

MEXICO'S IMMIGRATION POLICIES AND HUMAN RIGHTS COMMITMENTS: NEW STRATEGIES OR NEW EUPHEMISMS?

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The Global Detention Project (GDP) is committed to ending arbitrary and harmful migration-related detention practices around the world, and to ensuring respect for the fundamental human rights of all migrants, refugees, and asylum seekers. To achieve this, we seek to:

- Increase public knowledge and awareness of immigration detention policies.
- Expand coverage of immigration detention by human rights monitoring bodies and other international agencies.
- Expand partnerships with local and international civil society organisations working to end arbitrary and harmful immigration detention practices.
- Strategically target research and advocacy so that it effectively challenges arbitrary and harmful detention laws and policies.

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ABSTRACT

When Andrés Manuel López Obrador (AMLO) was elected President of Mexico in 2018, he championed a migration policy rooted in human rights. Consistent with this vision, his administration's unveiling of a new Strategy on Migration in May 2024 framed it as a rights-based, humanitarian approach to managing irregular migration—a central feature of which was the establishment of “Multiservice Centers for the Inclusion and Development of Migrants and Refugees,” purportedly designed to provide a wide range of migrant-support services. While authorities claim that these centres will not be used for the purposes of detention, a critical examination of Mexico's history of immigration control—particularly its role as a proxy enforcer of U.S migration policy—warrants skepticism. As this working paper demonstrates, facing pressure from the United States to impose stringent migration policies since the 1980s Mexico has frequently employed euphemistic and misleading language to reframe coercive practices as humanitarian ones, effectively obscuring actions that contravene human rights obligations. Mexico's latest strategy may represent yet another case of semantic gymnastics, concealing the persistence of punitive migration enforcement under the guise of humanitarianism and masking the country's on-going role as a surrogate enforcer of U.S migration control.



GLOSSARY

AMEXCID	<i>Agencia Mexicana de Cooperación Internacional para el Desarrollo</i> (Mexican Agency of International Cooperation for Development)
AMLO	Andres Manual Lopes Obrador
COMAR	<i>Comisión Mexicana de Ayuda a Refugiados</i> (Mexican Commission for Refugee Assistance)
DIF	<i>Sistema Nacional para el Desarrollo Integral de la Familia</i> (National System for Integral Family Development)
GTPM	<i>Grupo de Trabajo sobre Política Migratoria</i> (Working Group on Migration Policy)
INM	<i>Instituto Nacional de Migración</i> (National Migration Institute)
IOM	International Organization for Migration
MPPs	Migration Protection Protocols
NAFTA	North American Free Trade Agreement
SEDENA	<i>Secretaría de la Defensa Nacional</i> (Secretariat of National Defense)
SEGOB	Secretaría de Gobernación (Ministry of Interior)
SRE	<i>Secretaría de Relaciones Exteriores</i> (Ministry of Foreign Affairs)
TVRH	<i>Tarjeta de Visitante por Razones Humanitarias</i> ("Card of a visitor for humanitarian reasons")
UNHCR	UN High Commissioner for Refugees



I. INTRODUCTION

In May 2024, Mexico's Foreign Ministry announced a new Mexican Strategy on Migration (*Estrategia Mexicana de Movilidad Humana: un modelo único*).¹ The new strategy, which proposes addressing the structural causes of migration and outlines a series of coordinated actions for the “humanitarian administration” of irregular migration flows, represents the Mexican government's latest attempt to present a humane face on its immigration enforcement efforts. Among its proposals is the creation of new full-service migration facilities in key regions of the country called “Multiservice Centers for the Inclusion and Development of Migrants and Refugees.” These centres are intended to offer a range of services—including health and education, employment assistance, refugee status services, among others—and are to include the involvement of international organisations like the UN High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) as well as civil society groups.

While Mexico insists that these new centres will not be “detention facilities” nor “be used for immigration control,”² an assessment of the trajectory of Mexico's immigration policies and the various forces shaping its responses to migration pressures raises questions about the real intention of both these centres and the new strategy. Is Mexico really plotting a determined human rights approach in its immigration and refugee policies, or is it resorting once again to its long-standing tendency of cloaking harmful practices in misleading language and claims?

When Andres Manuel Lopes Obrador (commonly, “AMLO”) was elected President of Mexico in 2018, he promised that his administration's immigration policies would respect the rights of immigrants and address the root causes of immigration flows. He affirmed that: “The migration policy of the Government of Mexico (2018-2024) is established based on full respect for human rights based on a multisectoral, pluri-dimensional, co-responsible, transversal, inclusive and gender perspective approach.”³ To be sure, many important reforms were adopted during AMLO's presidency, which ended in 2024. The country has also been active in important regional and international processes, including being an active participant in the recent [Cartagena+40 process](#) that reaffirmed the country's commitment to “international refugee law, international human rights law, and international humanitarian law, with a

¹ Secretaría de Relaciones Exteriores, “La Comisión Intersecretarial de Atención Integral en Materia Migratoria adopta el Modelo Mexicano de Movilidad Humana,” 2024 <http://www.gob.mx/sre/prensa/la-comision-intersecretarial-de-atencion-integral-en-materia-migratoria-adopta-el-modelo-mexicano-de-movilidad-humana?idiom=es>

² Government of Mexico, “Fourth periodic report submitted by Mexico under article 73 of the Convention, due in 2022: International Convention on the Protection of the Rights of All Migrant Workers and Members of Their Families,” 2024, <https://digitallibrary.un.org/record/4074680>

³ Government of Mexico, “Nueva Política Migratoria del Gobierno de Mexico,” 2019, https://portales.segob.gob.mx/es/PoliticaMigratoria/Nueva_Politica_Migratoria

dedicated focus on developing comprehensive protection strategies for refugees.⁴ AMLO also championed the UN Global Compact for Migration in order to ensure a safe, orderly and regular flow of migrants, with Mexico becoming the first country to adopt the non-binding agreement.

The country's legal framework reflects key international norms relevant to protecting the human rights of immigrants. The 2011 Migratory Act and 2011 Law of Refugees, Complementary Protection, and Political Asylum provide critical guarantees for asylum seekers, including guaranteeing non-discrimination, protection of the family unit, confidentiality, and the right to claim asylum without facing criminalisation for irregular entry. Mexican law also enshrines the principle of non-refoulement, which protects individuals from being returned to places where they face risks of harm. Under these laws, Mexico ensures that detainees are informed of their right to apply for refugee status or statelessness recognition (Article 109(II)). Importantly, Mexico does not criminalise immigrants, although there are provisions allowing the government to detain and deport individuals.

Mexico's legal framework also outlines rights for vulnerable groups.⁵ Changes in 2020 to migration laws prohibited the detention of children and charged the *Sistema Nacional para el Desarrollo Integral de la Familia* (National System for Integral Family Support–DIF) with the responsibility of unaccompanied minors instead of the National Immigration Institute. Victims of trafficking also cannot be placed in detention and are also offered additional protections, along with non-citizens who have witnessed crimes. The Migratory Act of 2011 included the humanitarian visa (*“Tarjeta de Visitante por Razones Humanitarias”*), issued to vulnerable populations and for humanitarian reasons, allowing migrants to transit the country for one year.

Despite these important legal norms, the country consistently fails to adhere to them. For example, while the International Organization for Migration (IOM) praised the Migratory Act of 2011, many human rights organisations argue that it has created new avenues for abuse through its security-based approach. Reviews from international rights bodies and civil society organisations consistently criticise the actions of the Mexican government for not fulfilling the law and providing adequate resources.⁶ The country's detention facilities often lack adequate food and water, detainee requests for health care and medicine go unheeded, and facilities remain overcrowded. A fire at the Ciudad Juárez migrant detention centre in March 2023 resulting in the deaths of over 40 migrants while locked in their cells illustrated the brutality of Mexico's immigration policies.

In light of country's recent record, there is cause for skepticism in assessing Mexico's new migration strategy. For instance, the proposal to operate a network of new “Multiservice

⁴ Secretaría de Relaciones Exteriores, “Mexico Participates in the 2024–2034 Chile Declaration and Action Plan Under Cartagena+40 process,” 2024, <http://www.gob.mx/sre/prensa/mexico-participates-in-adoption-of-chile-declaration-and-action-plan-2024-2034-of-the-cartagena-40-process>

⁵ Global Detention Project, “Mexico Immigration Detention Profile,” 2024, <https://www.globaldetentionproject.org/countries/americas/mexico>

⁶ Global Detention Project, “Mexico Immigration Detention Profile,” 2024, <https://www.globaldetentionproject.org/countries/americas/mexico>; J. Gomez Guzman, T. Belinda Jimenez, and Y. Salvador Hernandez, “Centros de detención migratoria – CDH Fray Matías,” 2023, <https://cdhfraymatias.org/centros-de-detencion-migratoria/>; Human Rights Watch, “Submission to the Universal Periodic Review of Mexico | Human Rights Watch,” “18 July 2023, <https://www.hrw.org/news/2023/07/18/submission-universal-periodic-review-mexico>; OHCHR, “General comment No. 1 (2023) on Enforced Disappearance in the Context of Migration,” 2023, <https://www.ohchr.org/en/documents/general-comments-and-recommendations/cedcgc1-general-comment-no-1-2023-enforced>; OHCHR, “Report of the Working Group on Arbitrary Detention,” 2024, <https://www.ohchr.org/en/documents/country-reports/ahrc5744add1-visit-mexico-report-working-group-arbitrary-detention>

Centers” should be seen within the broader historical context of Mexico serving as an extension of U.S immigration enforcement—a role that has deepened in recent decades—as well as its long history of using misleading language to designate its migration enforcement practices. Mexico’s close economic integration with its neighbour to the north curtails its sovereignty to pursue an independent migration policy. The U.S threat of trade sanctions effectively forces the country to pursue repressive migration tactics, even as Mexican authorities employ euphemisms to disguise detention actions, deflect criticism, and circumvent legal obligations.

This working paper explores the challenges facing Mexico as it navigates the inherent contradictions between its claimed efforts to implement a humane migration strategy while at the same time servicing the economic and political objectives of the United States. The article first traces the history of Mexico’s immigration policies over the past few decades, highlighting how its neoliberal trajectory since the 1980s has led to deepening integration of both economic and migration policies vis-à-vis its relations to the United States. We then highlight how progressive efforts to change migration policies under the administration of AMLO came to a halt due to U.S pressures. The final section discusses Mexico’s use of a linguistic strategy that serves to paint a rosy picture of its migration enforcement practices while adhering to the restrictive demands of the United States. Mexico may not be able to overcome the inexorable contradictions it faces in humanely managing migration pressures while also responding to U.S demands, but it has created a clever verbal edifice that seems designed to give the impression that it has achieved this improbable feat.

Evidence for the article is derived from interviews with advocacy organisations, government officials, and representatives from international government organisations, as well as through a review of government documents and relevant academic and grey literature.



II. RECENT HISTORY OF DOING THE U.S' "DIRTY WORK" ON MIGRATION ENFORCEMENT

U.S. efforts to enlist Mexico in controlling third-country migration flows dates back at least to the 1980s.⁷ It was during this time that Mexico first began to implement a set of neoliberal policies under the presidency of Carlos Salinas de Gortari (1988-1994).⁸ His administration dismantled statist economic policies based on import-substitution industrialisation and encouraged market reforms and global integration. Illustrative of economic changes was the encouragement of more foreign direct investment through the expansion of “*maquiladoras*,” assembly plants using imported parts from Mexico’s border with the U.S.

Coinciding with Mexico’s integration with the U.S economy was its launching of a “vertical border” involving stepped up patrols of public transportation.⁹ U.S and Mexico migration officials collaborated to detect false documents, identify and detain Central Americans seeking to enter the U.S, and initiate expulsions back to Mexico. During this period, Mexico partnered with UNHCR to manage the influx of Guatemalans. While it resisted the refugee agency’s calls to uphold the principle of non-refoulment and its obligations under the 1951 Refugee Convention, it nevertheless allowed the organisation to process asylum claims on its territory. To support this arrangement, the U.S contributed 150 million USD to UNCHR and the International Red Cross to help contain approximately 200,000 Guatemalan refugees within Mexico.¹⁰

Throughout the 1990s, economic integration and U.S leverage over Mexico to curtail transnational migration persisted, most notably with the signing of the North American Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA) in 1993. While the trade deal focused more on bilateral migratory issues rather than Mexico’s southern border, Mexico began large-scale deportations at the start of the decade in the run-up to the agreement.¹¹ In the 1970s and 1980s, a negligible number of foreign nationals were deported from the country, but expulsions jumped dramatically in 1989 and exceeded over 100,000 for the first five years of the 1990s.

In the wake of U.S support to the Mexican government during the 1994 Peso Crisis by way of a 50 billion USD bailout, the two countries deepened cooperation on migration issues while simultaneously purporting to respect human rights.¹² Mexico promised effective law enforcement at its borders, the modernisation of the National Migration Institute (INM), and

⁷ D. Fitzgerald and A. Palomo Contreras, “*México entre el Sur y el Norte*,” Cuadernos CEMCA, 3, 16–31, 2018.

⁸ G. O’Toole, “The Reinvention of Mexico: National Ideology in a Neoliberal Era,” University Press, 2010, <https://doi.org/10.3828/9781846314858>

⁹ D. Fitzgerald and A. Palomo Contreras, “*México entre el Sur y el Norte*,” Cuadernos CEMCA, 3, 16–31, 2018.

¹⁰ D. Fitzgerald and A. Palomo Contreras, “*México entre el Sur y el Norte*,” Cuadernos CEMCA, 3, 16–31, 2018.

¹¹ W. Cornelius, “Mexico: From Country of Mass Emigration to Transit State,” *Inter-American Development Bank*, 2018, <https://publications.iadb.org/en/publications/english/viewer/Mexico-From-Country-of-Mass-Emigration-to-Transit-State.pdf>

¹² Working Group Meeting on Migration and Consular Affairs, “Joint Communique,” 1995, <http://www.migracioninternacional.com/docum/index.html?buttonbot=gtfeb95i.html>

the expansion of the INM's *Grupo Beta* at border areas to combat violence and abuse. At the turn of the century, the country was increasing border patrol operations and began a programme, funded by the United States, to bus migrants back to the Central America border.¹³ Encouraged by the U.S, the INM rolled out the South Plan ("*Plan Sur*"), the objectives of which were to improve migration checkpoints, increase *Grupo Beta*'s focus on vulnerable populations, and establish "Orderly and Secure Repatriation"—a euphemism that effectively formalised Mexico's deportations to Central American countries.¹⁴ The signing of the Plan of Action for Cooperation and Border Safety in June 2001 solidified Mexico's commitment to the U.S. to "reduce the flow of undocumented migrants arriving at the joint border" and began Mexico's tenure as a "transit control regime."¹⁵

The 9/11 terrorist attacks on the United States shifted migration discourse and policy migration toward securitisation, militarisation, and expulsion.¹⁶ While Mexican officials argued that *Plan Sur* resulted in a 35 percent decrease in migrants crossing its southern border, migrant advocates argued that the result was temporary and due to increased fears amongst migrants and asylum seekers.¹⁷ The government placed 18,000 troops along the routes of its Southern Border to block potential terrorist attacks. However, Mexico's efforts also targeted undocumented migrants, engaged in North American security initiatives with the U.S and Canada, and placed the INM in its National Security Council (*Consejo Nacional de Seguridad*).¹⁸ As a result, Mexico's authorities began to see migrants as "enemies of the nation."¹⁹

When Felipe Calderon assumed the presidency in 2006, he reaffirmed Mexico's commitment to controlling undocumented migration along the country's southern border. A year later, the U.S and Mexico launched the Merida Initiative—a security cooperation framework aimed at combating organised crime and strengthening the rule of law. Between 2008 and 2021, the U.S allocated some 3 billion USD under this initiative to support crime reduction, community development, and the creation of "a 21st-century border."²⁰ The agreement emphasised shared responsibility for tackling drug trafficking, crime, and human smuggling—and funding also supported migrant interdiction through equipment upgrades, technological modernisation, and the development of technology systems allowing Mexican authorities to track and share information (including biometric data) with the U.S Department of Homeland Security. U.S support has also extended to training migration officials and Mexican military forces.

¹³ Michael Flynn, "¿Dónde Está La Frontera?" *Bulletin of the Atomic Scientists*, 58(4), 24–35, 2002, <https://doi.org/10.2968/058004009>

¹⁴ G. W. Grayson, "Mexico's Forgotten Southern Border," *CIS.Org*, 1 July 2002, <https://cis.org/Report/Mexicos-Forgotten-Southern-Border>

¹⁵ A. Campos-Delgado, "Abnormal Bordering: Control, Punishment and Deterrence in Mexico's Migrant Detention Centres," *The British Journal of Criminology*, 61(2), 476–496, 2021, <https://doi.org/10.1093/bjc/azaa071>

¹⁶ J. M. Ramos-García, C. Barrachina-Lisón, and J. E. Ramos, "The Southern Border of Mexico: Problems and Challenges of National Security and its Different Dimensions," *Política, Globalidad y Ciudadanía*, 6(12), 102–127, 2020.

¹⁷ Michael Flynn, M., "¿Dónde Está La Frontera?" *Bulletin of the Atomic Scientists*, 58(4), 24–35, 2002, <https://doi.org/10.2968/058004009>

¹⁸ D. Fitzgerald and A. Palomo Contreras, "*México entre el Sur y el Norte*," *Cuadernos CEMCA*, 3, 16–31, 2018.

¹⁹ Vertiz, M. (2024, December 2). *Personal Communication GTPM* [Personal communication].

²⁰ S. Brewer, "The Bicentennial Framework: Opportunities and challenges as U.S.-Mexico security cooperation begins a new chapter," *WOLA*, 2021, <https://www.wola.org/analysis/the-bicentennial-framework-opportunities-and-challenges-as-u-s-mexico-security-cooperation-begins-a-new-chapter-2/>; C. R. Seelke, and K. Finklea, "U.S.-Mexican Security Cooperation: The Mérida Initiative and Beyond," *Congressional Research Service*, 2017, <https://crsreports.congress.gov/product/details?prodcode=R41349>

Under the auspices of the Merida Initiative, the subsequent administration of Enrique Peña Nieto (2012-2018) announced in 2014 the Southern Border Program (*Programa Frontera Sur*) ostensibly to develop the region, reduce the risks facing migrants, and better organise migratory flows.²¹ With increasing numbers of Central Americans transiting Mexico couple with continued pressure from the U.S, the program led to the establishment of additional nationwide checkpoints, the monitoring of rail lines such as the notorious *La Bestia*, and increased deportation capacity.²² Mexico's Interior Ministry (*Ministerio de Gobernación*) created specialised coordinating bodies to focus on the country's southern border.²³ With greater numbers of INM officials and inspections, apprehensions increased, and by 2015, Mexico was deporting more Central Americans than the U.S.²⁴

Before the AMLO administration, U.S pressure had led Mexico to impose more stringent migration policies, develop more border security cooperation, and deport more immigrants. However, the exact impact of these enforcement and deportation efforts in reducing Mexican transmigration is disputed. Accurately evaluating policies faces challenges in measurement because of a focus on outputs over outcomes and insufficient data collection and reporting measures.²⁵ For example, the metric of success of the Merida Initiative is that 150,000 Central American migrants were apprehended in 2015 and 2016. Still, data from U.S border patrol reveals that the apprehension of third-party nationals nearly tripled between 2012 and 2017, with most migrants spending approximately one month in Mexico before arriving at the U.S border.²⁶

Since 2010, the number of Mexican migrants arriving in the United States has declined, while the number of transit immigrants in Mexico has increased.²⁷ United Nations data estimates that in 2022, some 450,000 undocumented migrants passed through Mexico on route to the United States—most of whom were Central Americans, along with Venezuelans and other South Americans.²⁸ Central Americans from Guatemala, Honduras, and El Salvador, driven by gang violence and threats as well as few economic opportunities, comprised most of the transmigration through Mexico. Notably, the past decade saw a significant number of families with children—as well as unaccompanied minors—making the journey through Mexico.

Several U.S-Mexico agreements have formally emphasised the importance of human rights. Under the Merida Initiative for instance, a portion of U.S funding was withheld pending compliance with the Leahy Laws, which prohibit assistance to bodies implicated in human

²¹ Secretaría de Gobernación, "Programa Frontera Sur: Proteger la vida de las personas migrantes y fortalecer el desarrollo regional," 2015, <http://www.gob.mx/segob/articulos/programa-frontera-sur-proteger-la-vida-de-las-personas-migrantes-y-fortalecer-el-desarrollo-regional>

²² M. Chishti, and C. Putzel-Kavanaugh, "The Limits of the Go-It-Alone Approach: U.S. Migration Management Increasingly Requires Other Countries' Cooperation," *Migrationpolicy.Org*, 22 March 2024, <https://www.migrationpolicy.org/article/us-immigration-management-cooperation>

²³ D. Fitzgerald and A. Palomo Contreras, "México entre el Sur y el Norte," *Cuadernos CEMCA*, 3, 16–31, 2018;

²⁴ W. Cornelius, "Mexico: From Country of Mass Emigration to Transit State," *Inter-American Development Bank*, 2018, <https://publications.iadb.org/en/publications/english/viewer/Mexico-From-Country-of-Mass-Emigration-to-Transit-State.pdf>

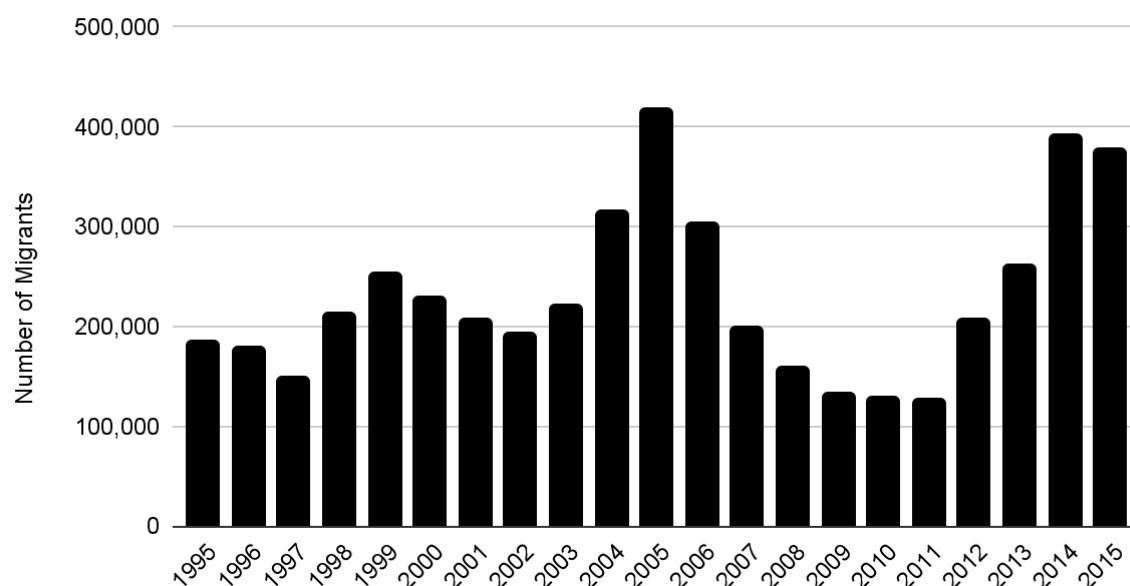
²⁵ U.S Government Accountability Office (GAO), "Merida Initiative: The United States Needs Better Performance Measures for Its Counternarcotics and Anticrime Support Efforts," July 2010, <https://digital.library.unt.edu/ark:/67531/metadc294237/>

²⁶ W. Cornelius, "Mexico: From Country of Mass Emigration to Transit State," *Inter-American Development Bank*, 2018, <https://publications.iadb.org/en/publications/english/viewer/Mexico-From-Country-of-Mass-Emigration-to-Transit-State.pdf>

²⁷ F. A. F. Alba, "Mexico at a Crossroads Once More: Emigration Levels Off as Transit Migration and Immigration Rise," *Migrationpolicy.Org*, 20 May 2024, <https://www.migrationpolicy.org/article/mexico-crossroads-emigration-transit>

²⁸ F. A. F. Alba, "Mexico at a Crossroads Once More: Emigration Levels Off as Transit Migration and Immigration Rise," *Migrationpolicy.Org*, 20 May 2024, <https://www.migrationpolicy.org/article/mexico-crossroads-emigration-transit>

Figure 1: Estimated Number of Central American Transmigrants Through Mexico (1995 – 2015)



Source: Adopted from Cornelius (2018)

rights violations.²⁹ Revisions under the Obama Administration to the Merida Initiative expanded funding for human rights protections and the rule of law. However, U.S pressure on Mexico to become a migration buffer, while ostensibly upholding human rights, ultimately failed to reduce transmigration. Instead, it worsened conditions for migrants, who increasingly faced abuses and violence,³⁰ including human trafficking, arbitrary detention, enforced disappearances, sexual violence, assault, kidnapping, and aggravated robbery.³¹

Mexico's 2018 presidential election marked the first time that the topic of migration had become a salient campaign issue.³² AMLO, who would ultimately win the presidency, emphasised the need to protect Central Americans transiting the country and uphold migrants' human rights. While also addressing the recurrent theme of Mexican migrants' needs in the U.S and the need for more economic opportunities in Mexico, he asserted the necessity of working collaboratively with the northern neighbour instead of merely doing its "dirty work." AMLO's political party, MORENA, outlined its policy platform in terms of supporting Mexican nationals abroad, reducing corruption in the country's migration-related public bodies, and protecting human rights.³³

²⁹ C. R. Seelke, and K. Finklea, "U.S.-Mexican Security Cooperation: The Mérida Initiative and Beyond," *Congressional Research Service*, 2017, <https://crsreports.congress.gov/product/details?prodcode=R41349>

³⁰ A. Raquel Minian, "Offshoring Migration Control: Guatemalan Transmigrants and the Construction of Mexico as a Buffer Zone," *The American Historical Review*, 125(1), 89–111, 2020, <https://doi.org/10.1093/ahr/rhz1227>

³¹ J. Knippen, C. Boggs, and M. Meyer, "AN UNCERTAIN PATH: Justice for Crimes and Human Rights Violations against Migrants and Refugees in Mexico [Dataset]," 2015, https://doi.org/10.1163/2210-7975_HRD-1226-2015003

³² S. Leutert, "Andrés Manuel López Obrador's Migratory Policy in Mexico," *LBJ School of Public Affairs*, 2020, <https://hdl.handle.net/2152/81573>

³³ S. Leutert, "Andrés Manuel López Obrador's Migratory Policy in Mexico," *LBJ School of Public Affairs*, 2020, <https://hdl.handle.net/2152/81573>



III. AMLO'S IDEALS FACE REALITY: "POOR MEXICO, SO FAR FROM GOD, SO CLOSE TO THE UNITED STATES"

Upon taking office, the Obrador administration (2019-2024) estimated that 2.5 million people were crossing the border annually and some 300,000 informally. The new president promised a more humanitarian approach in its migration policy that respects the rights of, and provides support to, migrants when they enter and transit the country. "Our vision is that migrants are not criminals and much less constitute a threat to the security of Mexico or the United States. They are human beings seeking to escape a reality of insecurity and deficiencies in their places of origin," said Olga Sánchez Cordero, the new head of the Interior Ministry (*Secretaría de Gobernación*–SEGOB).³⁴

Besides the promotion of safe and legal pathways based on human rights and legal entry pathways, Mexico's "humanitarian" approach also emphasised economic investments to combat push factors of migration from Central America.³⁵ For example, the Obrador administration signed the Comprehensive Development Plan for El Salvador, Guatemala, Honduras, and Mexico to address the root causes of migration in Central America and stop flows into Southern Mexico.³⁶ To this end, Mexico committed to provide El Salvador 30 million USD for agricultural job creation. The policy shift moved from an enforcement-based approach intertwined with racism and xenophobia toward improved integration with Central America to address inequality, poverty, and development needs.³⁷

The National Institute of Migration (*Instituto Nacional de Migración*–INM), responsible for implementing Mexico's migration policies, began changing its operations in line with the new approach. This authority's mandate includes inspecting documents at border crossings, operating migration checkpoints, managing migrant detention facilities, conducting apprehensions, and issuing permits for migrants to travel through the country. AMLO selected Tonituh Guillen, an academic specialising in migration topics and president of the university Colegio de la Frontera Norte, to direct the INM. The new director promised to professionalise the institute, work with civil society, and instil human rights. After dismissing around 600 officers for corruption and performance-related problems, Guillen sought to hire new staff with college degrees, offering improved salaries. He also aimed to address complaints and poor conditions at detention centres. Five of the worst were closed, and new regulations were

³⁴ P. Pinedo, "Política migratoria de México será humanitaria: Segob," *El Economista*, 7 January 2019, <https://www.eleconomista.com.mx/politica/Politica-migratoria-de-Mexico-sera-humanitaria-SEGOB-20190107-0062.html>

³⁵ A. G. R. Soto, "One Year after the U.S.-Mexico Agreement: Reshaping Mexico's Migration Policies," *Migrationpolicy.Org*, 4 June 2020, <https://www.migrationpolicy.org/research/one-year-us-mexico-agreement>

³⁶ A. Isacson and M. Meyer, "Mexico's Crackdown on Migration at its Southern Border," *WOLA*, 17 December 2019, <https://www.wola.org/analysis/mexico-southern-border-report/>

³⁷ S. Leutert, "Andrés Manuel López Obrador's Migratory Policy in Mexico," *LBJ School of Public Affairs*, 2020, <https://hdl.handle.net/2152/81573>

initiated to limit their use. So-called shelters (“*albergues*”) were established and were intended to be more suitable for migrant families.

The new administration also began issuing more humanitarian visas (*Tarjeta de Visitante por Razones Humanitarias*–TVRH). According to Mexico’s migration and refugee laws, migration authorities can provide, at their discretion, these visas to vulnerable populations, allowing them to move freely throughout the country and work legally for a limited period of time. The document protected migrants from detention and deportation as well as allowed them to travel more secure routes throughout the country. The number of humanitarian visas being issued steadily grew from 623 in 2014 to 17,722 in 2018—the result of civil society organisations encouraging migrants to solicit them as well as new initiatives developed by the administration.³⁸ In 2019, AMLO’s first year in office, the number issued increased to 40,966, with over 14,000 approved during the first two months of his term.

Despite efforts to implement rights-based migratory policy, images of large groups of men, women, and children making their journey through Mexico in “caravans” made migration a political issue in the U.S. Right-leaning media, such as Fox News; Republican candidates/politicians; and then U.S President Donald Trump, framed this issue as an ‘invasion’ to garner support for Republican candidates during the U.S midterm elections.³⁹ While these caravans had begun in 2017, their size and frequency had increased. While the first caravans were in the hundreds, subsequent caravans reached the thousands.⁴⁰ In these large groups, migrants found safety in numbers and sought to avoid paying expensive fees to smugglers.⁴¹ The U.S exerted pressure to stop this flow, with the Trump administration threatening a five percent tariff on Mexican imports in the spring of 2019 if Mexico did not stop migration into the U.S. Caving to U.S demands, AMLO signed the Joint Declaration and Supplementary Agreement Between the United States of America and Mexico.

Mexico’s acquiescence to U.S demands comes as no surprise given its economic dependence on its northern neighbour. Since joining NAFTA, Mexico’s largest trading partner has been the U.S, with current exports and imports valued at 728.2 billion USD.⁴² Today, 79.6 percent of Mexico’s exports are sent to the U.S.⁴³ Still, bending to U.S pressure contrasts with AMLO’s stance on migration and his 2018 presidential campaign rhetoric of decolonisation. He had promised an approach affirming Mexico’s sovereignty and his intention to define policy

³⁸ E. T. Cantalapiedra, “Las tarjetas de visitante por razones humanitarias: Una política migratoria de protección ¿e integración?” *EntreDiversidades*, 8(2(17)), Article 2(17), 2021, <https://doi.org/10.31644/ED.V8.N2.2021.A07>

³⁹ D. Folkenflik, “Tensions Rise At Fox News Over Coverage And Rhetoric Surrounding Migrant Caravan,” NPR, 30 October 2018, <https://www.npr.org/2018/10/30/662253600/tensions-rise-at-fox-news-over-coverage-and-rhetoric-surrounding-migrant-caravan>; Fox News, “National Border Patrol Council: Caravan is an Invasion,” *Fox News*, 29 October 2018, <https://www.foxnews.com/video/5854842686001>; L. Power, “STUDY: Caravan Coverage has Taken Over the News Cycle. That’s Exactly What Fox News and Trump Wanted,” *Media Matters for America*, 23 October 2018, <https://www.mediamatters.org/msnbc/study-caravan-coverage-has-taken-over-news-cycle-thats-exactly-what-fox-news-and-trump-wanted>

⁴⁰ G. J. Hale, and J. Ma, “Migrant Caravans: A Deep Dive Into Mass Migration through Mexico and the Effects of Immigration Policy,” *Baker Institute*, 2023, <https://www.bakerinstitute.org/research/migrant-caravans-deep-dive-mass-migration-through-mexico-and-effects-immigration-policy>

⁴¹ A. Isacson and M. Meyer, “Mexico’s Crackdown on Migration at its Southern Border,” *WOLA*, 17 December 2019, December 17, <https://www.wola.org/analysis/mexico-southern-border-report/>

⁴² Export Import Data, “Top Mexico Trade Partners in 2025: Key Trends and Opportunities,” 2025, <https://www.exportimportdata.in/blogs/mexico-trade-partners.aspx>; D. Workman, “Mexico’s Top Exports 2023,” *World Stop Exports*, 2023, <https://www.worldstopexports.com/mexicos-top-exports>

⁴³ Export Import Data, “Top Mexico Trade Partners in 2025: Key Trends and Opportunities,” 2025, <https://www.exportimportdata.in/blogs/mexico-trade-partners.aspx>; D. Workman, “Mexico’s Top Exports 2023,” *World Stop Exports*, 2023, <https://www.worldstopexports.com/mexicos-top-exports>

according to the country's own interests and values (and not those of a foreign power).⁴⁴ Such an approach would rebalance unfair power dynamics in U.S-Mexico relations. The country's Foreign Ministry stated: "Mexico respects the sovereign right of the United States to carry out its immigration programs, but we have acted and will continue to act independently and in our sovereign right when determining our own migration policy."⁴⁵ Despite the rhetoric, AMLO returned to the status quo trend in which the U.S maintained leverage in U.S-Mexico relations, especially on issues such as migration enforcement.⁴⁶

The Joint Declaration and Supplementary Agreement meant that Mexico would combat irregular immigration using the newly created National Guard (*Guarda Nacional*), expand Migrant Protection Protocols (MPPs), and increase alignment in the fight against smuggling.⁴⁷ The agreement focused on five commitments (Soto, 2020):

- (1) Mexico agreed to strengthen its military presence at its southern border by sending its National Guard to aid the INM;
- (2) Mexico agreed to accept non-Mexican asylum seekers as part of the MPP or 'Remain in Mexico Policy' as they wait for decisions on their U.S cases;
- (3) The U.S agreed to increase efforts to process asylum cases and removals;
- (4) Mexico and the U.S agreed to collaborate in the fight against human smuggling;
- (5) Both countries agreed to tackle the root causes of migration by increasing investments in Southern Mexico and Central America.

Since signing the joint declaration, Mexico has apprehended and returned increasingly large numbers of migrants: the same month that it was signed, a historic 31,000 were apprehended and 21,000 returned. From 93,846 apprehensions in 2017, they jumped to 182,940 in 2019 and then began growing exponentially to a record 782,176 by 2023 (see Figure 2, below)

The Joint Declaration did not mention human rights or specific targets. The text only states that Mexico would "offer jobs, healthcare, and education according to its principles." There was also no funding specified, and instead, the two parties agreed to "establish definitive terms for a binding bilateral agreement to further address burden-sharing and the assignment of responsibility for processing refugee status claims of migrants." Also, the U.S retained the discretion to determine whether Mexico has "achieved results" without specifying what these results might be. When asked if there were any specific indicators for assessing Mexico's compliance, a former U.S diplomat responded that the goal was to stop caravans from arriving at the U.S border.

⁴⁴ R. Soriano-Núñez, "Migration and (De)colonization in the Mexican Government Migration Policies," 2018-19, 8(1), 2020.

⁴⁵ Secretaría de Relaciones Exteriores, "Mexico's Migration Policy Is Sovereign, Seeks to Protect Migrants' Rights," 2019, <http://www.gob.mx/sre/prensa/mexico-s-migration-policy-is-sovereign-seeks-to-protect-migrants-rights>

⁴⁶ R. Soriano-Núñez, "Migration and (De)colonization in the Mexican Government Migration Policies," 2018-19, 8(1), 2020.

⁴⁷ A. G. R. Soto, "One Year after the U.S.-Mexico Agreement: Reshaping Mexico's Migration Policies," Migrationpolicy.Org, 4 June 2020, <https://www.migrationpolicy.org/research/one-year-us-mexico-agreement>

Figure 2: Migration Detention Entries

YEAR	DETENTION ENTRIES	YEAR	DETENTION ENTRIES
2007	120,455	2016	186,216
2008	94,723	2017	93,846
2009	69,033	2018	n/a
2010	70,102	2019	182,940
2011	66,583	2020	n/a
2012	88,506	2021	309,692
2013	86,298	2022	441,409
2014	127,149	2023	782,176
2015	198,141		

Source: Global Detention Project

Another major initiative in the early years of AMLO's presidency that was highlighted in the joint agreement was the MPP program, better known as the Remain in Mexico Policy. This policy required asylum seekers to stay in Mexico while awaiting adjudication of their applications. Consequently, Mexico saw an influx of 71,000 asylum seekers returned to their Northern border prompting a humanitarian crisis in which many found themselves stranded in dangerous conditions where they were vulnerable or victim to extortion, kidnapping, rape, and denied healthcare and education.⁴⁸ This policy also meant that asylum seekers had limited access to legal aid and counsel.⁴⁹

Administrative changes implemented by the administration provide further evidence of Mexico's work as an appendage of U.S immigration enforcement. While the Interior Ministry is charged with formulating and implementing migration policy, during AMLO's presidency, the Ministry of Foreign Affairs (*Secretaría de Relaciones Exteriores*, SRE) assumed more duties, including establishing migration-related agreements with the United States and overseeing the deployment of Mexico's National Guard to the southern border.⁵⁰ The SRE oversees the Joint Commission for Migratory Issues (*Comisión Intersecretarial de Atención Integral en Materia Migratoria*) created in September 2019 to coordinate across agencies to develop migration strategies, goals, and objectives. Through its developmental assistance arm AMEXCID (*Agencia Mexicana de Cooperación Internacional para el Desarrollo*–Mexican Agency of International Cooperation for Development), the SRE has even obtained United Nations funding to build Multiservice Centers.

⁴⁸ Human Rights Watch, "Submission to the Universal Periodic Review of Mexico | Human Rights Watch," 18 July 2023, <https://www.hrw.org/news/2023/07/18/submission-universal-periodic-review-mexico>

⁴⁹ Human Rights Watch, "Submission to the Universal Periodic Review of Mexico | Human Rights Watch," 18 July 2023, <https://www.hrw.org/news/2023/07/18/submission-universal-periodic-review-mexico>

⁵⁰ S. Leutert, "Andrés Manuel López Obrador's Migratory Policy in Mexico," *LBJ School of Public Affairs*, 2020, <https://hdl.handle.net/2152/81573>; Navarro, S. (2024, December 2). Personal Communication [Personal communication]; J. M. Ramos-García, C. Barrachina-Lisón, and J. E. Ramos, "The Southern Border of Mexico: Problems and Challenges of National Security and its Different Dimensions," *Política, Globalidad y Ciudadanía*, 6(12), 102–127, 2020.

There were also leadership changes at the INM following the Joint Declaration and Supplementary Agreement. Guillen resigned, stating that he disagreed with the approach based on enforcement and increased militarisation.⁵¹ In his place, the career politician Francisco Garduño, who had overseen the country's penitentiaries, assumed command of the institute. The new director continued to hire more INM staff, invest in renovating detention facilities, and provide human rights training.⁵² The establishment of more checkpoints where migration authorities now had to fulfil quotas for detaining migrants and a pivot toward a militarised enforcement marked his tenure.⁵³

While Mexico's armed forces and Federal Police (*Policia Federal*) had been involved in the country's migration enforcement policies, the role of the newly created National Guard (*Guarda Nacional*) was unprecedented. In June 2019, the government created this new civil-military security force to ostensibly combat drug cartels and replace the inept and corrupt Federal Police. However, four out of five of its members comprising the force of more than 100,000 came from the military, along with its leadership, training, and structure.⁵⁴ While the National Guard was formerly under civilian control in the Secretary of Security and Civilian Protection, when it was created, the Secretary of National Defense (SEDENA) maintained operational control. In September 2024, they were formally placed under SEDENA. Further evidence of the militarisation of migrant enforcement is the placement of former army members to the heads of regional INM offices.⁵⁵

According to migration officials and the law that established the new force, the National Guard can provide support to INM but does not have the authority to review migrants' documents and determine their status and rights. "It is only an auxiliary authority; or for example right now with the caravans, they are part of the group that takes care of them or gives them custody for security, but they cannot detain them, they cannot ask for their documents, it always has to be in collaboration with the INM," stated Graciela Martinez from SEGOB (Personal Communication). However, a 2018 decision from the Inter-American Court stated that the use of armed forces should only be used in exceptional circumstances, which has not been the case.⁵⁶

For their part, civil society advocates have increased their capacity to influence regulatory and legal frameworks for migration and asylum. Since 2010, several of these organisations formed the Working Group on Migration Policy (*Grupo de Trabajo sobre Política Migratoria*—GTPM) that directly lobbies and provides technical support to Mexico's Congress and other decision makers. They played a key role in 2020 changes to migration laws that required children and other vulnerable groups to be sent to "shelters" (*albergues*) instead of detention centre.⁵⁷

⁵¹ Milenio, "Tonatiuh Guillén López salio del INM," 19 April 2023, <https://youtu.be/tC8PFPDV4Js>

⁵² S. Leutert, "Andrés Manuel López Obrador's Migratory Policy in Mexico," *LBJ School of Public Affairs*, 2020, <https://hdl.handle.net/2152/81573>

⁵³ Carreño, C. (2024, December 4). Personal Communication IDC Rep [In Person].

⁵⁴ PRAMI, "La Guardia Nacional en el control migratorio: Consecuencias de su integración a la Sedena," Programa de Assuntos Migratorios Universidad Iberoamericana, 2022, https://prami.ibero.mx/archivo/la-guardia-nacional-en-el-control-migratorio-consecuencias-de-su-integracion-a-la-sedena/#_ftn5

⁵⁵ Representatives from an International Government Organization, (2024, December 3). *Personal Communication* [Personal communication].

⁵⁶ Representatives from an International Government Organization, (2024, December 3). *Personal Communication* [Personal communication].

⁵⁷ Carreño, C. (2024, December 4). Personal Communication IDC Rep [In Person].

One of the most significant advocacy achievements was the Supreme Court's March 2023 ruling, which affirmed that immigrants have constitutional protections limiting their detention to 36 hours. The ruling also mandates a different set of measures that authorities must implement.⁵⁸ Rights activists state the ruling has resulted in better treatments and actions towards migrants but has also resulted in other unforeseen consequences. In many cases, migration authorities seek to accelerate processing times, concluding cases quickly without the possibility of seeking legal support and issuing expedited returns and exit orders to people to leave the country.⁵⁹

To address the limits to detention duration, Mexican authorities have reportedly transferred migrants from centre to centre across the country. Pressured not to exceed the 36-hour maximum time in detention, authorities place migrants on a bus to transfer them to another centre when the 36-hour duration begins again. International governmental organisation representatives and migrant rights activists confirmed news reports of bussing migrants, described as "short-term forced disappearances," from the north of Mexico to the south, specifically to Villahermosa in Tabasco. The use of this tactic has quadrupled in the past ten years (see Figure 3). This violates due process, and impacts detainees' ability to access to legal representation, receive specialised study of asylum claims, and communicate with their families. "The fact that they spend 36 hours in one place and then another makes it difficult for organisations or anyone truly interested in advising people or handling their cases, because it simply becomes difficult to communicate with them. Then you're here, you identify them, and then you don't..." claimed Melissa Vertiz from the Working Group on Migration Policy.⁶⁰ Bus rides also often last longer than 36 hours. "This is done once, twice, or three times until people get tired, and at the exit from Villahermosa, there is an OIM with a voluntary return program," explained Salvador Guerrero Navarro from a legal rights clinic at the Iberoamericana University.⁶¹

To address the disappearance of migrants into INM 'busing bureaucracy,' advocacy groups spearheaded efforts to track detainees. The UN Working Group on Arbitrary Detention found that the administrative detention of migrants was not included in official and purportedly comprehensive detention rosters, thereby creating "an information gap that reduces the authorities' capacity to prevent and remedy arbitrary detention of migrants."⁶² In December 2024, the Supreme Court mandated the creation of a public registry of migrant detentions. This registry aims to enhance transparency by providing information on the time, date, location, and authority responsible for each detention, as well as the subsequent status of the migrant, whose name would not be made public.

Civil society organisations and international monitoring bodies continue to highlight government abuse and violations of migrants' rights. Human Rights Center Fray Matias de Cordova coordinates with around 18 organisations to conduct independent monitoring in Southern Mexico. "We document up to 5 operations in one day against people, and most of them were families. There were children beaten, military tactics to separate families...In the

⁵⁸ Representatives from an International Government Organization, (2024, December 3). *Personal Communication* [Personal communication].

⁵⁹ Salvador, Y. (2024, December 2). *Personal Communication* [Personal communication].

⁶⁰ Vertiz, M. (2024, December 2). *Personal Communication* GTPM [Personal communication].

⁶¹ Navarro, S. (2024, December 2). *Personal Communication* [Personal communication].

⁶² UN Working Group on Arbitrary Detention, "Report of the Working Group on Arbitrary Detention-Visit to Mexico," 2023, <https://www.ohchr.org/en/documents/country-reports/ahrc5744add1-visit-mexico-report-working-group-arbitrary-detention>

Figure 3: Number of Foreigners Transported in Mexico, 2014-2024

YEAR	FOREIGNERS TRANSPORTED
2014	10,334
2015	14,617
2016	20,702
2017	8,436
2018	20,857
2019	22,062
2020	29,634
2021	46,661
2022	44,912
2023	56,066
2024	45,857

Source: Information Request, Secretary of the Interior (Gobernacion)

[detention centres] we monitor, we have not observed acts of torture as such, although the infrastructure conditions and treatment itself are already torturous.”⁶³

International bodies have highlighted numerous concerns regarding conditions inside detention centres. Immigration officials and officers have been found to have played a significant role in rights abuses, with reports of officers torturing and abusing detainees.⁶⁴ This year, the Committee on Migrant Workers noted that authorities have failed to enforce the 36-hour detention limit, that children and teenagers continue to be deprived of their liberty in detention facilities, and that detention centres lack basic services and routinely experience overcrowding. The committee also noted that the country has failed to act against corruption and impunity, discrimination and xenophobia, and increased militarisation.⁶⁵ The Working Group on Arbitrary Detention also noted that Mexican officials, including security forces, continue to extort bribes from migrants that lead to their detention when they fail to pay.⁶⁶

⁶³ Salvador, Y. (2024, December 2). Personal Communication [Personal communication].

⁶⁴ Global Detention Project, “Mexico Immigration Detention Profile,” 2024, <https://www.globaldetentionproject.org/countries/americas/mexico>

⁶⁵ UN Committee on Migrant Workers, “Observaciones finales sobre el cuarto informe periódico de México,” April 2025, https://tbinternet.ohchr.org/_layouts/15/treatybodyexternal/Download.aspx?symbolno=CMW%2FC%2FMEX%2FCO%2F4&Lang=en

⁶⁶ UN Working Group on Arbitrary Detention, “Report of the Working Group on Arbitrary Detention-Visit to Mexico,” 2023, <https://www.ohchr.org/en/documents/country-reports/ahrc5744add1-visit-mexico-report-working-group-arbitrary-detention>

Increased enforcement and militarisation have contributed to more violence and human rights abuses against migrants. Some examples of the problems observed by civil society groups tabulated by the Migrant Law Clinic at Iberoamerican University include:⁶⁷

- On the northern border, the National Guard has pursued and detained migrants using force while attempting to cross the border, effectively acting as a U.S. border patrol.
- On the southern border, the National Guard has used batons, shields, tear gas, rocks, and sticks to beat migrants in an attempt to detain them.
- Containment operations have been carried out at night with riot gear, including breaking into churches and private homes without proper authorisation to pursue and detain migrants.
- Instances of family separation have been documented during arrests.
- Acts of torture have been reported against migrant men detained at the [Siglo XXI Immigration Station](#) and against Afro-descendant migrants at the [Cupapé Immigration Station in Tuxtla](#).
- The National Guard fired at a van in Pijijiapan, Chiapas, resulting in the death of a Cuban man on the spot, while another died in hospital, and three others were injured.

Migrant rights groups argue that these abuses are not isolated incidents but are systemic throughout the country's enforcement-based approach to migration and are constantly recurring. Many more are not reported out of fear that detainees will continue to be deprived of their liberty until complaints are addressed.⁶⁸ Increased enforcement has led to overcapacity and human rights concerns in immigration detention centres. In 2019, for example, Mexico's detention system held over 11,000 people while its capacity was only 8,500.

Another important change in the formulation and implementation of migration policy can be observed in relations between the government and civil society. While increased dialogue—if not incorporation of social movements into the government bodies—often characterises the election of leftist or left-of-centre parties into office in Latin America,⁶⁹ such has not been the case of AMLO's presidency regarding immigration. Instead, civil society organisations argue that they have had the least amount of contact with migration authorities during his term in office.⁷⁰ The National Human Rights Commission has lost much of its independence and ability to critique the government's migration policies. And while the Public Defenders Office (*Instituto Federal de Defensoría Pública*) has been more responsive to addressing rights abuses, it remains understaffed and underfunded. Despite wide documentation of human rights violations, authorities often deny that they take place.⁷¹

⁶⁷ PRAMI, "La Guardia Nacional en el control migratorio: Consecuencias de su integración a la Sedena," Programa de Asuntos Migratorios Universidad Iberoamericana, 2022, https://prami.ibero.mx/archivo/la-guardia-nacional-en-el-control-migratorio-consecuencias-de-su-integracion-a-la-sedena/#_ftn5

⁶⁸ Vertiz, M. (2024, December 2). *Personal Communication GTPM* [Personal communication].

⁶⁹ G. Prevost, C. Oliva Campos, and H. E. Vanden, "Social Movements and Leftist Governments in Latin America: Confrontation or Co-optation?" *Zed Books*, 2012, <https://doi.org/10.5040/9781350222649>

⁷⁰ Carreño, C. (2024, December 4). *Personal Communication IDC Rep* [In Person].

⁷¹ Vertiz, M. (2024, December 2). *Personal Communication GTPM* [Personal communication].



IV. SAVING FACE WITH SEMANTIC GYMNASTICS

Despite carrying out the U.S’ “dirty work” on immigration enforcement, AMLO continued to employ rhetoric rooted in the country’s independence and sovereignty, which was abetted by the broad range of euphemisms used in Mexican law and policy to denote—and perhaps disguise—detention and other migration enforcement measures. Grange was one of the first to highlight the extensive use of certain words in migration governance to “soften perceptions of and approaches...that may have a negative connotation.”⁷² That states, especially those espousing liberal ideals, resort to euphemistic phrases suggests a “sovereign discomfort” with the implementation of practices that undermine liberal, democratic norms.⁷³ Mexico’s euphemistic policy language and rhetoric are striking example of this unease.

Mexico’s use of misleading migration language became supercharged after the 2010 massacre of 72 migrants in San Fernando, Tamaulipas, as reflected in the 2011 Migration Law (*Ley de Migración*), according to Campos-Delgado.⁷⁴ The change reflected the global trends of “care-control rhetoric” that individualises protection without questioning the larger system of repression. The 2011 law, for example, created the humanitarian visa but “nested within a migration system that prioritizes migrant removal.”⁷⁵ Article 111 also states how migrants can be “returned” (“*devolución*” or “*devuelto*”), which refers to taking a foreign national (adult or child) in an irregular migratory situation to their country of origin.⁷⁶ Prior to this legislative change, the majority of forced removals were categorised as deportations.

The government has also sought to frame many of its migration control operations as “rescues.” A February 2024 INM news release stated that “the National Guard and INM rescued more than 2,000 migrants,” who were then transferred to INM’s installations in Hermosillo. Authorities often describe the INM’s Beta Groups carrying out “rescues” in cases of “emergencies” and attending to the “humanitarian needs” of certain vulnerable groups such as children, adolescents, and women. These actions, however, lack transparency and can lead to detention. Even the armed forces and National Guard have also conducted “humanitarian rescues” that result in detention and deportation.⁷⁷ According to Campos-

⁷² M. Grange, “Smoke Screens: Is There a Correlation between Migration Euphemisms and the Language of Detention?” *Global Detention Project*, September 2013, <https://www.globaldetentionproject.org/smoke-screens-is-there-a-correlation-between-migration-euphemisms-and-the-language-of-detention>

⁷³ Michael Flynn, “Sovereign Discomfort: Can Liberal Norms Lead to Increasing Immigration Detention?” In: M. J. Guia, R. Koulisch, and V. Mitsilegas (Eds.), *Immigration Detention, Risk and Human Rights* (pp. 13–23). Springer, 2016, https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-319-24690-1_2

⁷⁴ Campos-Delgado, “Euphemistic Rhetoric and Dysphemistic Practices: Governing Migration in Mexico,” *Geopolitics*, 2024, <https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/abs/10.1080/14650045.2023.2185513>

⁷⁵ Galemba, R., Dingeman, K., DeVries, K., & Servin, Y. (2019). Paradoxes of Protection: Compassionate Repression at the Mexico–Guatemala Border. *Journal on Migration and Human Security*, 7(3), 62–78, <https://doi.org/10.1177/2331502419862239>

⁷⁶ In Spanish, the article reads: “El Instituto podrá, previa resolución administrativa, devolver o retornar a su país de origen o de procedencia a los extranjeros que no acrediten su situación migratoria regular en el país...”

⁷⁷ S. Storr, “La militarización de las fronteras—Seguridad Vía Civil,” 24 March 2021, <https://seguridadviacivil.ibero.mx/2021/03/24/la-militarizacion-de-las-fronteras/>

Delgado, Mexico's use of the word "rescue" attempts "to divert attention from the political, regulatory and procedural decisions that precede and trigger this drama in the first place."⁷⁸

Also in keeping with this misleading linguistics, vulnerable populations such as unaccompanied children who are "rescued" are said to be channelled ("*canalizados*") to shelters ("*albergues*") where they receive support from the National System for Integral Family Development (*Sistema Nacional de Desarrollo Integral de la Familia*–DIF). The government defines persons who are *canalizados* as a "foreign person with an irregular immigration status" who was "directed to the DIF network shelters for temporary accommodation."⁷⁹ While *albergues* are not defined by the INM, they refer to facilities intended to offer temporary accommodation and basic services to migrants and refugees. They can be operated by various entities, including government organisations and civil and religious associations. Mexican state governments have also constructed *albergues*. Although they are not supposed to deprive persons of their liberty, those intended for children do have movement restrictions in place.

Many of these "shelters" are in reality closed-door facilities where detainees cannot be contacted, families have trouble communicating, and conditions are inhumane. "At the end of the day, they are not being able to enter and go out to the police, and so this is also a restriction of movement and this is also detention."⁸⁰ The Human Rights Center Fray Matias de Cordova has documented cases where children have been locked in their cells for up to 14 hours a day and have limited access to other children or adolescents, much less schooling, and few stimulating activities.⁸¹

While authorities talk of rescuing vulnerable populations and channelling them to shelters, the language used for other migrants contrasts starkly—they are "intercepted," "presented," and "housed" in "migration stations." Migrant authorities use the term interceptions ("*intercepciones*") to refer to instances where authorities stop migrants traveling within Mexican territory to review their documents. Interceptions are distinct from presentations or foreigner presented ("*presentaciones / extranjero(a) presentado*") which, according to SEGOB, refers to an "administrative measure issued by the National Institute of Migration through which the temporary accommodation [i.e. *alojamiento*] of a foreign person who cannot verify their immigration status is arranged, either for the regularization of their stay or for assistance with their return to their country of origin."

Housing ("*alojamiento*") does not amount to detention in Mexican legislation—instead, someone who is housed ("*alojado*") is defined as a foreigner placed in a migratory station until their status is resolved. However, in effect it does amount to detention, or the act of depriving a non-citizen of their liberty due to their immigration status. The media also employs the term "*asegurado*" (meaning "secured" in English) to refer to those that migration officials have detained. By not using the Spanish word for "detained" ("*detenido*")—which refers to a

⁷⁸ Campos-Delgado, "Euphemistic Rhetoric and Dysphemistic Practices: Governing Migration in Mexico," *Geopolitics*, 2024, <https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/abs/10.1080/14650045.2023.2185513>

⁷⁹ Mexico's Migration Law of 2011 in Article 20 states that INM should "*canalizar a la niña, niño o adolescente al Sistema DIF correspondiente*".

⁸⁰ Representatives from an International Government Organization, (2024, December 3). *Personal Communication* [Personal communication]; see also UN Working Group on Arbitrary Detention, "Report of the Working Group on Arbitrary Detention-Visit to Mexico," 2023, <https://www.ohchr.org/en/documents/country-reports/ahrc5744add1-visit-mexico-report-working-group-arbitrary-detention>

⁸¹ Salvador, Y. (2024, December 2). *Personal Communication* [Personal communication].

convicted felon sentenced to prison—authorities avoid required legal processes such as bringing the individual before a judge or competent authority.⁸²

As the UN Committee on Migrant Workers (2025) notes: “The continued use of terms such as “*asegurado*” or “*presentacion*” to describe measures that deprive migrants of their liberty contributes to the opacity of these practices and to barriers to the exercise of due process guarantees.”⁸³

In Mexican law, migration stations (“*estaciones migratorias*”) are defined as physical facilities established by the INM to temporarily house foreigners who cannot prove their regular immigration status in the country. Calling them migration stations and not detention centres allows authorities to restrict migrants’ rights. For example, a lawyer could enter a prison at any time, but at immigration stations, access remains limited.⁸⁴ In recent years, there have been efforts to change their name to “humanitarian protection centres for migrants” (“*centros de protección humanitaria de personas migrantes*”)—although such a renaming would not result in any substantive changes in their operation or address problematic issues.⁸⁵

Also problematic is Mexico’s use of the term “assisted return” (“*retorno asistido*”), which is widely used by the International Organisation for Migration and other international organisations. According to the SEGOB, an assisted return refers to an “administrative measure issued by the immigration authority to resolve the Administrative Migration Procedure (PAM) of a person in an irregular immigration situation aged 18 years or older, in order to return him or her to his or her country of origin.”

Critically, the procedure presumes that a person freely decides to return to their home country. However, as a migrant rights advocate⁸⁶ and a representative from an intergovernmental organisation confirmed to the authors of this paper—while some people want to return, in most cases, irregular migrants are forced to “self deport” or do not understand what they agree to when entering the assisted return program. In the case of Guatemala, Honduras, and El Salvador—with which Mexico has signed bilateral agreements allowing for rapid, undocumented deportations—returns can be extremely fast, bypassing formal processes and leaving no official deportation record.

Creative semantic wordplay also extends to other government migration procedures. Authorities, for example, use the term “events” to refer to interactions between government authorities and migrants like “raids” or “checkpoints.” However, referring instead to “raids” and “checkpoints” would better communicate the power dynamics, objective, timeframe, and requisite documentation involved.⁸⁷ Another nebulous term which is employed is “migratory alert” (“*alerta migratoria*”)—a label that has no legal specificity. According to experts and advocates, it essentially blacklists an individual at the discretion of migration officials (interviewees conceded that they did not know the criteria for issuing these alerts). At best

⁸² Navarro, S. (2024, December 2). *Personal Communication* [Personal communication].

⁸³ UN Committee on Migrant Workers, “*Observaciones finales sobre el cuarto informe periódico de México*,” https://tbinternet.ohchr.org/_layouts/15/treatybodyexternal/Download.aspx?symbolno=CMW%2FC%2FMEX%2FCO%2F4&Lang=en

⁸⁴ Navarro, S. (2024, December 2). *Personal Communication* [Personal communication].

⁸⁵ Vertiz, M. (2024, December 2). *Personal Communication GTPM* [Personal communication].

⁸⁶ Carreño, C. (2024, December 4). *Personal Communication IDC Rep* [In Person].

⁸⁷ Navarro, S. (2024, December 2). *Personal Communication* [Personal communication].

Figure 4: Forced Removals (“Devoluciones”) and Assisted Returns, 2011-2023

YEAR	FORCED REMOVALS	ASSISTED RETURNS	TOTAL
2011	61,202	4,129	65,331
2012	79,643	5,966	85,609
2013	80,902	8,577	89,479
2014	107,814	18,169	125,983
2015	181,163	36,921	218,084
2016	159,872	38,555	198,427
2017	82,237	17,093	99,330
2018	116,686	27,189	143,875
2019	149,812	46,777	196,589
2020	60,315	8,710	69,025
2021	130,269	23,048	153,317
2022	121,963	12,923	134,886
2023	54,728	7,665	62,393

Source: Information Request, Interior Ministry

some believe that these alerts stem from legitimate government action, such as a court order seeking individuals in connection with a criminal investigation. The number of these alerts has steadily risen over the past ten years, from a low of 19,135 in 2014 to a high of 98,305 in 2021⁸⁸

There are some concerns that the new Mexican Strategy on Migration that includes establishing Multiservice Centers of Inclusion and Development will be yet another extension of the country’s euphemism strategy, disguising the harsh reality of detention and deportation while adhering to the dictates of the United States. Civil society groups have urged vigilance to in the implementation of these new centres given the likelihood they “will involve some form of forced residence, amounting to de facto detention.”⁸⁹

The first of these centres opened March 2025 in Tapachula on Mexico’s southern border, which is being administered by Mexico’s Commission for Refugee Assistance (*Nacional Comisión Mexicana de Ayuda a Refugiados*—COMAR) along with support from UNHCR. However, the Trump Administration’s cuts to UNHCR in Mexico have resulted in a funding shortfall of 60 percent for its Mexico operations leading to office closures and budget cutbacks for migrant shelters.⁹⁰ These funding cutbacks are likely to limit the stated goals of the Multiservice Centers. In light of this, there are concerns that the new Multiservice Centers could offer “assisted returns” to their countries of origin where asylum seekers would see their lives at risk again. As the Global Detention Project has noted: “A key concern is whether

⁸⁸ Information Request, Interior Ministry.

⁸⁹ Global Detention Project, “Mexico: Oral Presentation to the UN Committee on Migrant Workers,” Global Detention Project, April 2025, <https://www.globaldetentionproject.org/mexico-oral-presentation-to-the-un-committee-on-migrant-workers>

⁹⁰ L. Diaz, “U.N. Refugee Agency to Close Four Offices in Mexico Amid Funding Crunch,” *Reuters*, 29 April 2025, <https://www.reuters.com/world/americas/un-refugee-agency-close-four-offices-mexico-amid-funding-crunch-2025-04-29/>

Mexico will provide the full range of legal rights to people held at these facilities, or whether they intend to shield themselves from responsibilities by promoting misleading definitions and terminologies.”⁹¹

⁹¹ Global Detention Project, “Mexico Immigration Detention Profile,” 2024, <https://www.globaldetentionproject.org/countries/americas/mexico>



V. CONCLUSION

The United States has long exerted pressure on Mexico to curb the transit of migrants, refugees, and asylum seekers across its territory. Instead of diplomatic pressure to encourage the country to fulfil its international commitments, the U.S has pressured its neighbour to use whatever means necessary to block migrants and asylum seekers. Mexico has responded by adopting policies focused more on processing migrants, achieving quantifiable objectives, and warehousing people, rather than on protecting people on the move. As an extension of U.S immigration enforcement, Mexico has developed one of the largest detention complexes in the world, incarcerating hundreds of thousands of people each year.

While there are serious doubts about the effectiveness of strong-handed enforcement measures in deterring migration, there is not about the harmful impacts of crackdowns on migrants and refugees seeking safety and security across borders. Studies drawing on survey and ethnographic data from the field demonstrate “little or no deterrent effect” of these crackdowns.⁹² At best, they provide a temporary pause until migrants find alternative routes and destinations. Ultimately, however, it is the varied push and pull factors that generate waves of immigrants in search of hope and refuge. Central Americans, as well as those from other countries, are fleeing government repression, endemic violence, failing economies, and environmental stressors; labour market dynamics and wage differentials—rather than changes to enforcement or politics—are the key factors for drawing migrants to the U.S.⁹³ Seen in this light, AMLO and his successor Claudia Sheinbaum’s deployment of the National Guard are merely symbolic gestures to demonstrate Mexico’s collaboration to constrain transmigration.

Mexico’s recent left-leaning populist leaders have espoused the rights of migrants, seeking partnerships to address regional migration problems, and addressing root causes. While they have experimented with policy changes including the temporary increase in humanitarian visas and increasing the overall approval rates of asylum, there is room for progress: Experts argue that COMAR should have a larger budget and the Mexican government should grant mass recognition for refugees similar to Colombia’s granting of Temporary Protection Status to Venezuelans crossing its border. However, in lieu of such a humanitarian approach to migration, Mexico has employed various euphemisms that allow it to claim such policies while also implementing crackdowns that appear aimed at assuaging U.S. concerns.

Mexico’s heavy use of euphemisms to frame its migration policies at the international level must be seen as a product of the country’s broader transit control regime. According to

⁹² W. Cornelius, “Mexico: From Country of Mass Emigration to Transit State,” *Inter-American Development Bank*, 2018, <https://publications.iadb.org/en/publications/english/viewer/Mexico-From-Country-of-Mass-Emigration-to-Transit-State.pdf>

⁹³ D. Bahar, “The Often Overlooked “Pull” Factor: Border Crossings and Labor Market Tightness in the US,” 2024, <https://www.cgdev.org/publication/often-overlooked-pull-factor-border-crossings-and-labor-market-tightness-us>; G. H. Hanson and A. Spilimbergo, “Illegal Immigration, Border Enforcement, and Relative Wages: Evidence from Apprehensions at the U.S.-Mexico Border,” *American Economic Review*, 89(5), 1337–1357, 1999, <https://doi.org/10.1257/aer.89.5.1337>

Campos-Delgado,⁹⁴ U.S and Mexico co-bordering agreements highlight a consistent trend in which Mexico conducts the U.S’ “dirty work.” By outsourcing migration control and physically keeping migrants away from the U.S-Mexico border, the United States creates moral distances from the militarised and inhumane practices employed by Mexico—shielding itself from social and international repercussions. So much so, that when UN bodies engage in periodic reviews of Mexico’s human rights record, detailing abuses and offering recommendations, Washington denies having any responsibility.⁹⁵ For example, Human Rights Watch noted that the U.S incorrectly claimed that migrants facing removal were afforded “procedural protections,” yet tens of thousands under MPP and nearly 3 million under Title 42 were expelled without access to counsel, asylum screening, or safeguards against removal to danger, including grave abuses suffered in Mexico.⁹⁶

With Trump back in the White House and tariffs once again imposed on Mexico, history appears to be repeating itself: We are witnessing a performative crackdown on transmigration, escalating abuses committed against migrants, and only a temporary pause in migration flows. Or, in the words of one activist, “We continue to do work for the United States, which is where people with mobility are most interested in going. And so, the wall is us.”⁹⁷

⁹⁴ A. Campos-Delgado, “Abnormal Bordering: Control, Punishment and Deterrence in Mexico’s Migrant Detention Centres,” *The British Journal of Criminology*, 61(2), 476–496, 2021, <https://doi.org/10.1093/bjc/azaa071>

⁹⁵ Vertiz, M. (2024, December 2). *Personal Communication GTPM* [Personal communication].

⁹⁶ Human Rights Watch, “Submission to the Universal Periodic Review of the United States of America,” April 2025, <https://www.hrw.org/news/2025/04/02/submission-universal-periodic-review-united-states-america>

⁹⁷ Carreño, C. (2024, December 4). *Personal Communication IDC Rep* [In Person].



www.globaldetentionproject.org