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Who's Trying to Cross Our Southern Border? Everyone

By Michael Flynn

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Last month, when President Bush was promoting what he called a "comprehensive strategy" on border security to prevent "people from coming here in the first place," few Americans had any doubt to whom the president was referring: undocumented Mexicans. Ignored in the rhetoric, as well as in U.S. policy, is a far more complex reality -- that the southern border is no longer just a border with Mexico. It is a global frontier that has become a conduit for illegal immigrants from all over the world.

A snapshot of this reality was provided to me during a recent trip to Mexico when officers from the [International Organization for Migration](#) (IOM), a group committed to managing the global migration crisis, showed me a classified official list of undocumented migrants held in Mexico City's migrant detention center during one day last April. On that day the *estacin migratoria* housed some 630 people from nearly 60 countries -- about a third of the nations in the world -- most of whom had hoped to use Mexico as a gateway to the United States.

The U.S. response to this phenomenon has consequences for both Americans and Mexicans, but most of all for the many migrants. By focusing its attention on hardening its own borders, the United States leaves Mexico to shoulder a burden not of its own making and does nothing to address the root causes of global migration, including poverty at home. And Mexico's sometimes draconian attempts to shift that burden jeopardize the lives of those who seek to cross the country in search of a better future.

The reasons for this burgeoning problem are simple: More and more people from the so-called global south -- the nations of Africa, Central and Latin America, and most of Asia -- are abandoning their homelands to find better lives elsewhere. Destination numero uno on many people's list is America. Unable to go directly because of tight visa restrictions, they take what they see as the next best route -- through Mexico.

According to a report released in October by the U.N.'s [Global Commission on International Migration](#), the number of people living outside their country of birth has doubled in the last 25 years to more than 200 million -- or about one in every 30 people on the planet. Most are "irregular migrants," who travel without proper documents. According to the commission, these numbers will grow inexorably because of the impact of globalization and growing disparities in development between rich and poor countries.

Hidden in the U.N. numbers are the so-called transmigrants. When their plans to cross a country are thwarted, there are often ugly consequences, as happened recently in Morocco, which serves as a gateway to Europe for sub-Saharan Africans. Stuck with thousands of unwanted people who had attempted to make their way into the Spanish colonies of Ceuta and Melilla, Morocco dumped large numbers of them in the desert.

A similar situation confronts Mexico. The stories I've heard about the people who've passed through Mexico City's detention center in recent years read like a brief history of the dark side of globalization: exotic dancers from

Hungary and Brazil who planned to earn cash in the strip joints of the city's Zona Rosa before heading north; Iraqi Chaldeans fleeing religious persecution who had hired a Lebanese smuggler based in Tijuana to help them get into the United States; Ecuadoreans who had braved a 1,000-mile voyage in rickety boats, a perilous border crossing in the region straddling Mexico and Guatemala, and the depredations of "coyotes," or human traffickers, only to be detained a few miles from the U.S. border; and Salvadoran gang members who work for burgeoning criminal syndicates that use Mexico as a transit zone for their trade in guns, drugs and people.

To deal with the burgeoning number of transmigrants, Mexico now maintains more than 50 migrant detention centers across the country. In the city of Tapachula, near the Mexico-Guatemala border, the government is putting the finishing touches on what it touts as the largest migrant detention center in the Americas.

Mexico's response to the growing problem is often similar to Morocco's. In one case in 2002, which was a cause celebre among advocates in both Mexico and Guatemala, authorities deported a group of migrants from India, who had languished in the detention center for months, to Guatemala, where they spent a further six months in another center. After one of the migrants committed suicide, a Guatemalan judge ordered the rest released. All eventually made it to the United States illegally.

Their case highlights a vexing problem of transmigration -- of what to do about migrants whose documentation is incomplete. Before deporting the Indians to Guatemala, Mexico had unsuccessfully tried to establish their citizenship through the Indian Embassy. When the Indian government refused to recognize their citizenship, Mexican authorities sent them back to Guatemala, arguing that they had entered Mexico from there.

A Mexican official told me that Mexico has ceased this particular deportation practice. But the situation of many undocumented migrants in Mexico remains precarious, with corruption in the ranks of [Mexico's National Institute for Migration](#) (INM) and terrible conditions in many detention centers.

To its credit, Mexico has undertaken a number of steps to improve their treatment, firing dozens of officials accused of corruption or of mishandling migrants. In April, Mexico became only the second country in Latin America to ratify a protocol to the U.N. [Convention Against Torture](#) that obliges member states to set up monitoring mechanisms in places of detention. Mexico also invited the Geneva-based IOM to open an office in Mexico City this year. Among its activities, the IOM assists with the "voluntary return" of people from outside the region and trains migration officials on how to deal with human trafficking cases.

Significant challenges remain. According to Mexico's [National Commission on Human Rights](#), the country will have detained more than 200,000 undocumented migrants by year's end. These numbers may well grow. In 1998, when Hurricane Mitch struck Central America, Mexico was flooded with homeless Hondurans who had abandoned their country and headed north. This year Central America was again hit by devastating hurricanes and tropical storms, leaving thousands without homes. Many of these people will likely head north if their lot doesn't improve.

Mexican officials argue that the United States is failing to do its share. Topping their list of complaints is what they see as the double-talk of the Bush administration.

For decades, Mexico's attitude toward transmigration was one of indifference, its southern boundary with Guatemala and Belize jokingly referred to as *la frontera olvidada* (the forgotten border).

But when the number of Central Americans entering the United States by way of Mexico shot up in the 1980s and '90s, U.S. officials began applying pressure on their Mexican counterparts to do something about it. During Bush's first term, American officials promised Mexico a quid pro quo: If the Mexicans would shut down the migrant route through their country, the United States would improve the status of undocumented Mexicans in the United States.

This promise has been all but forgotten in Washington, but it has turned into a political lightning rod in Mexico. Responding to a law signed by Bush in May tightening immigration controls, Santiago Creel, a presidential candidate and former interior minister in the administration of President Vicente Fox, said that Mexico had received "absolutely nothing" in return for stemming migration from other countries.

Mexican commentators also argue that many of the country's problems stem from U.S. policies. If the United States didn't give so much work to undocumented immigrants, goes the argument, then Mexico wouldn't be flooded with migrants from across the globe. Says Father Vladimiro Valdez, a Jesuit priest in Mexico City and outspoken critic of both Mexican and U.S. immigration policies: "The fact is, the United States needs illegal

workers, and it needs them to remain illegal because then they can continue to keep their wages low."

The politics of free trade, say critics like Valdez, have done little to improve the situation of the poor. Some claim that NAFTA has become a tool used by the United States to drive poor Mexican farmers off the land, thereby producing a steady stream of cheap labor for U.S. agribusiness.

Regardless of whether one agrees, it seems clear that one of the North Atlantic Free Trade Agreement's key selling points -- that it would create enough jobs in Mexico to stem migration flows -- has proven woefully off mark. Since the agreement went into effect in 1994, the number of Mexicans who have managed to establish themselves in the United States has nearly tripled, from an average of 277,000 per year during the 1990-95 period to a projected 750,000 this year.

These numbers point to a potential contradiction in Bush's policies, the consequences of which the Mexicans will likely be left to deal with -- hardening borders against migrants while pushing free trade agreements throughout Central and South America that seem bound to exacerbate the problem of migration.

Even when it comes to the little things, like aiding Mexico's effort to return migrants to their home countries, the United States is often uncooperative. Mexico could save thousands of dollars per flight if the United States allowed the flights to go through its territory. However, according to the IOM, the United States typically refuses for fear that migrants from places like China will claim asylum once they land in the United States. (The State Department says such transits were halted in 2003 because of concerns that terrorists could exploit them.) When I asked Hermenegildo Castro, a senior official at the INM, whether Mexico had a problem with U.S. intransigence, he diplomatically demurred: "What we have in Mexico is a reality, and we have to work with that reality." The first step the United States needs to take is to acknowledge that reality, too, and recognize that the problem of transmigration stretches way beyond our borders.

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