



► In Tegucigalpa, Honduras's capital, the police guard schools so as to protect pupils from the endemic gang violence on the streets.

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HONDURAS HUMANITARIAN CONSEQUENCES OF VIOLENCE

by Ruth Silva, DG ECHO

The expansion of violent, organised armed groups in Central America and Mexico has severely increased the level of humanitarian needs in recent years, leading to the confinement of entire neighbourhoods and the forced displacement of thousands, particularly children.

Central American countries are some of the poorest in Latin America. They are also some of the most violent in the world. Every year, tens of thousands of families, women and unaccompanied children flee the violence wreaking havoc in the 'Northern Triangle' region of El Salvador, Guatemala, and Honduras. They seek refuge in North America, and, increasingly, non-traditional asylum countries such as Costa Rica, Nicaragua or Panama. The humanitarian consequences are daunting.

"I left because they threatened to kill my two remaining children," says Susana Lopez (for security reasons the names in the story have been changed), a mother of four who escaped her hometown of San Pedro Sula in Honduras after the Mara-18 murdered her sons Anthony, 13, and Kenneth, 7. *"They were killed just four days apart, because they refused to join the mara,"* she told DG ECHO during a recent field visit.

In recent years, Honduras has ranked as the most violent country in the world, in terms of homicides outside of warzones. The Violence Observatory at Hon-

duras' National Autonomous University (UNAH – see link below) claims there are an average of 14 murders every day. In San Pedro Sula, the second largest city, there are 111 murders per 100,000 residents. In comparison, the average for the European Union is under 3. Law enforcement agencies and institutions struggle to cope, with more than a million small arms in circulation in a country of roughly 8 million people.

"This part of the world, which is confronted with a severe drought and food insecurity exacerbated by the El Niño phenomenon (see CEND# 27, pages 20-21), also suffers the impact of the violence. The combination of those factors makes this a humanitarian crisis causing forced displacement and severe restrictions of access to many Central American regions," explains Vicente Raimundo, head of DG ECHO's Regional Office for Central America, Mexico and the Caribbean.

The European Commission's response focuses on supporting those most vulnerable. *"Through the 'Education in Emergencies' pillar we are mainstreaming protection interventions within regular humanitarian actions. This ►*

Juillet - Août 2016



► Miguel, from Tegucigalpa, sells tortilla on the street to support his family, but attends a Commission-funded school on Saturday mornings. He hopes to become an engineer.

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means assuring the right of the victims to receive assistance and also funding protection programmes,” Raimundo explains.

Education to fight pervasive violence

In Honduras, the Commission’s ‘Education in Emergencies’ project promotes access to formal education and protective environments. The project, implemented by humanitarian partners the Norwegian Refugee Council (NRC) and Save the Children, helps out-of-school children return to class. The goal is to promote learning and communication skills to avoid being involved in the pervasive violence.

The project assists children and adolescents between 5 and 17 years of age, attending school in high-risk communities affected by the violence. Both children and their parents are reached through the coordinated efforts of teachers and community leaders.

“Thanks to the NRC classes, I have taken up the idea of becoming an engineer,” explains Miguel Torres, a 14-year old from Tegucigalpa, the capital. The violence has fed a massive migration crisis. Since 2008, the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) has recorded a nearly fivefold increase in asylum-seekers arriving in the United States from El Salvador, Guatemala, and Honduras. Formal requests for asylum have multiplied by thirteen over the same period.

According to the Council on Foreign Relations, “nearly 10% of the Northern Triangle countries’ 30 million residents have left, mostly for the United States”. Children are particularly affected, as “nearly 100,000 unaccompanied minors arrived in the United States from El Salvador, Guatemala, and Honduras between October 2013 and July 2015,” the Council observed in a January 2016 report.

“Fear is always there,” says Yelba Porras, a 55-year old resident of San Pedro Sula. “The best is to stay at

home and if you see something, ignore it,” she explains. “My son Cristian, 17, only thinks of leaving the country; he was a

good student and a very good artist, but he left school because of the gangs and constant threats,” Juan Soto, from Tegucigalpa, told DG ECHO recently.

Children are specifically targeted by armed actors. They face threats, forced recruitment, abuse and violence, and schools are used by maras as recruiting centres. This is why, since 2014, the European Commission has also supported its partner UNHCR in establishing several migrant shelters in Guatemala and Mexico, so as to provide unaccompanied or separated children and adolescents with primary protection, ensuring their safety and wellbeing through educational and psychosocial programmes.

“The maras stalk children, they recruit kids to turn them into messengers; you see children as young as 10 or 12 involved with gangs,” explains Gloria Sanchez, a mother who walks her daughter to school every day, fearing what may happen on the streets.

In Honduras, “over 400 children under age 18 were killed in the first half of 2014, most thought to be the victims of maras violence. Many more are pressured to join maras, often under threat of harm or death to themselves or to family members. Girls face a particular risk of sexual violence and assault by maras members,” Human Rights Watch pointed out in a March 2016 report.

The ‘Education in Emergencies’ project is a first, essential step in protecting and offering a future to 1,300 children in Honduras, helping to restore hope to the most vulnerable victims of the violence. ■

DG ECHO – Central America and Mexico factsheet

► <http://europa.eu/ipJ66wY>

DG ECHO – Education in Emergencies

► <http://europa.eu/!hh97cm>

Honduras’ National Autonomous University (UNAH) – Violence Observatory

► www.iudpas.org/observatorio