African Migrants and the American Dream: So close and yet so far

Migrantes africanos y el sueño americano: tan cerca y tan lejos

Migrantes africanos e o sonho americano: tão próximos e tão distantes

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Abstract

The numbers of migrants from sub-Saharan Africa crossing in Latin America on their way to the U.S. are unprecedented, yet the issue is largely absent from U.S. and Mexican immigration public discourse. From 2015 to 2019, thousands of African migrants trekked through several Latin American countries on their way north, aiming to enter the United States through its southern border. Some settled in one of the countries they crossed while others reached the U.S. border to request asylum. When U.S.-Latin American migration relations changed under the Trump administration, many migrants and refugees got stuck in Mexico. This article examines the dynamics of irregular migration through the context of African migration in Latin America and how some migrants cope when faced with unexpected global and migration policy changes far from their control.

Keywords: asylum; Africa; migration; Mexico; refugees; border

Resumen

La cantidad de migrantes del África subsahariana que cruzan América Latina en su camino a los EE. UU. No tiene precedentes, sin embargo, el tema está en gran parte ausente del discurso público de inmigración de EE. UU. Y México. De 2015 a 2019, miles de migrantes africanos atravesaron varios países de América Latina en su camino hacia el norte, con el objetivo de ingresar a Estados Unidos por su frontera sur. Algunos se establecieron en uno de los países que cruzaron, mientras que otros llegaron a la frontera de Estados Unidos para solicitar asilo. Cuando las relaciones migratorias entre Estados Unidos y América Latina cambiaron bajo la administración Trump, muchos migrantes y refugiados se quedaron atrapados en México. Este artículo examina la dinámica de la migración irregular a través del contexto de la migración africana en América Latina y cómo algunos migrantes se enfrentan a cambios inesperados en la política global y migratoria lejos de su control.

Palabras clave: asilo; África; migración; México; refugiados; frontera

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Resumo

O número de migrantes da África Subsaariana que cruza a América Latina em seu caminho para os EUA não tem precedentes, mas a questão está amplamente ausente do discurso público da imigração americana e mexicana. De 2015 a 2019, milhares de migrantes africanos caminharam por vários países latino-americanos em seu caminho para o norte, com o objetivo de entrar nos Estados Unidos pela fronteira sul. Alguns se estabeleceram em um dos países que cruzaram, enquanto outros chegaram à fronteira com os Estados Unidos para solicitar asilo. Quando as relações de migração EUA-América Latina mudaram sob a administração Trump, muitos migrantes e refugiados ficaram presos no México. Este artigo examina a dinâmica da migração irregular no contexto da migração africana na América Latina e como alguns migrantes lidam com mudanças inesperadas na política global e de migração longe de seu controle.

Palavras-chave: asilo; África; migração; México; refugiados; fronteira

INTRODUCTION

Slowly at first, then rapidly, the flow of African migrants in Latin America has grown. They arrive a South American country and trek north to the United States or Canada, in a journey that lasts months and subjects them to great danger. At first, African irregular migrants benefitted from the open migration policies of some South American nations toward African arrivals and a relative social tolerance to foreigners. Beginning in 2017, however, pressure from the Trump administration has led Latin American countries to tighten migration regulations and, in the case of Mexico, ensure that Central American and African migrants do not reach the U.S. border to claim refugee status. In 2019, thousands of African migrants held at a migration facility in southern Mexico staged a series of protests that garnered local and international coverage, pressuring the Mexican government to allow them free passage to the northern border. Other African migrants decided to remain in one of the Latin American nations they crossed, mainly Brazil and Mexico, and integrate into Mexican society.

African migrants interviewed by various publications report suffering the repercussions from violence suffered during their migration experience, such as post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD), stress due to their irregular migratory

status and daily difficulties, including language barriers and precarious living conditions. Furthermore, many reported suffering stress and persecution in their countries, such as death threats for homosexuality, ethnicity, or political participation, as well as gender violence, all of which compounds their present suffering. And yet, African migrants are coping: some have found ways to live and work while they await migrating to the United States and others have decided to settle in one of the countries they cross, especially Mexico, selling crafts, opening small shops, or finding work in local businesses. Others, finding themselves hostage to unexpected migration politics, staged a long protest that garnered internationals support. This article, then, will look at the dynamics of African migration through Latin America, particularly from 2016 to 2019.

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

It is pertinent, for the purposes of this paper, to explore theories that address the causes and contexts of irregular migration, social cohesion, and integration, as a lens to better understand the dynamics of migration and possibilities of integration for the particular subset of irregular extracontinental migrants, that is, African migrants. Theories that explain migration—its causes, its effects—abound, because it is an extremely complex social phenomenon which holds a wide array of interrelated angles. These include a plethora of factors that shape the context of migration, such as countries of origin and destination, countries transited on the way from one point to another, and many social, demographic and economic factors. Among the most common causes that push individuals to migrate are natural disasters, violence caused by military, paramilitary and organized crime groups, political conflict, persecution caused by gender, religion or ethnicity, and political economic factors such as

globalization and the acceleration of neoliberalism (Flores-Fonseca 2014, 95).

Other issues include safety and integrity. Migrants are often prey to great risks as they cross countries en route to their end destination; for example, different groups, from drug lords to thieves and human smugglers and smugglers, target migrants as a vulnerable group they can exploit for profit. These leads to violence, harm, and myriad human rights violations. They are also vulnerable to unfamiliar diseases, lack of access to shelter, and other.

It is important to highlight, however, that all aspects that impact migration, such as the geopolitical, demographic, economic, social, and cultural aspects involved, cannot be encompassed in one single theory, because migration is an multidimensional phenomenon, which should be analyzed from a wide variety of perspectives (Flores-Fonseca 2014, 95). Nevertheless, dealing with extracontinental migration in and through Latin America, it is pertinent to identify and frame it within the asymmetries of globalization and development.

Most countries of the world participate in migration, in one way or another. Conventionally, irregular migration is analyzed from the angle of South to North migration, that is, from less developed nations to those more developed. However, the case of sub-Saharan African migrants in a long trek through Latin America—and in some cases, settling there—must be positioned within a framework of South-South migration which, although less discussed in migration literature, has surpassed, in practice, South to North migration (González-Becerril, Montoya Arce and Barreto 2014; Spagna & Sorensen 2015).

It is also important to define, for the purposes of this article, the concept of Irregular migration, another underreported phenomenon. The International Organization for Migration (IOM) defines irregular migration as “a movement that takes place outside the regulatory norms of the sending, transit and receiving countries” (Yayboke and Gallego 2019, 2). In the same report, the authors describe irregular migrants as those at risk of

> being pushed into the shadows because of their legal migratory status or lack thereof: those who face uncertainty (and in many cases peril) in countries of origin, transit and destination. This includes forced migrants that could be eligible for official status but do not currently have it, certain economic migrants, and others who do not fit within established regular structures (Yayboke & Gallego 2019, 2).

According to the IOM, there are over 100 million irregular migrants worldwide. Their reasons for migrating vary and overlap; violence, persecution, hunger, military violence or conscription, lack of access to resources, such as jobs, education and health care, and many other (Yayboke & Gallego 2019, VI). By virtue of their situation, irregular migrants—which include refugees and asylum seekers—are frequently vulnerable to exploitation. Of course, individuals have agency and their decision-making is usually not owed by a single event. However, desperate people, coerced by harsh options, take their chances "regardless of the barriers they encounter on the way" (Yayboke & Gallego 2019, 1). In short, people make migration decisions in different contexts, and some may be atypical in conventional migration analyses. For instance, in Ghana, overfishing has led to potential food scarcity and in Eritrea. there is a policy of military conscription that lasts indefinitely, which impedes young people from planning a future. These are not considered typical causes for migration, but they help differentiate between irregular and regular migration (Yayboke & Gallego 2019, 7).

To understand the contexts faced by the African migrants who settle in countries that were not their primary destination, it is important to look briefly at strategies of social integration. One speaks of integration as a process of insertion of an "Other", such as when a foreign or minority group sets into a new societal context. Integration demands adjustments, readjustments and adaptations, not only by the minority group to the new context, but also by the autochthonous group to the new members in their

community. In other words, integration is “bidirectional”, even though the prevailing understanding places the burden of integration on the new arrival and the burden of social cohesion—or the blame for its fracture—is also placed on the new arrival. New arrivals may be welcomed at first, yet cracks may appear when the immigrating group begins to expand.

Faced with increasing migration flows through its territory, and more refugees settling in, a state may strive to promote integration. Mexico, for instance, has developed a multicultural legislation meant to integrate migrants, although critics point out that it suffers from lack of institutional support and resources. Moreover, some regions of Mexico reportedly offer thousands of work opportunities for migrants (albeit most are low-skilled jobs), and despite public perception, it is not at a cost to local labor (Yayboke & Gallego 2019; Kirk & Semple 2019).

It is also useful consider the concept of social cohesion, to examine the chances for success of migrants settling into a society. For Blanco (2006) cohesion includes an absence of negative discrimination of the immigrant groups or that discrimination occur in the same measure of inequality suffered by the autochthonous population, independently of ethnic, religious or other cultural factors; a minimum of common elements between a societies’ members must be present for migrants, integrating as new members, may participate and share in conditions of equality. For Escrich (2013), in order for it to be satisfactory, there are certain elements that must accompany a migrant’s integration process: respect for the immigrant’s identity and culture; an absence of discrimination and sharing the same rights as the autochthonous members; and, as the final objective of integration, the satisfactory performance of migrants in the society of destination, including access to social resources (16). As pertains to new African immigrants settled in Latin America, it is research that escapes the scope of this effort but should be endeavored, in depth, in the future.

To summarize, then, individuals leave their countries of origin for a wide variety of reasons. Most of the reasons for irregular migrants to leave home are conflicts, which may be

social, political, economic, a natural catastrophe, or some combination thereof. Lately, these include climate change as well. People seek safety and opportunities to live, work and thrive; thus, they move to where they may have a greater chance of acquiring these. According to the United Nations agency for refugees, there are about 25 conflicts in 54 African nations, which hinder their inhabitants from thriving at home. In fact, human rights organizations have long stressed the many violations of human rights--enslavement, forced disappearances, arbitrary detention, torture, rape, and murder, prevalent on the region (Estrada Tobar 2017). Given the right conditions, however, migrants may settle in countries that were not part of their original plan, regularize their situation, and gain some stability and hope.

THE JOURNEY

Increasingly tough migration policies in traditional destination European countries have led thousands of irregular migrants to Latin America, intending to seek asylum in North America. The overwhelming majority of migrants crossing Mexico are Central American, with recent variations that include people from South Asia, and sub-Saharan Africa. Most stop in Tapachula, Chiapas, a main gateway for travelers arriving at Mexico from Central America, although their end destination is usually the United States (Semple 2020).

Asylum in the United States is, in fact, a viable option for refugees from some sub-Saharan countries. In 2019, over eighty percent of asylum requests by Cameroonians were granted, as well as 77 percent of Ethiopians, 67 percent of Eritreans, and 58 percent of Nigerians (Solis 2019). There are several reasons for this, including that U.S. authorities are more inclined to deter immigration from nearby countries, in order not to encourage more migration. Africa, however, is

far. Also, despite rising numbers, migration from Africa is perceived as low, even though in 2018, refugees from the Democratic Republic of Congo outnumbered those from other countries, according to a Pew Research Center survey (Krogstad 2019).

To request asylum, irregular African migrants must first enter the United States and, to do so, the easiest way is to enter through one of the Latin American countries with liberal travel visa requirements. The following report, published in The Pacific Standard, describes a typical roadmap for entry into Latin America and Mexico:

> After leaving behind a war-torn country, asylum seekers from Cameroon often head to Ecuador, where they are visa-exempt. But without Spanish language skills and fearing racial discrimination, many … decide to continue north. For Martin, the 15,000-mile journey meant spending $3,000 on plane tickets to Liberia, Ghana, Spain and then Ecuador, where he hopped on buses to Colombia and took boats to the notorious Darien Gap … African migrants often report being robbed, beaten, and extorted while crossing South and Central America. … He had to walk for days under heavy rain, drinking water from streams, and sleeping under rocks and trees. Other asylum seekers from Cameroon describe seeing abandoned bodies along the way (Dias 2019).

Most African migrants do reach Mexico and their numbers are growing. Migrants tallied by Mexican authorities increased from 460 in 2007, to almost 6,000 in 2019. In August 2019, Mexico curtailed transit visas that would allow African migrants to continue north to the U.S. Instead, Mexican authorities began to ask Africans to process resident permits to stay in Mexico, which U.S. activists warn would endanger their asylum requests in the U.S. (Solis 2019).

Activists also argue that staying in Mexico is not a safe option for Africans, since there are reports of them being

mistreated and robbed. Despite these reports, African migrants continue to arrive in Mexico through the Guatemala-Mexican border (Solis 2019). Upon crossing the border, they enter Chiapas, one of Mexico's poorest regions, where they get stranded in the city of Tapachula.

Most come from Cameroon and Congo; other Sub-Saharan countries are also represented (Matalon 2016). Reasons reported for leaving their country vary, although most claim to be fleeing political conflict and repression, poverty, bad economies and persecution. They first enter migrant-friendly countries such as Ecuador or Brazil, before making their way up north to Mexico. The strategies used include hiring smugglers and spending thousands of dollars on flights and bus tickets, as well as relying on a network of social media posts by others who took that route before. The journey can take months (Lawal 2019).

The trek forces migrants to spend a week or more traveling through the rainforests and swampland in the Darien Gap, infested with poisonous fauna and viruses, and considered one of the most lawless regions of the planet. At about 60 miles in length, it is a necessary pass to enter Panama going north. Despite the risks, there is a notable advantage for migrants crossing through Latin America: countries in the region seldom deport migrants from other continents, as they seek to avoid the deportation costs and lack deportation agreements with their countries of origin (Solomon 2019).

In 2017, the Trump administration begin to roll out new migration policies and in 2018, deployed the U.S. military to the border with Mexico. In January of 2019, the Migration Protection Protocols known as "Remain in Mexico" were activated. Asylum seekers that reach the U.S. through Mexico are returned to wait that their cases be processed, rather than released on parole within the U.S. as established by law. This is done even though, as human rights defenders argue, sending asylum seekers back to Mexico, where they face deportation and violence, violates the Refugee Convention of 1951 (Lawal 2019).

In July 2019, Mexican President López Obrador signed an

agreement with the Trump administration, in order to avoid trade sanctions, in which he agreed to deploy Mexican troops to secure the border. However, these agreements obviate the fact that Mexico and Central America lack the capacity to process mass asylum claims and provide security for their own citizens; in fact, the majority of Mexican and Central American migrants are fleeing poverty and violence precisely in these nations. Compounding these problems is the fact that migrants crossing northern Mexico are particularly vulnerable to harm from drug cartels and human traffickers. Nevertheless, under pressure from the Trump administration, the Mexican government strengthened border security, increased migrant detentions, and stopped issuing exit permits to African migrants arriving at the southern border, essentially trapping them in Mexico.

Many African migrants, lacking diplomatic protection from their countries, afraid of deportation from the U.S. and facing growing obstacles to applying for U.S. asylum, accepted to pursue legal residence status in Mexico. In consequence, new African migrant communities began to settle in there (Semple 2020).

Not all African migrants reach Mexico. Some, reportedly, die or are jailed along the way. Most begin their trek in Ecuador, Brazil, Guyana, or Argentina and some remain in different places along the road to Mexico, which takes them through Colombia and Central America. The numbers entering through South America continue to grow. Over 2,400 Cameroonians entered Ecuador in 2019, thrice the number of the previous year (Orsi, Solano, Spagat & Vertigo 2020). Reports show that smugglers take groups of up to 100 people who enter through Brazil, Ecuador and Colombia. The region crossed includes inhospitable territory, facing corrupt authorities, thieves, military and paramilitary, and organized crime. Wherever they enter, they must cross the Darien Gap, the isolated stretch of jungle considered the most dangerous in the world, where rivers flow “carrying the corpses of an unknown number of people who have perished in the Darien Gap” (Lawal 2019)

On the other hand, migration authorities in most of these countries leave them largely alone, because they prefer to

avoid the bureaucracy involved in arresting them and processing a deportation (Rogers 2015). Hundreds of migrants travel through Central America and cross the border into Guatemala from Honduras every single day—or did so, until the borders closed due to the Covid-19 pandemic. Guatemalan border officers claim there is nothing they can do to stop the flow, so they turn a blind eye to avoid hassles. Guatemala, for instance, does not have a specific law to stop migrants from crossing the country and migrants need only 24 hours to cross the small nation and reach Mexico (Estrada Tobar 2017).

The number of African migrants arriving in Mexico doubled from 2014 to 2019. They remained a short time in Mexico, moving along until they reached the United States, where they may request refugee status or asylum. In June of 2019, the Mexican government started enforcing restrictions, cracking down on those attempting to leave Tapachula for the United States. Just in the month of June 2019, over 500 African migrants were detained by U.S. border authorities on the Del Rio border in Texas, compared to only 211 Africans detained over all of 2018 (Bonello & Culligan 2019). The numbers had already been swelling before that. According to Pew Research Center, in 2015 there were 2.1 million of African migrants into the U.S., almost triple what it was 15 years before. One of the reasons was the Refugee Law of 1980, which benefits Africans fleeing conflict zones. At the time of its inception, only 1 percent of refugees were from Africa, compared to almost 40 percent in 2016, according the Department of State (Estrada Tobar 2017).

By 2018, Mexican police detained around 3,000 Africans, according to the Migrant Policy Unit of Mexico's Interior Ministry. That year, authorities calculated the number of African migrants In Mexico had quadrupled compared to five years prior (Solomon 2019). These developments coincided with the 2016 bilateral agreements between Turkey and Greece, and the European Union, to stop Syrian refugees from entering Europe. Similarly, Italy signed an agreement with Libya in 2017 for the Libyan Coast Guard to stop African migrants on the Mediterranean and return them to Libya (Lawal 2019). It is no surprise, then, that the American

continent became for many a more attractive migration destination than Europe.

Yet on March 2020, Ecuador, one of the Latin American countries that opened unrestrictedly to African migrants, began to close its doors. While Ecuadorean law establishes a "universal citizenship" valid for all visitors to Ecuador, its government recently stated that nationals from African nations will need entry visas. The restrictions appeared as President Lenin Moreno eagerly aims to reach commercial accords with the Trump administration (Orsi, Solano & Spagat, Vertigo 2020).

Many African migrants arrive by air but some make a perilous journey by boat into the coasts of Brazil. Take the following anecdote:

> One day last May, fishermen working off the coast ... in northeastern Brazil, came to the rescue of a rough-looking catamaran with a busted mast and a nonfunctioning motor. After towing the boat to safety, they realized it was carrying an unlikely group of passengers: 25 men from sub-Saharan Africa who said they'd been at sea for over a month.
>
> The men had boarded the vessel on the other side of the Atlantic, in the island nation of Cape Verde, paying hundreds of dollars apiece for their spots. Some of them later said they could see immediately that the boat was too small, but they decided to get on anyway.
>
> Passenger Talat Shou, a 37-year-old native of Guinea, says he had set his sights on Brazil after hearing horror stories of racist abuse African migrants had endured in Europe (Freier 2018).

Reportedly, they received humanitarian visas in Brazil, as well as medical care and shelter: "most of them are optimistic that they can make lives for themselves in Brazil" (Freier 2018). Surveys conducted in 2011, demonstrated that recent African migrants have settled and created communities in places like Quito, Ecuador; Buenos Aires, Argentina; and

other cities. While many still saw it as a way station on their journey to North America, others had become content with making South America their new home (Freier 2018).

In 2017, when President Trump signed executive orders suspending the entry of refugees into the United States, some African migrants put their dream of entering the United States on hold and stayed in one of the countries they were crossing. Another reason for settling was the fear of being deported back from the United States to their countries of origin: “It is best to die than to return to my country. It is best to die,” declared one of the migrants (Estrada Tobar 2017).

Across Latin America, African migrants claimed to have faced both discrimination and kindness. Tim Rogers, who interviewed groups of African migrants, reported: “He says everyone they came in contact with in Central America treated them with kindness. And everywhere they went, they encountered scores of other Africans making the same journey” (Rogers 2015).

Between January 2016 and March 2017, Guatemalan authorities tallied 3,680 African migrants from 22 countries. Sixty-eight percent come from Congo and the rest from Eritrea, Guinea, Somalia, Ghana and other countries that suffer warfare, arbitrary imprisonment, executions, food insecurity and poverty.

STAYING IN MEXICO

Because of its geographic location, Mexico’s territory is an important point of reception, passing and emission for migrants and refugees proceeding from Central America towards the United States. Before Mexico’s National Migration Institute stopped issuing exit permits, restricting migrant movement north in July 2019, African migrants expressed having no major problems crossing Mexico. The

new permits issued to migrants, however, only allowed to exit south, back to Guatemala, and forbid travelling north towards the U.S.-Mexico border. Most African migrants refused to take the new permits and protested the measure. Yet the measure may have worked. Net migration from Mexico to the United States and Canada is now negative. Nevertheless, the numbers of international migrants flowing to Mexico from Central America continue to rise. As they are increasingly impeded from moving north, the amount of asylum seekers in Mexico grew more than twenty-fold from 2013 to 2018, suggesting that Mexico is fast becoming a destination country (Yayboke & Gallego 2019, 22).

Inevitably, the Mexican public became gradually aware of the African influx.

In 2013, the National Migration Institute detained 545 Africans. In 2015, it detained 2,045, most of them from Somalia (Najar 2016). By 2016, the Mexican media began to talk about the "silent migration" (Najar 2016; Solis 2019). For those African migrants who chose to remain in Mexico, integration is a complex matter. The refugees must face various barriers, such as the language and the large inequality gap prevalent in Mexico. According to the National Council for Prevention of Discrimination in Mexico, foreigners are not free from risk of discrimination and xenophobia, which also occurs among Mexican nationals, through different social classes and ethnicities. Moreover, according to a 2011 survey, 32 percent of Mexicans opined that there were too many foreigners in the country, and 67 percent believed that foreigners create division in communities (Escrich Gallardo 2013, 12). The latter highlights the ways in which the burden of cohesion and integration tends to be placed upon the new arrivals, as addressed before.

Nevertheless, some have settled and began to thrive. In 2016, some Congolese migrants expressed satisfaction with their situation: "'We're fine here,'he said in Tonalá of himself and his brother. He showed me a Mexican visa that allows him to stay temporarily" (Matalon 2016). Africans settled in Mexico often survive in precarious work situations, as shown in the following New York Times report:

> As they wait for their applications to be reviewed, some make a few pesos through day labor. But others have opened businesses, each endeavor an expression of the ambition, creativity and courage that drive so many of the world's migrants to leave home in pursuit of better lives… A Ghanian restaurant has for months been dishing out fufu and other African dishes… Kwende Pekings, an asylum seeker from Cameroon and a co-founder of the bar, said he wanted to create "a place made by Africans, for Africans." "It was a place for gathering" he explained, "A place where Africans can meet and talk" … "I was able to imagine this space as it is now," recalled Mr. Pekings, who has applied for a humanitarian visa in Mexico (Semple 2020).

Semple also cites the case of a migrant whose family had suffered violence by Cameroonian security forces: "'I can't go back there,' he said. In Tapachula, he had been unable to find a job. So he bought a sewing machine to make bespoke clothes" (2020). Initially most Africans initially refused to seek asylum in Mexico, but eventually, more people began to apply, particularly from Cameroon. In 2019, new asylum claims from African nationals was tallied around 500 (Lawal 2019).

However, the situation of African migrants who do not want to remain in Mexico has become complicated, as they became stuck in a liminal space. Upon entering Mexico from Guatemala, migrants are placed in Migratory Station Siglo 21 in Tapachula, the largest government migrant shelter of Latin America. Residents have described it as a prison. Migrants were living in tents because they had no place else to go, but they also hoped that it would pressure federal authorities to allow them to continue their way north. Tensions began to rise and detonate conflicts with the police. In 2019, the situation for African migrants worsened when the National Guard and National Migration authorities, as well as federal police, dispersed a migrant caravan—most of them African—traveling north through southern Chiapas. Some

managed to escape arrest and return to Siglo 21. The situation became nightmarish; there were reports of fights for food and supplies provided by charity organizations. Human rights activists reported irregularities and abuses against the migrants held at the station (Sinembargo 2019; Torres 2019).

In time, the influx of refugees and migrants began to cause political dissent in Mexico, around the perceived acquiescence of President Obrador to President Trump, and his rescinding human rights guarantees made earlier in his mandate. Human rights organizations worldwide also began to condemn U.S. and Mexican migration policies, accusing them of violating international law (Lawal 2019). The situation became increasingly desperate for many African migrants:

> For now, Basame is stuck between a rock and a hard place. Even if he had the money, it would be too dangerous for him to go home, and yet he currently has no way out of Mexico. As he struggles to stay afloat, his hopes are fading fast. "I'm running out of cash and I'm running out of patience. I'm sick and I don't have anywhere to live," he says. "How will I survive?" … With no work permit, and even if he had one, with few opportunities available to him as an African migrant and a non-Spanish speaker, Basame is clear about his options: "Mexico can't give me that" (Lawal 2019).

Mexico continues to deny or delay applications for visitor visas that would allow African migrants to move north. They offer, instead, residency cards, which would allow migrants to seek work and some government resources. The measure, however, would kill their hopes of every seeking asylum in the United States, being that both the 1951 Refugee Convention and the 1980 US Refugee Act prevent migrants afforded safety in another country from seeking protection in a third country (Lawal 2020). Most irregular migrants have harrowing stories; the reality is that they are refugees, that most people do not want to leave their homes if they can help

it:

> "Many people think we are going to America to look for a good job," said Bertrand, 29, a Cameroonian asylum seeker and offshore welder who only gave his first name for fear of being located by the Cameroonian authorities. "I had a good job in my country. I never had any intention of leaving" (Semple 2020).

As it is, then, most African migrants do not intend to remain in Mexico; they keep their sights set on the United States or Canada. The main reasons cited is the language barrier (most African migrants are Anglophone or Francophone). And then, many have family members waiting for them in the United States and Canada. Also, if they accept a residency card to regularize their status in Mexico, it will probably be notified to the U.S. Customs and Border Protection (CBP). And according to the U.S. Department of Homeland Security, the CBP and Mexico's immigration authorities have a data-sharing agreement since December of 2017 (U.S. Dept. of Homeland Security 2017).

African migrants have managed to break through the border barrier illicitly.

More and more, some are taking desperate and dangerous measures, such as trying to skirt the coastlines on boats and rafts. In fact, there have been unconfirmed reports of African migrant deaths in capsized boats. Those who reach the United States often send advice back home, helping make the journey easier for others, according to human rights activists (Matalon 2016; Solomon 2019). Meanwhile, to lessen the burden of absorbing all the new refugees in Mexico, the United States may push a plan to put pressure on Central American nations to do more to prevent asylum seekers from crossing the border, including African nationals (Solomon 2019).

THE PROTEST

The situation of African migrants held in Mexico was often dire. Their predicament and their lack of representation came to the attention of U.S. elected officials. In November of 2019, some members of the U.S. Congress Black Caucus and from the subcommittee of Foreign Issues for Africa visited black migrants on the border, where they met with people from Africa, as well as Haiti. After their mission, they issued a report that includes instances of mistreatment, racial discrimination and death through their trek from Ecuador through Mexico.

The Human Rights Center Fray Matias in Tapachula, which helps thousands of migrants from around the world, attended to 16,000 between January and August of 2019, a higher number than all previous four years added together. An organization officer stated that Africans are more marginalized than other migrants, due to racism and lack of diplomatic representation from their countries. They are effectively deemed "stateless" and felt under relentless pressure to become Mexican residents or to leave for Guatemala in the south. Moreover, African migrants have less access to services from legal aid organizations who do not have staff that speaks their languages (Solis 2019).

At one point, there were 4,000 Africans living in a tent camp outside the Siglo 21 migrant station. The NMI's continuous denial of permits to leave Tapachula was sparking growing unrest. The migrants claimed their living conditions were deleterious and that they were surviving on donated food and rainwater. Charity organizations explained they never had enough food for all the refugees, only for about 10 percent. By October 2018, thousands of African migrants had joined to protest. Activists claimed that denying them the necessary documents to continue on their way violates Mexican migration law, such as the stipulation that migrants have a right to justice and a law that stipulates that if they are not Spanish speakers, they must be assigned an interpreter in their language, regardless of their legal status. With the help of human rights defenders, the African migrants filed a claim, arguing they were not receiving the legal services and justice

they should by law, as well as basic services such as food and proper shelter. Their protests began to receive widespread local media coverage (Recamier 2019).

In September 2019, the protests at Siglo 21 station achieved results: over 800 Africans, with the support of human rights agencies, were granted permits to exit Mexico by any border they wished. The protests had placed the government of Mexico in an uncomfortable spot; on the one hand, the protests were attracting embarrassing international coverage and, on the other, the government was trying to stem the flow of the African migrants to the United States, reportedly as part of a migration pact meant to preserve Mexico's export status with the U.S. (EFE 2019; Infobae 2019). Moreover, in October 2019, African migrants who had applied for it, began to receive permanent residence status, after waiting over 7 months. Over 1,400 African irregular migrants were granted a permanent residence card, which regularizes their situation, allows them to travel and work in the country (Álvarez 2019). Nevertheless, many continued to state that even though there are jobs, it is difficult to find work, which they blame more on racism than to lack of opportunities (Recamier 2019).

CONCLUSION

Irregular migration continues to occur and it is now clear that while closing borders and migration entry spots may stem migration flows for a while, desperate people will continue to take ever more riskier chances to move to a region where they can feel safe and pursue a viable future. States and organizations spend much time analyzing and debating ways in which to predict and manage irregular migration, as well as to find ways to stem it. It is always difficult, however, to accurately predict irregular migration flows. The worldwide Covid-19 crisis has further complicated

the panorama, causing a possibly temporary slowdown in migration flows and throwing predictions about further immigration into doubt. Moreover, monitoring and information systems exist to track migration flows in real time, but these have a predictive value for the short term and do not work as well for long term forecasts. Therefore, further research is urgently required on migration, given the rapidly and drastically global changes in 2019 and 2020 (Yayboke & Gallego 2019, 8; OECD 2018).

Considering historical patterns in conjunction with current drivers of irregular migration may provide some insight as to what new drivers may arise in the future to push people from their homes. We know, from experience, that violence, conflict, poverty and natural disasters are some of the most commonplace. However, there is rarely just one driver and new ones have arisen, including the rapid environmental deterioration caused by climate change and its ensuing increase in natural catastrophes. Now, an international pandemic must be added to the list. These are just some of the many limitations to this analysis.

Further research should be conducted on how these new factors will affect irregular migration to Latin America on the one hand and, on the other, how migrant community outposts, such as sub-Saharan African migrants, become integrated, over time, into the societies in which they settle along the way.

NOTES

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