

PERSPECTIVES FROM THE NATIONAL SOCIETIES

Assistance for and protection of migrants: Experience of the Honduran Red Cross

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Abstract

The Honduran Red Cross began working in the area of migration in July 2012, when it set up the Migrant Assistance Module in Corinto for Honduran migrants returning over land at the Honduran–Guatemalan border. The Honduran Red Cross has helped hundreds of returning and irregular migrants, thanks to agreements with the Ministry of Foreign Affairs and the National Migration Institute. It has also worked with other National Red Cross Societies in the region, the International Federation of Red Cross and Red Crescent Societies and the International Committee of the Red Cross, which have helped it to strengthen its capacity and build a comprehensive vision for the protection and assistance of migrants. This article summarizes the action that the Honduran Red Cross has undertaken with respect to migration and explores the services provided at the Corinto module, the Honduran Red Cross's subsequent management of the Returning Migrant Assistance Centre in Omoa and other care centres for migrants returning because of their irregular status, and the development and implementation of projects on migration and related topics.

Keywords: Honduran Red Cross, migration, migrants, Corinto, Omoa.

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Migration trends in the Americas

The global landscape is changing drastically as structural and political developments in some countries increase the level of insecurity among the population, causing internal displacement and migration. In the past ten years, the intensification of violence (armed conflicts and other situations of violence) has led to massive population movements. According to the 2015 *World Migration Report* published by the International Organization for Migration (IOM), “there are an estimated 232 million international migrants... and 740 million internal migrants... in the world”.¹ According to the UN News Centre, there are around 20 million refugees, bringing the total number of international migrants up to 244 million.²

Regardless of the cause that drives people to migrate irregularly, when they arrive in host countries they expect to enjoy a sense of well-being and freedom, and to live a safe and healthy life. This is, however, sometimes preceded by a long and dangerous journey rife with risks that include lack of protection, neglect, exclusion, extortion, abuses, discrimination, ill-treatment, enforced disappearance, human trafficking and even death, as well as an endless catalogue of human rights violations that require timely action to be redressed.

Migration has a long history in the Americas, particularly with regard to movements between neighbouring countries and areas within the region, driven by events such as those referred to above. In the last two decades, however, migration to the United States has overshadowed these population movements between the region’s countries and areas. As noted in the 2015 *World Migration Report*, Canada and the United States are now two of the ten countries where about 50% of the world’s international migrants live.³

In spite of this general trend, in the past decade, there have been significant migration flows into some Latin American and Caribbean countries. The Organization of American States’ (OAS) 2017 *International Migration in the Americas* report observes that, between 2012 and 2015, 7.2 million individuals left their country of origin in the Americas.⁴ According to the same report, 48% emigrated to the United States and Canada, 34% to Latin America and the Caribbean, and 18% to Europe. The report also shows that in 2015, 880,000 people worldwide emigrated to countries in Latin America and the Caribbean, representing 20% of total emigration, with Barbados, Chile, Ecuador and Panama establishing themselves as the new emerging countries of immigration in the

1 IOM, *World Migration Report 2015 – Migrants and Cities: New Partnerships to Manage Mobility*, Geneva, 2015, p. 17.

2 “Deputy UN Chief Presents New Report on Global Migrant Trends, Highlighting Rising Numbers for 2015”, *UN News Centre*, 12 January 2016, available at: news.un.org/en/story/2016/01/519782-deputy-un-chief-presents-new-report-global-migrant-trends-highlighting-rising (all internet references were accessed in March 2018).

3 IOM, above note 1, p. 17.

4 OAS and Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development, *International Migration in the Americas: Fourth Report of the Continuous Reporting System on International Migration in the Americas (SICREMI)*, 2017, p. 42, available at: www.oas.org/documents/eng/press/SICREMI-2017-english-web-FINAL.pdf.

Americas. Furthermore, the study highlights that “[i]n the Americas, as in other parts of the world, migration trends have been reinforced by the increase in the number of people fleeing their countries, whether from natural catastrophes, or economic or political instability;”⁵ migrants may also be fleeing from conflict zones or conditions of economic collapse or underdevelopment, or because of expectations that regulations facilitating immigration to a particular country will come to an end, as is the case for Haitians, Colombians, Venezuelans and Cubans.

In the same period, there was a surge of extra-continental migration to Latin America, which was noted by the OAS and IOM to be “‘new and growing’, comprised of mixed migration flows with diverse types of migrants: economic migrants, refugee applicants, refugees and victims of migrant smuggling”.⁶

The situation in Central America is exceptional because all irregular migrants whose destination is North America (Canada, the United States or Mexico) must pass through it. It is also an area with very high migration outflows, particularly from the so-called Northern Triangle of Central America. It is therefore a region of origin, transit, destination and return for thousands of irregular migrants. Irregular migrants in Central America come from the Caribbean, South America, Asia and Africa; there are also regular and irregular migrants who come from North America.

Guatemala, El Salvador and Honduras are the Central American countries from which the largest numbers of people migrate to North America (mainly the United States) and outside the continent (mainly Spain). The year 2014 was eventful in terms of migration in the region, with large numbers of unaccompanied migrant children and adolescents (around 60,000) arriving at the US border and many more on the migration route through Mexico. This situation led to a humanitarian emergency being declared by the Honduran government⁷ and prompted a response from the countries involved, consisting not only of humanitarian assistance but also activities to ensure the safe and dignified return of migrants to their own countries. Laws, policies and tools were adopted to implement repatriation processes. Even so, in 2016, US Customs and Border Protection intercepted nearly 46,900 unaccompanied children and more than 70,400 family units at the US–Mexico border.⁸

In 2015, approximately 3.4 million Central Americans were residing in the United States, and 85% of them were from the Northern Triangle. According to the mid-2015 estimates of the United Nations (UN) Population Division, 78% of the 4.1 million migrants from Central America resided in the United States; 15% were scattered within the region (including Mexico), while the rest were in Canada and Europe.⁹

5 *Ibid.*, p. v.

6 OAS and IOM, *Regional Report: Irregular Migration Flows to/within the Americas from Africa, Asia and the Caribbean*, 2016, p. 7.

7 Republic of Honduras, Executive Decree PCM 33-2014, *La Gaceta*, No. 33,476, 11 July 2014, available in Spanish at: www.acnur.org/fileadmin/scripts/doc.php?file=fileadmin/Documentos/BDL/2016/10642.

8 Gabriel Lesser and Jeanne Batalova, “Central American Immigrants in the United States”, *Migration Policy Institute*, 5 April 2017, available at: www.migrationpolicy.org/article/central-american-immigrants-united-states.

9 *Ibid.*

Migration trends in Honduras

Honduras has seen different forms of human mobility, including forced displacement and voluntary migration. Large-scale migration began in 1998 in the wake of Hurricane Mitch, when the main reasons for leaving the country were family reunification and the search for better employment prospects and a better life. However, recent years have seen a growth in forced internal and external displacement caused by violence and crime in the country. The increased presence of organized crime, in its different forms (such as murders, kidnappings, extortion, forced recruitment and the control of territories), has forced a large number of people to leave their places of residence in order to protect their life, freedom, well-being and physical safety, owing to the lack of suitable protection mechanisms.¹⁰

In Honduras, ensuring the human dignity of internally displaced people and migrants is a complex challenge, as it is a country of origin, transit, destination (to a lesser extent) and return. It therefore has to meet the assistance and protection needs of returnees, irregular migrants, children, adolescents, young people and adults.

The parliament of Honduras – the National Congress – adopted a law on Honduran migrants and their families¹¹ as a starting point for the implementation of measures to raise awareness about the dangers of irregular migration. It also established activities to provide assistance and protection to Honduran migrants and their families in Honduras and in other countries, and to promote their reintegration into society. However, the sheer number of Honduran migrants returning to the country has meant that response is outstripped by demand. According to the Observatory for Consular Affairs and Migration in Honduras, in the three years up to December 2017, a total of 193,267 Honduran migrants returned to the country, with a decrease of 30.8% in 2017 as compared to 2016.¹² These figures include migrants returning by land, sea and air.

With regard to assistance for irregular migrants, changes were implemented in the National Institute for Migration (Instituto Nacional de Migración, INM), the office responsible for migration policy in Honduras. While management of migration policy remained under the area of national security, a human rights-based approach to assistance for irregular migrants¹³ was developed. This approach includes granting irregular migrants humanitarian visas, which have eventually become three- to five-day permits for leaving the country, with the aim of reducing the risks they face and

10 Inter-Agency Commission for the Protection of Persons Displaced by Violence, *Characterization of Internal Displacement in Honduras*, 2015.

11 Ley de Protección de los Hondureños Migrantes y sus Familiares (Law on the Protection of Honduran Migrants and Their Families), available at: www.tsc.gob.hn/leyes/Ley_proteccion_HND_migrantes_y_fam_2014.pdf.

12 For a comparative table showing statistics on migrants returning to Honduras, see “Cantidad de Hondureños retornados al país el año 2017”, Observatorio Consular y Migratorio de Honduras, available at: conmigho.wixsite.com/subscym-conmigho/retornados-2017. See also IOM, “Honduran Statistics”, available at: triangulonorteca.iom.int/honduran-statistics.

13 For more statistics on irregular migration in Honduras, see OAS and IOM, above note 6, pp. 40–41.

facilitating their journey. The work itself involves improving reception facilities and seeking partnerships for the delivery of humanitarian assistance. In the case of minors, in line with government policy, the Directorate for Children, Adolescents and Family (Dirección de Niñez, Adolescencia y Familia, DINAF) intervenes to ensure that irregular migrant children and adolescents receive due protection and assistance.

Humanitarian commitment of Honduran Red Cross in the area of migration

Actions based on humanitarian principles

The Fundamental Principles of the International Red Cross and Red Crescent Movement (the Movement),¹⁴ the Declaration “Together for Humanity” adopted at the 30th International Conference of the Red Cross and Red Crescent,¹⁵ and the humanitarian needs of hundreds of migrants in the country have prompted the Honduran Red Cross to take action to provide protection and assistance for them.

The Honduran Red Cross’s work in the area of migration began with the support of the International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC), and continues to the present day. The International Federation of Red Cross and Red Crescent Societies (IFRC) also provides support through the implementation of projects aimed at protecting the rights of migrants in the region, especially in the Northern Triangle.

The first step taken by the Honduran Red Cross and the ICRC in 2011 was to conduct a joint study to assess the situation of returning Honduran migrants. The study involved meeting with the authorities and visiting repatriation points, including the Returning Migrant Assistance Centres (Centros de Atención al Migrante Retornado, CAMRs) for migrants arriving by air, located at the international airports of Toncotín in Tegucigalpa and San Pedro Sula in the municipality of La Lima.

The study concluded with the development of a project to set up a Migrant Assistance Module at the Corinto border crossing (the Corinto module) located between Honduras and Guatemala. The project was aimed at assisting returning

14 The Fundamental Principles of the Movement are humanity, impartiality, neutrality, independence, voluntary service, unity and universality. International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC), *The Fundamental Principles of the International Red Cross and Red Crescent Movement: Ethics and Tools for Humanitarian Action*, available at: www.icrc.org/en/publication/0513-fundamental-principles-red-cross-and-red-crescent. See also Amelia B. Kyazze, “Walking the Walk: Evidence of Principles in Action from Red Cross and Red Crescent National Societies”, *International Review of the Red Cross*, Vol. 97, No. 897/898, 2016, available at: www.icrc.org/en/international-review/article/walking-walk-evidence-principles-action-red-cross-and-red-crescent.

15 30th International Conference of the Red Cross and Red Crescent, Resolution 1: Declaration “Together for Humanity”, 26–30 November 2007, Geneva, available at: www.icrc.org/eng/resources/documents/publication/p1108.htm.

Honduran migrants and migrants in transit (children, adolescents, young people and adults) that were entering through Corinto by land.

Before the module was set up, Corinto was a challenge for the hundreds of migrants returning each day, as there was no assistance available and no frequent transport to the nearest city (Puerto Cortés, which is 60 km away), from which they could start their journey back home. Many of them returned to the migration route.

Volunteering and humanitarian assistance at the Corinto module

Assistance was provided to migrants by Honduran Red Cross volunteers, who had received appropriate training in migration issues, safety, restoring family links (RFL) and technical and financial management. They were also required to have skills in other areas, such as psychosocial support, first aid and leadership. There were originally two teams, each consisting of three people working weekly shifts, meaning that they would travel 60 km to Corinto each day. Sometimes they would have to stay for entire days (twenty-four hours) until the buses bringing the Honduran migrants arrived. Staffing had to be increased once the service was in operation and demand rose. Operational procedures were developed for the delivery of services, including management of the module, opening and closing of the module, assistance on board the buses arriving in Corinto, assistance at the module, management of special cases, coordination, media relations and communication, and safety.

In addition to assistance for adults, services were also provided at this border point for unaccompanied children and children travelling with their families, in coordination with the government agency responsible at that time for ensuring children's rights in the country. This assistance varied in some respects, taking into account the criteria established by the government agency and the best interests of the child.

The services provided included support for migrants from the time of their arrival at the border, with volunteers boarding the buses and welcoming them to boost their spirits and self-confidence, and to assuage their sense of frustration at their failure to achieve their dream of migrating. The volunteers explained the services offered and invited the migrants to pay an optional visit to the module when they got off the bus. Whereas volunteers initially had to remind the returning migrants when they disembarked that, for example, the services were free and accessible as needed, after a few months the buses were arriving at the border with the passengers well aware of the Corinto module, its services and the Honduran Red Cross. The migrants also received information and guidance for their onward journey. With the aid of a map on the wall, one of the volunteers would show them where they had entered the country and points of interest en route to the city, where they would have a better chance of finding a way to travel home. A telephone was made available to the returning migrants so that they could contact their families.

First aid was provided in an area fitted out for this purpose, providing the required privacy, and staffed by a paramedic. Migrants requiring further medical treatment were transferred to a hospital as part of this service. Hygiene kits, the contents of which varied according to the age (infants, children and adults) and sex (men and women) of the recipient, were handed out. Those given to children included a snack (fruit purée/baby food, biscuits and fruit juice), oral rehydration solution and nappies. Purified water was given to migrants as they entered the module, and children were also given water once they had been received by the government agency responsible for their care.

Provision was made for particularly vulnerable migrants unable to continue their journey to stay at a small hotel near the module. They were given food, and transport was provided once they were fit enough to travel. Lastly, migrants who were ill, mutilated, injured or in a poor state of health were transported from Mexico and other countries using the ambulance services of the region's National Societies, forming a "humanitarian chain".

The work of the Honduran Red Cross in Corinto was known to Honduran government institutions, representatives of other governments, UN agencies, civil society organizations and components of the Movement. There were extensive discussions about the need for the government to provide comprehensive assistance to migrants returning by land, including a service which, in addition to registering entry into the country, would allow returning migrants to receive humanitarian assistance such as that offered by the Honduran Red Cross. The module ceased to operate on 22 September 2015 after the Honduran and Mexican governments agreed a new repatriation point 45 km from the border, in the municipality of Omoa.

Management of the Returning Migrant Assistance Centre in Omoa and other work

On 23 September 2015, in accordance with the law on the protection of Honduran migrants and their families, the Honduran government opened CAMR – Omoa, the first centre for receiving and assisting Honduran migrants returning to the country by land.

Given the Honduran Red Cross's experience in assisting returning migrants, an agreement for it to manage CAMR – Omoa was signed with the Ministry of Foreign Affairs in November 2015 and remains in force. Red Cross volunteers continue to deliver the humanitarian services that had previously been provided by the Corinto module, in accordance with the Fundamental Principles of the Movement. The Honduran Red Cross currently supports all reception centres for Honduran migrants returning by land, sea or air. It also provides free telephone calls at the Migrant Child and Family Care Centre, a DINAF unit that receives migrant children, adolescents and family units returning by land.

As mentioned above, the migrants assisted by the Honduran Red Cross include irregular migrants passing through the country. The first operation to meet the needs of this group of migrants started in August 2016, when the

Honduran Red Cross Choluteca branch (southern area) reported the presence of over 2,000 mostly Haitian migrants, including both children and adults. It approached the INM about the problem, and as a result the National Society started an RFL service (telephone calls) – provided to irregular migrants at the Irregular Migrant Care Centre based in Choluteca – which is still in operation, with funding provided through a Disaster Response Emergency Fund allocation granted by the IFRC. Health information, different types of hygiene kits, first aid and paramedic support for medical assessments and hospital care, and purified water are provided to migrants for a three-month period after their arrival. These services were delivered under an agreement signed with the INM, which has been renewed until 2020. Through these activities, the Honduran Red Cross has assisted more than 127,910 people, providing over 421,392 services.¹⁶

The Honduran Red Cross's involvement in activities to provide assistance and protection to migrants is not, however, limited to the operations described above. With guidance from the ICRC, a number of initiatives have been undertaken in the area of protection, while projects are being developed with other National Societies to address the problem of internal displacement. Together with the IFRC, the Honduran Red Cross is involved in implementing the Rights of Migrants in Action project, the Violence and Legal Protection in Migration in the Northern Triangle of Central America project, which has now ended, and other regional projects. It is also part of the IFRC Migration Task Force, helping to develop tools and strategies that promote the Movement's work on migration.

Outside the Movement, a UNICEF-funded project is being carried out to implement the Community Strategy for the Emotional Recovery of Children, with a focus on returning migrants.

Coordination with the government and other actors to strengthen the response

From the outset, the Honduran Red Cross's response in the area of migration entailed two approaches. The first involved the National Society, in its role as auxiliary to the government, helping the public authorities to carry out humanitarian activities, complementing but not substituting State action. While working in Corinto, the Honduran Red Cross engaged with central government and local authorities on numerous occasions. The second approach highlighted the primacy of the Fundamental Principles, particularly the principle of humanity, basing all activities on human rights in order to ensure the protection of migrants and their enjoyment of said rights.

Dialogue and coordination with State actors led to the signing of a number of the agreements referred to above, as well as participation in high-level discussion forums such as the Regional Conference on Migration, a forum led by regional

¹⁶ Honduran Red Cross statistics on how many people were assisted and the quantity of services provided between 2012 and 2017. On file with authors.

foreign affairs ministers for coordination and decision-making aimed at achieving safe and orderly migration. The Honduran Red Cross engaged in dialogue with the Honduran Ministry of Foreign Affairs to establish processes for and development of guidelines on assistance for migrants (agencies such as the Norwegian Refugee Council and the Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) also participated), and it maintained relations with the INM, thereby ensuring an effective humanitarian response for irregular migrants.

As an actor with recognized expertise in the field of migration nationally, the Honduran Red Cross takes part in training processes with UN agencies, including UNHCR and the IOM. From the start, it has coordinated its work with civil society organizations such as the National Forum for Migration in Honduras, the Human Mobility Pastoral Group and the Centre for Human Rights Research and Promotion in Honduras, which is also a partner in the Rights of Migrants in Action project. The Honduran Red Cross also partners with academia, participating in the Support Group of the Observatory for International Migration in Honduras, set up by the Latin American Faculty of Social Sciences.

Achievements and challenges

Thanks to its experience and knowledge in the area of migration, the Honduran Red Cross has positioned itself as an important partner in this field nationally and within the Movement, hence its participation in various forums dealing with migration issues. In addition to the Movement guidelines set out in the IFRC migration policy¹⁷ and migration strategy,¹⁸ the Honduran Red Cross's National Development Plan 2016–2020 identifies human mobility as one of the major strategic areas of social development. This implies taking action, together with the other components of the Movement working in Honduras, to establish a regional Red Cross and Red Crescent platform on migration. Such a platform should be backed up by a policy and strategy that allow it to define its actions and strengthen its capacities as the forum for coordinating and consolidating efforts to protect and assist this vulnerable group, whether they are returning Honduran migrants, migrants in transit or migrants with specific protection needs.

Human mobility is itself a reality that is changing because of diverse factors that require careful analysis. However, even though the Honduran Red Cross has important partners producing knowledge in this area, it believes that producing knowledge from its own experience and in-depth research on the effects of its

17 IFRC, *Policy on Migration*, Geneva, November 2009, available at: www.ifrc.org/Global/Governance/Policies/migration-policy-en.pdf.

18 IFRC, *IFRC Global Strategy on Migration 2018–2022: Reducing Vulnerability, Enhancing Resilience*, Geneva, 2017, available at: media.ifrc.org/ifrc/wp-content/uploads/sites/5/2017/12/IFRC_StrategyOnMigration_EN_20171222.pdf.

work will improve its response and enable it to identify and address new issues – for example, protection needs and the humanitarian effects of human trafficking.

The Honduran Red Cross firmly believes that its humanitarian action as auxiliary to the public authorities must continue in order to deliver the comprehensive response that migrants need: striving to help them to become resilient and integrate, and to ensure recognition of the need for the respect, exercise and enjoyment of their rights.

The Honduran Red Cross has already come a long way in its efforts to meet the humanitarian needs of migrants. However, more research and knowledge on the subject would lead to more efficient and effective action for improving the resilience of migrants, as a matter of priority.