

Remarks by Rodrigo Dominguez-Villegas
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Before

The House of Commons' Standing Committee on Citizenship and Immigration

Mr. Chairman and members of the standing committee, my name is Rodrigo Dominguez Villegas. I'm an independent consultant for the Migration Policy Institute in Washington, D.C., and a researcher at the University of Massachusetts-Amherst.

I am pleased to be here to discuss two issues: The challenges of reintegrating deportees in Mexico and Central America and recent changes in Mexico's migration policies.

Between FY 2012 and FY 2018, the United States carried out approximately 1.8 million repatriations of Mexican migrants. The United States and Mexico together carried out approximately 1.4 million deportations to Honduras, Guatemala, and El Salvador -- the three countries known as the Northern Triangle of Central America.

Imagine Daniela, a 23 years old, high school graduate from Honduras. She grew up in the United States since she was 7. She got apprehended in a raid, and after a few weeks in detention she was deported to Honduras. Not only was her life completely changed but she faced many challenges that come with deportation.

First, she had been away from Honduras for so many years that she had no Honduran identification documents. This blocked her access to basic services from opening a bank account to enrolling in social assistance programs.

Second, her high school diploma from the U.S was not recognized. She was then denied access to jobs that require a high school degree. Her English, though fluent, was not backed up with a certification, so English schools did not believe she could teach it.

And now, when she goes to job interviews, employers hear her broken Spanish, realize she was deported from the U.S., and associate her with gang membership.

Our recent fieldwork found that deported migrants face many common challenges, three of which are exemplified in Daniela's story: lack of identification documents, difficulties getting education and skills recognized, and social and employment discrimination.¹

¹ Ruiz, Ariel, Rodrigo Domínguez-Villegas, Luis Argueta, and Randy Capps. Sustainable Reintegration: Strategies to Support Migrants Returning to Mexico and Central America. Washington, DC: Migration Policy Institute. Available at <https://www.migrationpolicy.org/research/sustainable-reintegration-migrants-mexico-central-america>

Additionally, all deported migrants face the persistence of key push factors of endemic poverty and gang violence that drive emigration from the Northern Triangle.

Though at different stages and with varying success, the governments are responding to these challenges by improving services available for deported migrants.

When deportees first step off the plane or the bus after deportation, they are greeted at reception centers and receive food, basic medical checkups, free phone calls, and transportation subsidies to get home. The governments in the region and the IOM have made significant investments to renovate reception centers and improve reception services.

The challenge now is to strengthen longer term reintegration services.

Existing government reintegration services mostly aim to help deportees find a job through training programs, access to job boards, or loans to start small businesses. But existing reintegration services are only available to a tiny fraction of people and lack a holistic approach to address the economic, social, and psychosocial needs of deportees.

Non-governmental actors fill some of the gaps unaddressed by government institutions through a variety of programs. For example, Hola Code, a social enterprise in Mexico, provides an accelerated software development training program that places graduates in high paying jobs in the tech industry. Beyond learning how to code, deportees participate in activities from group therapy to lessons on how to navigate Mexico's bureaucracy. And in El Salvador, the Salvadoran Institute for Migrants provides psychosocial support for migrants and their families to address migration-related trauma, which is otherwise rarely available.

Strengthening the reintegration capacity in Mexico and the Northern Triangle is particularly urgent now. The U.S. administration's decision to terminate the Deferred Action for Childhood Arrivals or DACA Program, and the Temporary Protected Status (TPS) for immigrants from El Salvador and Honduras may lead to higher volumes of deportations to the region and will likely impact the number of people wishing to migrate to Canada.

The second topic I want to cover is Mexico's new migration policy.

Mexico's new federal government, inaugurated on December 1st of 2018, has vowed to shift the country's focus of its migration policy from detention and deportation to protection and regional cooperation.

When a caravan of Central Americans reached the Guatemala-Mexico border in mid-January, instead of detaining and deporting migrants, the Mexican government issued over 12 thousand humanitarian visas that allow people to remain in Mexico for a year and get employment.

The benefits of promoting regularization were two-fold: first, Mexican authorities were able to know who was entering the country. Second, humanitarian visas allow migrants to use safe transportation in Mexico and avoid traffickers.

However, high demand for humanitarian visas forced the government to stop registering people at the border. Central Americans are now required to apply for these visas at Mexican embassies and Consulates in their home countries.

The reliance on temporary humanitarian visas rather than granting permanent refugee status to those with a credible protection claim is unsustainable. To achieve its protection and integration goals, Mexico's administration will have to strengthen its asylum system.

The number of asylum claims in Mexico increased 23 fold between 2013 and 2018 causing a growing backlog. Mexican law requires that applicants receive a response within 90 days, but decisions are now taking months. The UNHCR is working closely with COMAR to upgrade its capacity. But it will require funding and commitment to change the inertia around the Mexican asylum system.

Mexico is also leading regional negotiations to launch a CAN\$39.5 billion development plan for the Northern Triangle of Central America. The details of the plan remain uncertain, but it offers opportunities for fruitful cooperation that could help address the root causes of migration in Central America.

Investments on reintegration of deportees and upgrading the Mexican asylum system are two areas with clear needs where Canadian cooperation would be promising.

I commend the committee's endeavor to conduct the study that brings us here today and I thank you for inviting me to testify.