foremost, it's imperative to point out that **this is not a border crisis**. Border crossings remain at [historic lows](#) compared to past decades, even with the recent slight increase. The total number of border crossings for 2018 is still lower than 2014. Secondly, **it is not illegal to seek asylum under U.S. or international law**. The members of the caravan aren't criminals and shouldn't be treated as such. They shouldn't be denied their right to asylum and **they shouldn't be separated or locked up indefinitely**.

Right now, 5,200 active-duty troops are headed to the border. And that's on top of the over 2,000 members of the National Guard and all the border patrol agents that are already there. The

latest deployment is **larger than the current U.S. military footprint in Iraq and Syria** And it's still unclear what role the active-duty troops will play, since using the military for policing within the United States **violates** our law and risks human rights violations. **This extreme military response to families, children, and individuals is a waste of taxpayer money** and diverts attention from real security threats.

What's more, **the Trump Administration is floating ideas to further restrict access to asylum** at our border. But this would only violate laws and worsen an already dangerous situation for people fleeing instability and violence.

Instead, what we need are humane solutions for the families, men, women, and children seeking protection at our borders. We need to **ensure their rights to seek asylum and due process** remain intact. We need **cost-effective, community-based alternatives** to detention that have already proven **successful**. And we need to address the roots of this migration with **well-targeted, humanitarian programs** for poverty reduction and violence prevention, combined with a principled stance against human rights violations and corruption in Honduras and other countries from which people are fleeing.

by **Lily Folkerts & Andrea Fernández Aponte** on November 01, 2018

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