

# How coronavirus has halted Central American migration to the US

Border closures and strict lockdowns have led to a steep decline in the number of migrants coming from Central America.



Migrants seeking a U.S. work visa are pictured after being evicted from their hotel, which local authorities said was crowded, as part of the measures to prevent the spreading of the coronavirus disease in Monterrey, Mexico. Photograph: Daniel Becerril/Reuters

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When Angelica turned 30, she realized there was no future for her in Honduras.

Although she had a college degree, she was still living paycheck to paycheck and was stuck in a neighborhood of the capital Tegucigalpa ruled by violent gangs.

So, after years contemplating migration to the US where she has relatives, she

finally made arrangements to depart.

“I didn’t want to stay in a neighborhood where there are massacres or where the people lock themselves in their homes at six at night because the gangs impose a curfew,” she said. “I realized I was more surviving than living.”

But by the time she was due to start her journey north, Honduras had closed its borders and declared a state of emergency. She could no longer leave her city – much less take a bus to northern Guatemala, to meet a coyote who would guide her through Mexico.

“I had thought that only a hurricane could stop me,” she said. “But I hadn’t thought of a pandemic.”

Border closures and strict lockdowns prompted by the COVID-19 crisis have disrupted the migrant trail through Central America and Mexico, forcing some would-be migrants to postpone their journeys – and stopping many others in their tracks.

The result has been a deterrent more effective than any wall Donald Trump could build.

Activists across the region have reported a steep decline in the number of migrants coming from Central America since the restrictions were implemented. One Mexican shelter near the Guatemalan border said it hadn’t received a new arrival in a week.



FacebookTwitterPinterest A migrant washes the hands of a child at an encampment in Matamoros, Mexico, as more than 2,000 migrants seek asylum in the US. Photograph: Daniel Becerril/Reuters

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“The crisis has facilitated Trump’s policies because [Central American] migrants

can't even leave their countries," said Sister Nyzella Juliana Dondé, coordinator of a Catholic migrant aid organization in Honduras.

El Salvador closed its borders on 11 March, and the governments of Guatemala and Honduras quickly followed suit. All three countries in the so-called northern triangle have since announced internal lockdowns of differing strictness.

The three nations had recently signed "safe third country agreements" with the US government under which they agreed to increase enforcement on their borders, and receive migrants who had transited their country on the way to the US.

Only Guatemala had begun to implement the new measures, but it announced on 17 March that it would suspend the deportations of Hondurans and Salvadorans from the US to its territory.

But Guatemala and Honduras continued to receive deportation flights bringing their own citizens from the US - despite concerns that the practice could accelerate the spread of the virus.

In the past week, a migrant who was deported from the US to Guatemala was diagnosed with COVID-19 and a group of deportees to Honduras escaped from the shelter where they were to be quarantined. Guatemala has now requested that the US suspend deportation flights.

Meanwhile, migrants who were already en route have been left exposed by the closure of shelters and the difficulties facing humanitarian organizations that would normally attend to them.

"They are in a vulnerable situation because the guidance is to stay at home - but the migrants don't have homes," said Dondé, who mentioned a case of a large group of Haitian and African migrants who were detained after crossing into Guatemala from Honduras amid the lockdown. "Neither Honduras or Guatemala wanted to offer them a place to stay."

Migrants who already had arrived in Mexico have been left in limbo by the US government's decision to immediately return all migrants from Mexico and Central America who cross into the country irregularly along the south-west border.

When restrictions are eventually eased, a fresh surge in migration seems likely: multiple would-be migrants who spoke with The Guardian said it was only a question of when, not if, they would set out for the US.

And the economic impact of the crisis may, in turn, cause others to migrate.. “Before many people migrated because they lacked work and dignified life,” said Silva de Souza. “Now there will be many more.”

Migrants who have come from even farther afield, have no choice but to try to push on. Mohamed left Freetown, the capital of Sierra Leone, in 2018, following the well-trodden migrant path via Ecuador, Colombia and the jungles of Panama. He was burning through his savings and racking up debt, but making steady progress north.

But he reached Guatemala just before the government announced a state of emergency which has made moving on impossible.

“Travel has become very difficult,” he said in a brief exchange via Facebook Messenger. But he was still determined to reach the US – even if he now has to move more carefully – traveling at night and avoiding large caravans. “With God’s will, I’ll get there. I will build a life of opportunity.”

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▪ *Additional reporting by Joe Parkin Daniels*

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