Experiences of Flight and Persecution. Individuals with International Protection Needs Trapped in Tijuana

Experiencias de huida y persecución. Personas con necesidades de protección internacional atrapadas en Tijuana

Israel Ibarra-González[1] & María Dolores París Pombo[2]

ABSTRACT

This article analyzes the impact of organized crime in the contexts of flight, persecution, and lengthy wait of Mexican and Central American migrants in Tijuana. Fifteen structured interviews and twenty-nine semi-structured interviews were conducted with migrants requiring international protection at a government shelter. The findings indicate that exit factors related to criminal and gender-based violence increase the risk of assaults, exploitation, and human rights violations during movement and prolonged waiting at the border. Moreover, the study reveals the effects of multi-scalar violence—including criminal, institutional, and gender dimensions—on entrapment in hopes of asylum. The research contributes to advancing the relational understanding of criminal violence and forced mobility, while its originality lies in explaining the continuum of violence during forced displacement.

Keywords: 1. forced migration, 2. criminal violence, 3. human rights violations, 4. gender-based violence, 5. migration policy.

RESUMEN

El artículo analiza el impacto del crimen organizado en la huida y persecución de personas mexicanas y centroamericanas, así como su llegada y espera prolongada en Tijuana. Se realizaron 15 entrevistas estructuradas y 29 semiestructuradas a migrantes con necesidad de protección internacional en un centro de acogida gubernamental. Los resultados indican que los factores de salida de violencia criminal y de género incrementan los riesgos de sufrir agresiones, explotación y violaciones a derechos humanos durante su movilidad y espera fronteriza prolongada. Se muestran los efectos de la articulación multiescalar de la violencia –criminal, institucional y de género– en el atrapamiento con esperanza del asilo. El estudio enriquece el conocimiento relacional entre la violencia criminal y la movilidad forzada. Su originalidad radica en la explicación del continuum de violencia en el desplazamiento forzado.

Palabras clave: 1. migración forzada, 2. violencia criminal, 3. violaciones a los derechos humanos, 4. violencia de género, 5. política migratoria.

[1] El Colegio de la Frontera Norte, Mexico, israelibarra@colef.mx, https://orcid.org/0000-0002-6737-2349
[2] El Colegio de la Frontera Norte, Mexico, mdparis@colef.mx, https://orcid.org/0000-0003-1714-2112

INTRODUCTION[3]

Since Donald Trump's first administration (2017-2021), a set of immigration control and security policies and programs implemented on the southern border of the United States has led to the blockage, expulsion, and prolonged waiting in northern Mexico of forcibly displaced Mexican and Central American asylum seekers. Many of these policies continued, and new control measures were introduced, during the Joe Biden administration (2021-2024) (Capicchiano Young, 2024). This caused thousands of Mexicans and foreigners to remain in cities such as Tijuana in a condition that various authors have termed "entrapment" (Odgers-Ortiz et al., 2023). During this prolonged wait, people survive in extremely precarious conditions and are vulnerable to organized crime.

This study seeks to explain the process of forced displacement from Mexico and Central America, and its relationship to organized crime in places of departure, mobility, and entrapment. It explores criminal violence as a factor in migrant flight, both during the journey through Mexico and the wait in Tijuana. Forced migration linked to criminal violence is explained as a process of gradual intensity that does not stop at the moment of departure but often continues with persecution throughout the journey. The presence of organized crime groups in different areas of the countries of origin, transit, and entrapment at the border, means that migrants can be re-victimized, leading not only to initial flight but also to repeated, forced relocations.

Fieldwork included 15 structured interviews (mostly closed and some open-ended questions) along with 29 semi-structured interviews with Mexican, Guatemalan, Salvadoran, and Honduran migrants held in a reception center run by the Mexican government in Tijuana (the Carmen Serdán Migrant Integration Center) while waiting to cross into the United States and apply for asylum.

This article is divided into five sections. The first addresses the issue of forced migration in relation to various forms of violence (criminal, State, and gender-based). By means of the "continuum of violence," concept proposed by Scheper-Hughes and Bourgois (2004), it seeks to explain the spiral of aggression and serious human rights violations, ranging from daily domestic abuse and widespread extortion to kidnapping and murder.

The second section presents the methodology of this research, as well as the demographic characteristics and reasons for flight of the interviewees. A third section describes criminal violence and the territorial control imposed by criminal organizations (COs) in both Mexico and northern Central America (Guatemala, Honduras, and El Salvador). It also analyzes—based on the literature on crime and forced displacement, and information provided by the interviewees in this research—how criminal and gender-based violence is linked to other forms of State-sponsored violence.

The fourth section describes the ongoing persecution and the risk of attacks in other settlements in Central America and Mexico. It shows how forced migration often involves multiple displacements in the, sometimes desperate, search for safety. Fleeing to the United States is then perceived as the only option for protection from persecution. The final section addresses experiences of violence on Mexico's northern border, related to expulsions, the precariousness of waiting, and insecurity.

MULTIPLE VIOLENCE AND FORCED MIGRATION

Stephen Castles (2003) draws attention to the need for a more in-depth study of forced migration and the processes of social transformation in this era of global capitalism. The author proposes an analysis of human mobility in the wake of globalization and the end of the Cold War, highlighting the role of the strategic economic interests of the Global North (oil, diamonds, weapons, etc.) in protracted local or regional wars. Likewise, it highlights that war situations in countries of origin have shifted: "the protagonists are no longer large standing armies but irregular armed forces. The aim is not control of territory but political control of the population" (p. 18).

Ariadna Estévez (2022) argues that forced migrations are a component of extractivism itself, accounting for the fact that ultimately the forced depopulation of vast territories facilitates the dispossession and appropriation of natural resources. Moreover, the growing securitization of migration routes, the increasing number of migrant deaths, and the proliferation of criminal activities in transit territories, often in collusion with the authorities themselves, result in this mobile population being harassed and threatened before reaching a destination where they can secure their lives.

Drawing on fieldwork and various recent contributions in the Americas (see, for example, Alba Villalever et al., 2024), forced migration is understood here as a process of human mobility due to a considerable degree of threat to individuals' life or integrity, which may be a consequence of either persecution for racial, religious, ethnic, political, national, gender, or group-based grounds, or of imminent threats to personal integrity, harms to family members, loss of housing and livelihoods due to development projects, extractivism, climate change, and natural or human-made disasters (Castles, 2003). People fleeing these conditions often try to resettle in their country of origin, either in a nearby city or in small towns relying on family networks; but the spread of criminal networks means that internally displaced persons can be found again by their persecutors and forced to cross a border to seek international protection.

In Mexico and Central America, this form of human mobility is frequently linked to violence caused by COs, which are sometimes entangled with local institutions and security agencies through corruption and collusion (Paris, 2017). This violence is linked to extremely unequal power relations in communities of origin where State or irregular armed actors impose their will through physical aggression and exemplary punishment. It is also embedded in what Segato (2013) calls the "gender structure": "In 'normal' socio-political conditions of the status order, we, women, are

the payers of tribute; they, the receivers and beneficiaries. And the structure that connects them establishes a symbolic order marked by the inequality that organizes all other scenarios of social life governed by the asymmetry of a status law" (p. 24).

Although the perpetrator is usually a member of a CO or a male member of the family (a partner, the father), the State's responsibility is often evident through omission or collusion. The State actively participates in creating conditions of extreme inequality and dispossession promoting neoliberal policies and megaprojects that disregard the needs of local populations. Additionally, it is an agent of direct violence in its fight against COs, often through militarization, increase sexual violence in "war" zones, and the criminalization of certain social sectors (Menjívar & Walsh, 2017).

Violence and forced displacement benefit certain business sectors linked to extractive industries, criminal markets, or their counterpart, the security industry. Financial resources from illegal activities enter the formal economy. As criminal groups consolidate their territorial control, they engage in both legal and illegal sectors of commerce, mining, agriculture, and transportation. Thus, there are multiple social, economic, and symbolic anchors of criminal organizations in the daily life of the localities under their control (Guerra, 2022; Maldonado, 2019).

COs operate on a large scale considering "the number of victims, perpetrators, the amount of damage, its duration, frequency, and complexity" (Quintero, 2021, p. 340). In the loose sense of "macro-criminality," crimes can be committed by non-State actors with the State's inaction while, strictly speaking, the organizational system and structure differ from "criminal norm" due to the role played by the State, resulting in a "criminality strengthened by the State" (Hassemer, cited in Quintero, 2021, p. 341).

Forced displacement is part of a spiral of violence intersecting economic, political, ethnic, and gender violence (Abrego & Menjívar, 2023; Menjívar & Walsh, 2017). In the interviews, criminal violence most often emerges as the immediate trigger for flight, but gender violence stands out. Yet, narratives reveal a continuum of violence (Scheper-Hughes & Bourgois, 2004) or multisided violence (Menjívar & Walsh, 2017) before displacement, including harassment and sexual violence, extortion through threats, kidnapping or forced recruitment by COs, assaults, beatings, torture, enforced disappearances, and the murder of family members. Querales-Mendoza (2020) points out that victims experience "a flow of continuity" between enforced disappearance and internal forced displacement. Bourgois (2001) speaks of "everyday violence": routine micro-level practices and aggressions of interpersonal, domestic, and criminal nature. As such, people normalize both these "petty brutalities" within the home and the terror experienced at the community level. They thus create a common sense or "ethos of violence" (p. 8).

Similarly, when it comes to gender-based violence in Honduras, Menjívar and Walsh (2017) argue that "The layered and interconnected nature of these forms of violence contributes to their normalization and the internalization of frames through which individuals understand and make sense of the social world" (p. 223). It is in this sense that the authors speak of "a sociopolitical architecture of violence" that organizes people's daily lives and shapes their frames of reference.

The mechanisms of bodily mortification impose a heavy psychological burden on displaced individuals. The detailed descriptions in interviews, printed and cellphone photographs, and videos recorded with the same device can be explained as the desire, described by Guerra (2017), to harm the victims' bodies beyond all rationality and to publicize these images, highlighting class, gender, homophobic, identity-based, and even religious dimensions.

METHODOLGY

Qualitative fieldwork was conducted at a Mexican government reception center in Tijuana in order to analyze the experiences of flight, persecution, and forced waiting experienced by Mexican and Central American people trapped on Mexico's northern border. Forty-four people (18 men and 26 women) were interviewed during September and October 2021. Data collection began with a structured instrument (15 questionnaires with mostly closed questions) and was later adapted to a semi-structured instrument (29 interviews), so as to delve deeper into the stories of forced displacement. Due to the security risk for both the interviewees and the interviewers, the subjects were never identified by their real names. Some of them, having already fled once or more as victims of organized crime, received threats upon being relocated to Tijuana. Pseudonyms were used in the informed consent forms and during the interviews to protect their identities, recordings included, and to prevent potential threats aimed at obtaining information.

The interviews were conducted at the federal government's Carmen Serdán Migrant Integration Center (MIC), located in an industrial park in Tijuana's East Zone. Security was provided by the National Guard, which manned two access points and monitored the behavior of the migrants. Various United Nations agencies and national and international non-governmental organizations (NGOs) provided services such as psychological support, recreational and educational activities for children, and legal advice for applying for refugee status in Mexico or for asylum in the United States.

The MIC was a safe place, according to the interviewees; this was emphasized by those who had previously stayed in civil society shelters, and especially those who had lived in a makeshift camp near the El Chaparral border crossing. However, this place was also overcrowded, with little opportunity for privacy. Migrants had access to shared dormitories, meals, showers and bathrooms, medical and psychological care, a job center, phone charging centers, and quarantine areas for those with contagious diseases in the context of the COVID-19 pandemic. Many people preferred to stay in, as their basic needs were met and the surrounding neighborhood was perceived as dangerous due to high crime rates. Moreover, there was a persistent fear of being located by their attackers and potentially losing their lives.

Interviews were conducted in the breakfast area when it was empty, as a means to preserve privacy and build trust. Some people came with their partners, their children, or both, as many were in family units. However, minors were not interviewed, and measures were taken to prevent

them from overhearing conversations; they were seated at nearby tables and given coloring books and toys.

The objective was to analyze the risk of violence experienced by asylum seekers forced to wait on Mexico's northern border while their cases were resolved in immigration courts in the United States. However, with the health emergency declared due to the COVID-19 pandemic, U.S. authorities closed the land border to all asylum seekers. Thus, at the time of the interviews, most of the people at the MIC had been expelled after attempting to cross irregularly or had been unable to cross the border and were waiting for the entry point to open.

The interview guide sought to understand the experiences of flight, persecution, and forced waiting, delving into matters of violence, human rights violations, and internal displacement routes, which, in the case of the Central American migrants, became international issues. Finally, interviewees were inquired about the conditions at the border and the risks perceived while waiting.

Table 1 shows information on the 44 displaced persons. Eleven women were from Mexico and 15 from Central America, while 6 men were from Mexico and 12 from Central America. Overall, the main reason for leaving was criminal violence (30), followed by domestic violence (7), and poverty (4).

Table 1. Sociodemographic Characteristics and Factors Driving the Mobility of Interviewees

		Women n = 26	Men n = 18	Total N = 44
Country of origin	**Mexico**	**11**	**6**	**17**
State	Michoacán de Ocampo	7	3	10
	Guerrero	1	2	3
	Jalisco	2	1	3
	Chiapas	1	0	1
Region of origin	**Central America**	**15**	**12**	**27**
Country	Honduras	6	6	12
	El Salvador	6	3	9
	Guatemala	3	3	6
Exit factor	Criminal violence	15	15	30
	Climate factors	1	1	2

(*continues*)

(*continuation*)

Poverty	2	2	4
Domestic violence	7	0	7
Violence against LGBT people	1	0	1

Source: Own elaboration.

Although Mexicans are categorized as internally forced displaced persons (IFD), they are at the border intending to flee the country. Two Mexican interviewees had already undergone asylum proceedings in the United States, one with a positive resolution and the other with a negative one. In the first case, her return to Mexico was due to family circumstances that forced her to visit her place of origin, and when she tried to return to the United States, she found herself stranded in Tijuana due to border closure. In the second, she was deported to Mexico when her application was denied.

CONTINUUM OF VIOLENCE IN THE PLACES OF ORIGIN

During the 2000s, criminal markets in Mexico and northern Central America underwent significant changes resulting in criminal organizations seizing control of large territories. In Central America, these organizations are generally identified as "maras" or gangs, and their power concentrates primarily in urban neighborhoods on the outskirts of cities. In Mexico, they are known as cartels, despite a clear trend toward the fragmentation of large criminal corporations and the emergence of multiple territorial gangs (Bailey, 2014). These gangs compete for large rural areas, urban nodes located on arms and drug trafficking and human smuggling routes, as well as for spaces for drug dealing, piracy, prostitution, and drug production in cities. They are often organized into networks affiliated with a larger organization, controlled by local or regional leaders (Guerra, 2017).

In Central America, territorial control has been built through the establishment of patronage and protection networks, agreements, bribery, the seizing of local governments, police, and other security forces, as well as extensive extortion systems (International Crisis Group, 2017). Over the past decade, extortion has become the lifeblood of criminality and the economic engine of gangs, reinforcing territorial control and providing economic support and salaries to multiple local members engaged in surveillance and coercion. Small and medium-sized businesses, professionals, transport workers, and even households located within a gang's area of control timely pay the so-called war tax, under the threat of being violently attacked, kidnapped, or even murdered if they fail to comply (Insight Crime and Global Initiative against Transnational Organized Crime, 2019). The pressure to pay for so-called "protection" or war tax frequently evolves into forms of gender-based violence or forced recruitment for participation in criminal activities.

According to various authors and reports on maras and gangs in Guatemala, Honduras, El Salvador, and Mexico, these gangs have evolved into increasingly complex, networked forms of territorial control, based both on support and protection networks and on coercive and predatory mechanisms (Saunders-Hastings, 2018). These two aspects, clientelist and predatory, are not mutually exclusive; gang members can be both victims and perpetrators of increasingly crude and destructive violence at the neighborhood level.

Central American gangs stand out for their strong recruitment capacity, whether voluntary or forced; they recruit children and teenagers dedicated to intimidating schoolmates or monitoring the block where they live (Insight Crime and Global Initiative against Transnational Organized Crime, 2019). The interview with Araceli, a Salvadoran woman, reveals the level of vulnerability of minors, and the resulting need for their guardians to flee with them: "They wanted to make my nephew and my son into gang members. So they sent me a message: if we took the children out of the country—they were 11 years old—they would shred us into pieces, they would kill us" (Araceli, personal communication, October 11, 2021).

Violence can escalate from threats, extortion, and dispossession to the kidnapping or murder of family members, as reflected in the account of Eduardo, a native of Guerrero and owner of a small food business. Initially, the CO that controls the region forced him to pay 5,000 pesos (MXN) a month. A few weeks later, they doubled the "fee" under threat of death. The so-called "fee" continued to increase until Eduardo was forced to flee with his family to seek asylum in the United States. However, they were expelled to Mexico, so they tried to settle in Cancún, Quintana Roo, where their pursuers tracked them down again and forced them to return to their hometown. Eduardo reopened his business in his home and continued paying the ten thousand pesos demanded by the criminals for several months. Still, the criminals would arrive at any time in his house and forced him to serve them for free. After a few months of extortion, they began threatening him with forced involvement in drug trafficking.

> They told my wife and daughter that if I did anything they would kill them [...]. They told me I had to sell drugs, so I had to work for them if I wanted to stay alive [...]. I told them no, but they already had [...] drugs there and they told me someone would come by at such and such a time to pick them up. [...] Just last month, in August [...] they arrived in a truck and one of them got out, a guy I'd never seen before. [...] I peeked out [...] I told him I was going to open the door for them and then I hugged them [the wife and daughter], and I told them to leave [...] through the back door and try to jump over [the fence] and the neighbors' fences and go there. I thought, "oh well," I was sure they were going to kill me or do something to me [...] I practically said goodbye to them [the wife and daughter]. The man told me: "Next week you're going to start working with us, but you're going to close here, you're going to come with us, you're going to come with us to fucking *throw hands*." [...] I told him yes, if I didn't accept, they would kill us all, my entire family (Eduardo, personal communication, October 13, 2021).

Shortly before fleeing for the second time, Eduardo went downtown to have dinner, where he was forced into a truck and kidnapped. He was blindfolded and taken to his own home, and there

threatened to death if he did not follow the rules imposed by the criminals. Eduardo decided to report the incidents, and the authorities informed him that they would open an investigation file. However, they never visited him at home or interviewed him again, so he decided to flee again with his family to Tijuana, in hopes of seeking protection in the United States.

Eduardo's interview reveals not only the cruelty and violent means of coercion used by COs, but also the authorities' failure to enforce the rule of law, which systematically fosters a feeling of helplessness among displaced individuals, a sense of lack of institutional response, or denied State protection.

Criminal organizations operating in Mexico combine the most brutal forms of coercion and predation with clientelist networks based on protection and even the distribution of consumer goods among the population. The forced displacement of communities and the disappearance or murder of social and environmental leaders guarantee the establishment of highly polluting extractive industries, the destruction of forests, and the expansion of drug production areas. These ties, alliances, and even the seizing of local governments reflect a transformation of power networks at the regional level and the establishment of what Maldonado (2019) calls "political/criminal hegemony" (p. 751).

This illegal supremacy is reinforced by the support and protection of segments of the population who legitimize the activities of the criminal organizations due to their lack of other economic options and State assistance (Guerra, 2017). The complexity of Mexican cartels enables them to commit crimes against global and high-value-added industries, as explained by Luis, a Mexican internally displaced person whose knowledge of international trade operations in the port of Lázaro Cárdenas, Michoacán, made him a significant asset for criminals. Since he had a job as a maritime container guard, he was repeatedly robbed. He then left that job and was harassed by members of a CO who wanted to recruit him for extortion and illegal trafficking activities (Luis, personal communication, September 9, 2021).

Property or business dispossession can also occur suddenly, after the inheritance or acquisition of assets. This is the case, for example, of Cándido, originally from Michoacán, who inherited the house from his grandparents, with whom he had grown up. He went to take possession and was attacked by the *halcones* (junior members of a CO). They tied him up, tortured him for two days, and stole his motorcycle and his grandparents' house. A similar case is that of Israel, originally from San Salvador. His wife inherited a pupusa stand located between the territories of two different gangs. Both demanded a large payment that the couple could not afford, so they kidnapped and beat them and left them for dead under a bridge.

The growing power of the COs and the militarization process have also intensified gender-based violence, from domestic violence to femicide. Social war demands desensitized soldiers, capable of displaying extreme cruelty. These masculinities are necessary and functional not only to State security agencies but also to organized crime (Segato, 2013). Beatriz, 25, recalls her experience in Honduras as a collateral victim of her partner, who was linked to gangs:

I got together and went to live with this guy [...] he had a lot of problems on his hands, and they caught up with me and my daughter. They came and held us at gunpoint inside our place... they threatened us that he would die that day, and I too. We fled from there to another place, but [...] they found us too. [...] He had to be taken out in a rush because he was at risk [...] After looking for me, they started looking for his family; they killed one of his uncles; then they looked for his brother, and then another uncle. [...] [I] worked to support my daughter, but [...] they sent me a message through another person, saying that it was no longer only about me, but her, and that she was his daughter... and since he owed so many things, she was the one... like, the one who would have to pay [...] With her, they were going to get even and take away something that hurt him more than his other relatives (Beatriz, personal communication, October 11, 2021).

COs impose on women the role of partners of men integrated into the structures of organized crime. Criminals kidnap young women, often teenagers, or force them to accompany them under threats of death against them and their families. In contrast, teenage males are recruited for surveillance purposes—known in Mexico as *halcones* or *punteros*—and, over time, are assigned to undertake other criminal activities, including contract killings.

Zing Varela et al. (2024) studied the emotions and resilience of women undergoing forced displacement from Honduras and Mexico who were residing in shelters in Tijuana. These women had faced violence in their place of origin, during their journey, and in conditions of entrapment. They expressed their feelings of guilt, fear, anger, and hope for themselves and their families.

Gender-based violence can also be a form of blackmail against other family members, leading to their forced recruitment. Karen, a displaced Salvadoran migrant, recounted fleeing to avoid becoming a gang member, while her father was being recruited:

I was a student [...] my father was a taxi driver and paid a certain amount of money for each car [to the gang] [...] once they called him and asked if he could transport some weapons, drugs, and illicit items... from one place to another... my father refused [...] They got angry and told him that if he didn't comply, they would take me as their wife, because I hadn't had a boyfriend. They kept a close eye on me. I was a schoolgirl (Karen, personal communication, October 18, 2021).

LGBTIQ+ people are constantly harassed in the family, community, and workplace. Daily violence can escalate into threats and physical attacks. For example, Isaura, a displaced woman of Mexican origin, was forced to flee the state of Michoacán due to the persecution she suffered after starting a relationship with her partner, Matilde. Initially, Isaura lost her job when her employer disapproved of her sexual orientation. Later, she encountered a more dangerous situation when she was harassed and threatened by her partner's ex-husband, who had ties to organized crime.

He followed us, and after he found out we were a couple, he would show up everywhere [because he was a taxi driver there] and follow her… and since he has acquaintances and is involved in organized crime, he would get people following us, until one day in the evening, while we were out for a drink, we were leaving the place and a car was following us; armed

and hooded. And we had to leave in a rush… the insecurity was too much. He was going to kill us because he didn't want to see his children with two people like us (Isaura, personal communication, October 13, 2021).

People get trapped in this illegal social order; If they do not fulfill their assigned role, they are threatened, tortured, made disappear, and murdered. Some migrants travel with reports of complaints, photographs of injuries from torture or of their murdered relatives (when they are not made disappear) in an effort to gather evidence for asylum claims in the United States. Many initially attempt to resettle with relatives in a town or city in Mexico or Central America. If they are found by their persecutors or revictimized, they decide to leave for the United States.

MULTIPLE DISPLACEMENTS AND REVICTIMIZATION

The vast territorial control of gangs or cartels leads people to make the decision to either submit entirely to criminal power or flee their homes. But in many cases, forced internal displacement does not guarantee freedom from violence and persecution. Thus, ten interviewees experienced at least one prior displacement before arriving in Tijuana. Some people from Central America tried to relocate first within the same country or to another Central American country before having to flee to Mexico. Beatriz, originally from Honduras, recalls: "I moved to the capital of the department, Trujillo, Colón [...]. About four days had passed when they took us out [...]. We left one day at midnight, walking, because we no longer trusted anyone" (Beatriz, personal communication, October 11, 2021).

In the case of displaced Mexicans, the extent of criminal networks and the ability to track migrants' location are evident, as people who relocated to other states were found by their pursuers. For example, Alejandro fled his hometown in Jalisco in 2020 after hooded criminals arrived at his home in trucks and seized his land and livestock. He managed to travel with his mother and siblings to the state of Colima and later to Nayarit, but on both occasions, they were tracked down and threatened. They headed to Tijuana and went directly to the border to request asylum in the United States but found the land crossing point closed and joined a large migrant camp near the El Chaparral border crossing, where they lived for a while.

In the case of Jesús, originally from Michoacán, after being extorted, threatened, and robbed of his belongings, he fled with his family and tried to seek refuge in the state capital, Morelia:

I don't know how they found us. They threatened us again, saying they already knew where we were. And what did they want? Well, now it was the land, everything. But we really left everything there, we brought nothing with us. We left with whatever we could, fleeing from them and in fear, especially for the children. We didn't even let the children go out to play in the yard anymore, because these people would even stalk around (Jesus, personal communication, October 12, 2021).

Mexicans who traveled straight to the border to request asylum were not attacked during the journey. Once they left the area closest to their place of residence, the perimeter where they are most vulnerable to being found by members of the COs who threaten them, they have the option of taking a bus or a plane to the border thanks to the freedom of movement they enjoy inside the country.

However, the possibility of relocation over time is latent, as happened to Eduardo after a failed attempt to apply for asylum in the United States:

> I came here to Tijuana about two years ago. Yeah, to apply for asylum. They denied me anyway, and I didn't want to return to Guerrero, so I went to Cancún. Yeah. I worked there for a while, but I received that kind of messages, calls, and I wasn't so worried until they told me in a message that they already knew where I was, that I was in Cancún. Yeah, that I better returned (Eduardo, personal communication, October 13, 2021).

For people from Central America, one mobility strategy consists of requesting asylum upon arriving in Mexico, in Chiapas or Tabasco. This entails long waiting periods in those states, where they can be located by gangs or be victims of other criminals (París, 2017). One interviewee was located by his pursuers while waiting in the long lines outside the Mexican Commission for Refugee Assistance (COMAR, acronym in Spanish for *Comisión Mexicana de Ayuda a Refugiados*) in Chiapas. Marvin, originally from El Salvador, claims that gang members were lined up right there with refugee applicants and threatened to kill him, forcing him to flee north without being able to complete his immigration paperwork (Marvin, personal communication, October 15, 2021).

Some Central American interviewees claimed to have hired a *coyote* (smuggler) to travel from their hometowns to the U.S. border. For example, Indira, originally from Honduras, traveled with a little girl in the back of a trailer. Nearly 200 people were with her, so they could not even move, and several fainted from dehydration. The transporters threatened her to cover the girl's mouth or prevent her from crying. Although they paid five thousand dollars to the coyote, who promised to take them to the United States, they lost the money when they were expelled in Tijuana.

In other instances, migrants attempted to travel through Mexico on their own or hired coyotes solely to cross the country's southern border. In all of these cases, the accounts mention at least one assault by criminals or an extortion by immigration authorities. A Honduran man, Karlo, was extorted along the way by the National Guard. In Monterrey, he was kidnapped and demanded 20,000 pesos for his release.

Two men who crossed the border with their families through the state of Tamaulipas, in northeastern Mexico, described the most extreme forms of physical violence, including kidnapping and human trafficking. One of these families was expelled through Tijuana, Baja California, and the other through the city of Reynosa, Tamaulipas. Upon entering Mexico, Iván and his family (the latter) were victims of kidnapping and human trafficking.

When we left [through Reynosa], we took a taxi, and that taxi sold us to the mafia. We were kidnapped for 21 days. My arm is even swollen from when they hit me with a board. They hit me in the head with a gun. They hit my wife's knee. She fell and hit her head and convulsed. Thank God, they didn't do it in front of my son. My son didn't experience that trauma, but they did keep us away from him. We didn't know where he was or what was going to happen.

They asked us for our relatives' phone numbers, and we told them we didn't have any, that that was why we'd crossed like that. And so, with the help of an aunt, we paid them almost 30,000 pesos. And they put me to work for them for almost 15 days: I had to guard a warehouse at night; without food or water; and without seeing my son and wife.

And one of the guys in charge of the warehouse took pity on me: he gave me food and water. But the others didn't know, because if they found out, they'd beat him. He argued on my behalf that they let me go: that I was going to die there and burn down the warehouse. Because without food, water, and staying up all night... that's when they let me go... "Go now," he told me. "We've already gotten what we needed from you. You made your payment with the time you guarded the warehouse" (Iván, personal communication, October 15, 2021).

By returning Iván and thousands of other asylum seekers to Mexico, the U.S. government is effectively exposing them to the same dangers they fled from, violating the principle of non-refoulement, a cornerstone of the international refugee protection system. The spread of criminal networks and widespread violence in Mexico and Central America thus leads to the re-victimization of expelled, relocated, or blocked individuals. As the next section will show, Mexico's northern border is precisely a highly vulnerable area to criminal and gender-based violence, where people are trapped for months or years while waiting to be able to apply for protection in the United States.

WAITING, PRECARITY, AND VULNERABILITY IN TIJUANA

The interviewees in this investigation had relatives in the United States, which is why they were stationed at the border. Their relatives were willing to cover the costs of a *coyote* (smuggler) or had informed them about their possibilities of applying for asylum. However, none of them knew about the U.S. government's policies of rejecting and expelling migrants and asylum seekers with the support of Mexican authorities.

Since 2016, people arriving in Tijuana to request international protection were forced to sign up on waiting lists, managed first by shelters and civil society organizations and later by volunteers in collaboration with Mexican authorities. In 2019, a program officially called the Migrant Protection Protocols (MPP) and known as Remain in Mexico began to be implemented. Through this program, people who had managed to cross into the United States to request asylum or other forms of protection could be returned to Mexico to wait out their application process. They crossed

the border only on the days of their hearings in immigration courts, located at U.S. ports of entry (Paris, 2022).

The health emergency caused by the COVID-19 pandemic exacerbated the political and legal mechanisms of the U.S. government that forced refugees to wait on the Mexican side. All immigration court hearings were canceled, and immediate expulsions to Mexico were authorized. These policies of expulsion and prolonged waiting soon led to situations of extreme precarity. Many foreign migrants lacked work permits or the resources to rent rooms or apartments. During the pandemic, migrant shelters were limited to operate at half capacity prompting the formation of makeshift camps. The homeless migrant population became increasingly visible and at risk of being revictimized by crime. Some people lost their rental housing or, being unable to find space in the more institutionalized shelters with better infrastructure, were sent to makeshift and dangerous shelters or ended up homeless. From February 2021 and for more than a year afterward, a makeshift camp was established near the border (El Chaparral). Set up with hundreds of tents donated by social organizations and volunteers from the United States, this camp lacked sanitary services and any kind of help or intervention from the authorities, except for a small mobile stand run by the State Ministry of Health and monitoring by the National Commission for Human Rights (Del Monte & Paris, 2021).

Irwin and Karen (mentioned in the third section) met in El Salvador, but became a couple when their paths crossed in Mexico, after attempting to settle in other Central American countries on their own. Together they faced a series of acts of violence in El Chaparral, Tijuana, before arriving at the MIC. Below, the couple describes the entry of organized crime into El Chaparral following a racial conflict:

> One of the Haitians beat up a Mexican there. A small group of thugs came and started taking everyone out [...] they were hooded [...]. We stayed, but they threatened us for defending a Haitian. That Haitian didn't bother anyone. He only came to pass the night. It was like, everyone would pay for one's mistake. We only heard the women and children screaming. They had bats and machetes (Karen, personal communication, October 18, 2021)

> Tent by tent, they took out everyone [...] They also brought weapons [...] With long guns, and we had nowhere to go [...] They weren't from El Chaparral, but they were involved with them. We were frightened. We had nowhere else to go (Irwin, personal communication, October 18, 2021).

Migrants stranded in the city —particularly people in need of international protection— are vulnerable to crime due to the precarious conditions they find themselves in (París, 2024). As numerous human rights reports have documented, the prolonged wait of migrants in northern border cities greatly increases their chances of experiencing threats, extortion by COs or corrupt authorities, kidnapping, and rape (Hope Border Institute & Human Rights First, 2021). Persecution and criminal violence are very common in Tijuana; this city, located in the far northwest of Mexico, is indeed one of the most dangerous in both Mexico and Latin America, according to its homicide rates (Hernández Hernández & Betancourt Cabrera, 2023). Staying in migrant shelters

does not guarantee the safety of displaced people. While Tijuana is the city with the largest number of shelters on Mexico's northern border (Coubès et al., 2020), only a few are professionally equipped and fully serviced. Many shelters are rather makeshift accommodations in churches, camps, or abandoned buildings.

Most of the migrants interviewed at the MIC had spent at least one night in migrant shelters or camps before arriving at this center. The interviews reveal not only extreme precariousness but also diverse experiences of violence in makeshift shelters. In the context of the pandemic, the National Migration Institute transferred people to places that could receive them, without considering the unsafe conditions or the lack of utilities.

Indira, a migrant from Honduras who fled with a 5-year-old girl due to violence by her partner, recalls that when she arrived in Tijuana, they were taken to a very poor shelter, very far away, dusty, with a dirt floor, where there was neither food nor water. Some migrants were turned away for not carrying money, and her own money was taken (Indira, personal communication, September 18, 2021).

Isaura, who fled with her partner and two children, arrived with her family at the port of entry to request asylum in the United States. There, they directed her to a men's shelter:

> That shelter was for men only, and they told us they were going to give us a chance to stay upstairs where they were going to build a gym, and they started sending us there in Ubers [a member of a local organization paid for the transportation of several migrants]. I was the first to arrive, with two elderly people and a girl about 13 years old. But when I saw the place, it looked really ugly. Some men started peeking in and saying, "Fresh meat." I was really scared, so I spoke to my partner, and he said, "No, wait, we're already on our way in other Ubers." They arrived, and everyone was like "no." We're not staying here (Isaura, personal communication, October 13, 2021).

The people interviewed in Tijuana did not report having been victims of physical assault or violence at the MIC. Nonetheless, two individuals related discrimination or stigma due to their sexual orientation, and several interviewees spoke of the stress of constantly sharing their living space with hundreds of people. On the other hand, those who had received death threats expressed feeling protected by the presence of the National Guard and the Army at the facility.

They explained that during their stay they tried to contact civil organizations that help with asylum applications in the United States, sometimes successfully and sometimes not. Furthermore, when they manage to contact these organizations, the follow-up to their case depends greatly on the current immigration policy. Eduardo (personal communication, October 13, 2021) recounts that he filled out an online survey for an organization. Most of the displaced migrants interviewed completed this type of asylum process through one of the civil associations that were collaborating with the U.S. government at the time to facilitate border crossings for people in vulnerable situations.

Some interviewees stated that they fled without even knowing that an asylum process existed; their sole objective was to protect their lives. Upon arriving at the shelters, they learned about the option and then approached civil society organizations for legal support with their applications.

CLOSING REMARKS

Forced migration, from different regions of both Mexico and Central America, can be interpreted as a form of resistance against the coercive dynamics imposed by organized crime. Despite facing constant threats, extortion, and violence—whether through direct attacks or through control mechanisms such as kidnappings, forced disappearances, and the murder of family members—displaced individuals do not completely succumb to the logic of subjugation that criminal organizations seek to impose. As such, their forced displacement reveals a tension between the forces of coercion and the resilience of communities that, far from being simple victims, manifest an implicit resistance to the violent order that seeks to dominate them.

Beyond attributing forced displacement solely to organized crime in Mexico and Central America, it is crucial to acknowledge the structural complicity of States in this phenomenon. Whether by action or omission, States contribute to the conditions that force people to abandon their homes. State negligence, systemic corruption, and, in some cases, direct or indirect support for criminal groups reinforce an environment of violence and vulnerability that perpetuates the cycle of forced migration. In this sense, State responsibility lies not only in its failure to guarantee security, but also in its active role in reproducing the conditions that facilitate dispossession and involuntary mobility.

The capitalist structure in which criminal organizations are embedded maximizes the extraction of material and human resources, beginning before forced displacement and continuing throughout the persecution and entrapment of victims on the move. This exploitation is not limited to the economic but encompasses the co-optation of the labor force of individuals prior to displacement. When these individuals are recruited for various roles within the criminal network, they face the constant threat of deadly violence against themselves or their families. Once their productive capacity is exhausted, these individuals are discarded, becoming expendable in a system that exploits life to the point of exhaustion. In this context of structural violence, flight emerges as the only possibility for survival. Therefore, forced displacement is not only a consequence of direct violence, but a process linked to broader extractivist logics, where human life is subordinated to capital, and violence becomes a mechanism of accumulation.

The State also plays a role in the land grabbing process, whether through corrupt practices, such as payments received from criminal groups, or by charging informal and unofficial fees to migrants in exchange for their transit through national territories. Although human rights and freedom of movement of citizens are more likely to be respected within their own countries, these types of violations intensify in the case of foreigners, as evidenced by the testimonies presented here.

This phenomenon reveals the State's participation in extractive dynamics that transform migratory transit into an opportunity for economic and political gain. The collusion between State

and criminal actors creates a double vulnerability for migrants: on the one hand, as exploitable subjects and, on the other, as commodities whose mobility is conditioned by payments and bribes.

The concept of continuum of violence, as used in this article, is approached from a longitudinal perspective, up to the moment when people find themselves entrapped at the border.

The resistance of forcibly displaced people manifests itself in a variety of mobility strategies, ranging from displacement within their communities of origin to broader trajectories that cross interstate (interprovincial or interdepartmental) and international borders. This movement not only responds to the need to flee organized crime, but also reflects a constant attempt to evade networks of control and violence. In the case of deportation after failed attempts to apply for asylum in the United States, these individuals resume their journey, seeking refuge in new territories. However, criminal networks often manage to track them down and reestablish their dominance, demonstrating the persistence of control mechanisms. Theoretically, this phenomenon reveals the tension between the dynamics of agency and coercion in contexts of systemic violence and forced mobility, challenging the notions of territorial sovereignty and State protection against criminal networks.

Corruption networks between the State and organized crime highlight the lack of official protection for displaced people, who, far from receiving institutional support, are often revictimized. The authorities' complicity is made clear when criminals are alerted after a civil or criminal complaint is filed. Moreso, displaced persons, particularly foreigners, face extortion in the form of bribes demanded by authorities at different levels of government, not limited to immigration authorities, to ensure their free transit through the country.

Organized crime not only generates forced displacement but also exerts control over the territories through which people must transit to flee. This domination creates ongoing tension, forcing victims to face extortion, kidnapping, threats of being forced to return, and to pay transit fees or suffer reprisals on their way to their final destination. Although the regulation of migratory transit is a State function, the influence of organized crime has usurped, and sometimes even co-opted, these functions through corruption. This phenomenon reveals a decomposition of the nation-State, in which non-State actors appropriate sovereign functions, disrupting the legitimacy of migration control and State authority.

Translation: Fernando Llanas.

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