

FORCED MIGRATION FROM EL SALVADOR, GUATEMALA, AND HONDURAS TO THE UNITED STATES: IDENTIFYING ENVIRONMENTAL REFUGEES IN MULTICAUSALITY

Migração forçada de El Salvador, Guatemala e Honduras para os Estados Unidos: identificando refugiados ambientais na multicausalidade

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Abstract

This article discusses natural disasters as the main factor that have led to forced migration processes in El Salvador, Guatemala, and Honduras to the United States between 2018 and 2023. These three countries have similarities in that their contexts of poverty and violence that force people to flee from them. They are also considered by the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC) to be some of the most vulnerable places in Latin America to climate change. We analyzed data on internal displacement and asylum-seekers from these countries; statistics on the apprehension of migrants at the Southwest land border of the United States; data on natural disasters. This article aims to show that disasters can influence internal and international forced migration. By identifying potential environmental refugees in Central American migrations, we hope to draw attention to the need for legal protection for these people in situations of vulnerability.

Keywords: climate change; natural disasters; forced migration; Central America

Resumo

Este artigo discute os desastres naturais como o principal fator que levou a processos de migração forçada em El Salvador, Guatemala e Honduras para os Estados Unidos entre 2018 e 2023. Esses três países têm semelhanças em seus contextos de pobreza e violência que forçam as pessoas a fugir deles. Eles também são considerados pelo Painel Intergovernamental sobre Mudanças Climáticas (IPCC) como alguns dos lugares mais vulneráveis da América Latina às mudanças climáticas. Analisamos dados sobre deslocamento interno e solicitantes de asilo desses países; estatísticas sobre a apreensão de migrantes na fronteira terrestre do sudoeste dos Estados Unidos; dados sobre desastres naturais. O objetivo deste artigo é mostrar que os desastres podem influenciar a migração forçada interna e internacional. Ao identificar possíveis refugiados ambientais nas migrações da América Central, esperamos chamar a atenção para a necessidade de proteção legal para essas pessoas em situações de vulnerabilidade.

Palavras-chave: mudanças climáticas; desastres naturais; migração forçada; América Central

Introduction

Forced migrants are individuals forced to migrate, either internally or internationally, due to reasons beyond their control. Factors such as poverty, violence, sociopolitical and/or structural crises, armed conflicts, epidemics, natural disasters, and others can interact to trigger process of forced migration in certain countries. This article will examine the forced migration from El Salvador, Guatemala, and Honduras to the United States of America (USA) between 2018 and 2023. We aim to discuss some drivers of these migrations, focusing on natural disasters as triggers. We intend to determine whether it is possible to identify 'environmental refugees' in the emigration of these countries to the USA during the selected period, considering multicausality as a main element of migration in this context.

As indicated by the IPCC (2022, p. 1710), Central America will be severely impacted by climate change, facing heat waves; droughts; desertification; severe flooding; increased intensity of tropical storms; rising sea levels; melting glaciers; food, water and energy insecurity, among other catastrophes. Migration motivated by environmental and climate issues can be the adaptive result of the climate crisis or an escape from the disasters that will hit vulnerable people directly (Czaika, Münz, 2022). We elected to examine disasters due to the political advocacy for international legal recognition of the existence of environmental refugees (Mishra, Singh, 2023), which is why we opened the article discussing the concept of 'environmental refugees'. Finally, we believe that working with the social effects of disasters and climate change is necessary in a context in which International Relations has little discussion of this issue, even though it recognizes its importance in International Politics, as criticized by Sending *et al.* (2020).

In regard to methodological aspects, a series of data will be analyzed for the purpose of describing and correlating natural disasters with migration. The data on natural disasters was obtained from the EM-DAT platform of the Catholic University of Louvain (Belgium). This platform provides open access to a comprehensive range of disaster-related information, including the occurrence of disasters, the total number of people affected and killed, financial losses, and other relevant data. The EM-DAT database is one of the few open access databases on natural disasters. It is regarded as one of the most comprehensive sources for statistical data on natural disasters by Tin *et al.* (2024). It collates data from a range of sources, including the Centre for Research on the Epidemiology of Disasters (CRED), United Nations agencies, non-governmental organizations, research institutes, and media reports, as well as insurance companies. Regarding migration from El Salvador, Guatemala, and Honduras, data were sought from three distinct sources. The first source is the Internal Displacement Monitoring Center (IDMC), which maps internal displacement due to disasters and violence around the world and is part of the Norwegian Refugee Council. The IDMC provides a total count of individuals who have been internally displaced as a result of each event, whether disaster or violence. However, the platform makes no methodological distinction as to the duration of this displacement, indicating that 'Internally displaced people' are 'stocks', i.e., all the people living in internal displacement at the end of the year. To map the mobility of Salvadorans, Guatemalans, and Hondurans to the USA, we utilize statistics on the apprehension of migrants by border agents on the Southwest land border (USA-Mexico) from United States Customs and Border Protection (CBP). The statistics are presented by fiscal year, as released by the agency, and the final number of apprehensions is also utilized, representing the sum of apprehensions of accompanied minors, individuals in a family unit, single adults, and unaccompanied children. The USA fiscal year commences in October and concludes in September of the next year. To supplement the CBP

data, we consulted statistics produced by the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) regarding the number of individuals born in El Salvador, Guatemala, and Honduras who are asylum-seekers in the USA and those who have already been considered refugees in the USA.

The objective with this data analysis is to identify any potential correlation between natural disasters and migration from El Salvador, Guatemala, and Honduras to the USA between 2018 and 2023. The article's temporal scope commences in 2018 with the formation of the Central American migrant caravans because they are a milestone in the struggle for visibility, safety, and better conditions for migrants. Furthermore, they reflect a shift in the demographic profile of their members, a topic that will be explored in the article. Our period encompasses the COVID-19 pandemic, and the restrictive measures imposed by the USA to control mobility at its border with Mexico, such as Title 42. Furthermore, our analysis was conducted until 2023, which represents the most recent year for consolidated annual statistical data on migration and disasters. This article is divided into five sections. The initial section addresses the concept of 'environmental refugees'. The second is a profile of poverty and violence in El Salvador, Guatemala, and Honduras. The third section address migrant caravans and Title 42. Then, in the fourth section, we delve into natural disasters and their links to internal displacement. We conclude with a brief summary of our findings.

The Concept of 'Environmental Refugees'

In 1951, the Convention Relating to the Status of Refugees came into effect, also known as the 1951 Geneva Convention or the Refugee Convention. It was structured in the context of the aftermath of the Second World War (1939–1945), with the aim of resolving the lack of protection of rights for the millions of people displaced by the conflict throughout Europe, as well as defining who could be a refugee (ACNUR, 2024). A refugee is a person who crosses international borders due to a well-founded fear of persecution for one of the following reasons: race, nationality, religion, membership in a particular social group or political opinions, as well as fleeing armed conflicts (UNHCR, 1951). More than 73 years later, the Convention is still the same, without broadening the scope of refuge. Meanwhile, the world is facing a series of natural disasters, which are becoming more frequent and are being strengthened by climate change, which can promote migration and, depending on the case, could lead to 'environmental refugees'. However, who are environmental refugees?

Environmental refugees are people who are forced to leave their habitat, either temporarily or permanently, due to natural or triggered by people environmental disturbances, making it impossible to live there. This first definition dates to 1985, when Essam El-Hinnawi, considered one of the forerunners of this debate, wrote one of the first articles on the subject for the United Nations Environment Program (UNEP). The author also made a distinction, stating that migrants searching for better jobs or displaced by conflict or persecution could not be considered environmental refugees. After El-Hinnawi, Jacobson (1988), in light of the nuclear accident at the Chernobyl plant, reinforced that environmental refugees are people displaced by environmental degradation and warned that, in the 21st century, the degradation of agricultural land use and disasters produced by human action would lead to forced migration. In 2001, Myers advocated the creation of a clear and delimited operational concept of environmental refugees, their characteristics and causes, and the impacts of climate change that cause their displacement. The author links the socioeconomic vulnerability of populations to vulnerability to natural disasters, noting that the poorest suffer

the most from desertification, flooding, food insecurity, pandemics, problems with governments and accentuated poverty, considered an added element for the displacement of these individuals (Myers, 2001).

In the field of Law studies, Ramos (2011) defines environmental refugees as people affected by natural disasters, the effects of climate change and disasters caused or accelerated by human action, as well as a combination of these factors. For her, these people need to be recognized as environmental refugees because of the extent of their losses, forced migration to survive and the preservation of their rights during mobility. Borràs Pentinat (2011) agrees with Ramos, defining environmental refugees as those displaced by disasters due to the impossibility of remaining where they live, whether due to destruction or economic crisis, with the inhabitants of developing countries being the most susceptible to this mobility due to their socioeconomic vulnerability and the risks imposed by nature. Claro (2017) argues that the existence of environmental refugees is an issue because of the vagueness of the concept of environmental refugees and the existence of other similar terms, such as “climate refugees”, “environmentally displaced people” and “refugees from development megaprojects”, which make it difficult to formulate the issue directly and provide legal support for the cause, leaving the political struggle for recognition of this category.

Mishra and Singh (2023) argue that natural disasters amplified by climate change occur within the national borders of countries but that they can spill over into the international arena, becoming a political and legal dilemma in relation to the management of these flows. The authors reiterate Claro’s (2017) criticism, albeit without citing it, about the conceptual vagueness of environmental refugees but go one step further. They say that these people will not have their existence recognized if there is no political consensus and mobilization of international law to treat the climate crisis as something serious and problematic for the existence of our society. As climate change increases the intensity and occurrence of natural disasters, there is a need to deal with this issue. It is at this challenging moment that this article is inserted, as we are working with natural disasters and their impact on migration, something that could become frequent as the climate crisis progresses.

Boas *et al.* (2019) argue that there is a false narrative of mass international migration related to climate change, which leads to processes of securitization of migration by the Global North. According to them, migration is not motivated exclusively by climate change, but by the multicausality of socioeconomic, cultural and political factors. Furthermore, the authors point out that it is not yet possible to indicate the influence or attribution of specific natural disasters to climate change, and they reject the use of expressions linked to migration to discuss mobility in response to natural disasters or related to the climate crisis, since this mobility can be seasonal or temporary. In this sense, the authors establish a counterpoint to the discussion presented in this section.

Ferris (2020) shows that from the 1980s to the late 2010s, the field of studies on the connections between the environment and climate and migration was in formation, but with several gaps, including the difficulty in building a consensus on which terminology or concept to use. Terms such as “environmental refugees”, “climate refugees”, “environmental migrants”, “climate migrants”, “climate-induced migrants” or “climate-induced mobility” illustrate the difficulty in establishing who these people are, although there is agreement that natural disasters and climate change can have a direct or indirect correlation with mobility, whether forced or voluntary.

However, Balsari, Dresser and Leaning (2020) shows that the fight for legal recognition of the existence of people displaced by disasters and climate change finds more support in academia and non-governmental organizations. International organizations, on the other hand, despite recognizing the connection between the environment and migration, do not seek to extend refugee protection to these people, say the authors. Hartmann (2010) criticized the use of concepts such as “environmental refugees” or “climate refugees” to deal with displaced people forced by disasters or climate change. For her, these concepts ignore policies for adaptation and building resilience to the climate crisis. In addition, because climate change needs to be analyzed with political and economic processes, she argues that it cannot be considered the only element that triggers migration. Hartmann also argues that calling these people ‘refugees’ reduces the rights and protections already recognized by the 1951 Convention, creating bureaucratic hierarchies of eligibility and greater rejection of the admissibility of refugees by states. Farbotko and Lazrus (2012) also oppose the use of the term ‘refugees’, but for different reasons. The authors argue that labeling people as ‘climate refugees’ or similar variations denies them their subjectivity, voice, educational and social capacities to adapt to the climate crisis. These people, according to the authors, are treated as incapable of acting, victims of the actions of unnamed actors, such as large corporations and polluting states.

However, the connection between disasters and migration is discussed in academia from the perspective of forced migration. Czaika and Münz (2022) work with the idea of forced displacement in scenarios of sudden-onset disasters, stating that this mobility will mostly be internal and that it will be a quick return to the place of life due to government aid. While long-term internal displacement or international migration occurs due to low-onset disasters, such as the loss of arable land, food and water insecurity, desertification and others. In the low-onset disasters scenario, Czaika and Münz believe that the occurrence of disasters in poor countries with little government capacity to mitigate the climate crisis or support migrants can lead to migration as a form of adaptation, especially in cases where migrants find social support networks in the destination and transit countries. Qi and Bircan (2023) argue that forced migration occurs when people do not initially intend to flee but are forcibly displaced by conflicts or natural disasters. According to them, this displacement occurs at various stages, usually within countries, but can become international migration. Qi and Bircan defend that internal displacement tends to be triggered by a shock, carried out without planning, while international displacement requires some organization and a search for a destination. These authors point out that the conflict-migration nexus is widely debated, but the relationship between extreme weather events and migration is recent and complex, as environmental and climatic conditions can lead to conflicts over resources and impoverishment, with migration being a long-term result of this process.

For Coraza de los Santos and Gatica (2019), the intertwining of multiple migratory causes makes it difficult to distinguish categories between forced and non-forced migration, leading to the concept of “mixed flows”, which includes refugees, asylum-seekers, economic migrants and other migratory categories. In addition, these authors recognize that migrants have agency, with different levels of decision-making regarding their mobility and the responsibility of third parties. According to them, forced migrants are not just desperate actors fleeing catastrophic situations, as they can choose destinations, rely on social and family networks, and use cultural and political ties to guide their mobility.

Czaika and Münz (2022) are similar to Qi and Bircan (2023), arguing that natural disasters can increase the risk of social tensions and violent conflicts, as well as increasing people's intention to leave certain locations due to the deterioration of economic factors, loss of habitat and lack of government support, indicating that the effects of climate change and disasters on migration depend on other factors and drivers. On the other hand, Kaczan and Orgill-Meyer (2019) consider that poorer families are more vulnerable to climate change and more likely to migrate forcibly when there is a "shock", which would be the occurrence of a major disaster. In scenarios where a major disaster does not occur, according to the authors, the poorest tend to remain in their habitat, given the lack of financial resources for mobility.

In this article, we use "environmental refugees" based on the concept presented by Ramos (2011). We understand that people can be forced to move internally and/or internationally due to natural disasters, the impacts of climate change and disasters caused by human action. In this way, we recognize the complexity of the environment and the various ways in which people can be affected by what happens in it, making it necessary to use a broad term. We know that the 1951 Geneva Convention is restricted in its definition of refugee, requiring a well-founded fear of persecution, in which we understand that nature does not act as a persecuting agent, making the legal use of "refugee" impossible. However, we make a political case for these people to be recognized as refugees, if they wish so that they can have the rights and international legal protections that refugees have. We even believe that this definition is useful for the nationals of El Salvador, Guatemala, and Honduras, since their migration can be internal, at a certain point crossing borders into the USA, as we will demonstrate below. After all, those fleeing droughts and floods, which destroy homes and agricultural crops, should have the right to find refuge in a safe place and not be forced to return to a habitat that is unable to sustain human life.

The Poverty and Violence as Triggers for Migration in El Salvador, Guatemala, and Honduras

El Salvador, Guatemala, and Honduras have a common history of poverty dating from Spanish colonization to the present day, processes of exploitation of land and native peoples, landlord control by foreign private companies and political and military interventions by other nations, especially the USA (Galeano, 2017). According to Ceceña (2005), the USA sought to build a hegemony over Central America, leaving the countries underdeveloped and incapable of sovereignty, as if they were ungovernable and needed USA military bases to be stable. At the end of the 20th century, with the expansion of drug trafficking in these countries, they were targeted by Washington's security policies, which began to securitize the mobility of these nations under the discourse of narcotics control, as Ramírez López (2005) points out. Ceceña (2005) and Ramírez López (2005) agree that the dictatorships and civil wars that took place during the Cold War, liberal socioeconomic reforms and the dismantling of state social protection structures and political polarization have made these three nations vulnerable to various problems, especially inequality, poverty, violence, and sociopolitical crises.

Coraza de los Santos and Gatica (2019) demonstrated that the civil wars in Guatemala and El Salvador during the Cold War promoted forced migration and forced internal displacement. They also point out that the violence of drug trafficking, crime, the territorial control of criminal groups, the negative impact of neoliberalism on the population, hunger, and the occurrence of natural disasters all plays a role in increasing the vulnerability of the population and the mobility of the

Central American population. Reece (2016) and Velasco Ortiz and Hernández López (2021) are some of the authors who point out that, for decades, there has been an intense flow of Central Americans to the USA, fleeing the crises they faced in Central America, such as poverty and economic hardship, political violence, violence perpetrated by drug traffickers, among others. These migrants saw the USA as a “Promised Land” where they could find better living conditions and be free from the multiple forms of violence they might encounter in their countries, according to the authors mentioned above. These migratory flows have undergone different responses in recent decades. At certain times, according to Reece (2016), they have been welcomed because of the prospect of increasing the number of underemployed and low-paid workers in the USA, and in other moments, they have been criminalized, especially since the terrorist attacks of September 11, 2001, which increased the securitization of borders by treating anyone who tried to cross them irregularly as a potential enemy to be shot.

Coubès (2021) noted that this was one of the main characteristics of Central American migration to the USA was the invisibility of mobility to avoid detention by security forces. This took place via clandestine routes through Mexico to the USA until mid-2018 when the migrant caravans were formed. Cabral (2022) shows that, until the migrant caravans were formed, Central American migration was mostly represented by young men seeking work opportunities in the USA. However, with the caravans, more women, families and unaccompanied minors left Central America in groups. The author reiterates that women, families and unaccompanied minors were already migrants at other times, but their mobility was not visible, as the caravans sought to break the invisibility of their journey through Mexico.

Data on migration from the United Nations Department of Economic and Social Affairs (UN DESA, 2020) show that in the period 1990-2020, more than 17.7 million Salvadorans, Guatemalans, and Hondurans have established residence in foreign countries, whether their migratory status is regularized or not. Data on net migration from the World Bank (2024a), representing the difference between the number of immigrants (those arriving in the country) and emigrants (those leaving the country), show that in the period 1990-2020 (World Bank does not provide data on net migration after 2020), El Salvador, Guatemala, and Honduras had negative results. El Salvador registered -25,214 people, Guatemala -23,142 people and Honduras -6,199 people. This means that the three countries are “producers” of emigrants, i.e., their population emigrates in greater numbers than the country receives foreign migrants. In the period analyzed in this article, from 2018 to 2023, there was a substantial increase in the number of refugees from El Salvador, Guatemala and Honduras, as shown in the table below.

Table 1 - Refugee population from El Salvador, Guatemala, and Honduras around the world between 2018 e 2023

Country	2018	2019	2020	2021	2022	2023
El Salvador	32,562	41,816	45,640	52,041	58,621	68,633
Guatemala	19,128	22,770	24,544	26,927	30,259	34,010
Honduras	18,857	26,351	34,456	51,687	64,785	84,363

Source: World Bank (2024b).

Meanwhile, it was necessary to search for more information on refugee claims and the recognition of refugees from El Salvador, Guatemala, and Honduras in the USA from 2018 to

2023. The UNHCR’s public statistics show a growing search for refuge in the USA, with all three countries having more than 100,000 citizens requesting refuge per year since 2020. However, the data presented below shows that, per year, the USA recognizes a significantly low number of refugees from these three countries. According to the American Immigration Council (2024), asylum-seekers, regardless of their nationality, who were recognized as refugees in the USA in fiscal year 2023 (October 2022 to September 2023), waited an average of 1,364 days. In other words, the average waiting time to obtain legal protection under the 1951 Convention can exceed three and a half years. Moreover, according to the American Immigration Council, delays in the response of refugee status already occurred before the COVID-19 pandemic, but since the global outbreak of the disease the scenario has worsened due to the closure of asylum offices and courts. Mora-Tellez (2022) argued that poverty and socioeconomic inequalities are important drivers of migration from these countries, which worsened significantly with the economic crisis resulting from the COVID-19 pandemic, exposing these people to more vulnerabilities and financial and food insecurity, which may explain why the following statistics have increased.

Table 2 - Asylum-seekers and Refugees (under UNHCR’s mandate) from El Salvador in the United States of America between 2018 and 2023

Year	2018	2019	2020	2021	2022	2023
Asylum-seekers	101,000	113,404	126,248	131,244	122,775	112,448
Refugees	22,152	26,216	27,434	28,996	32,143	35,083

Source: UNHCR (2024).

Table 3 - Asylum-seekers and Refugees (under UNHCR’s mandate) from Guatemala in the United States of America between 2018 and 2023

Year	2018	2019	2020	2021	2022	2023
Asylum-seekers	84,848	114,404	139,527	152,784	157,113	164,775
Refugees	17,610	20,883	21,951	23,180	25,552	17,821

Source: UNHCR (2024).

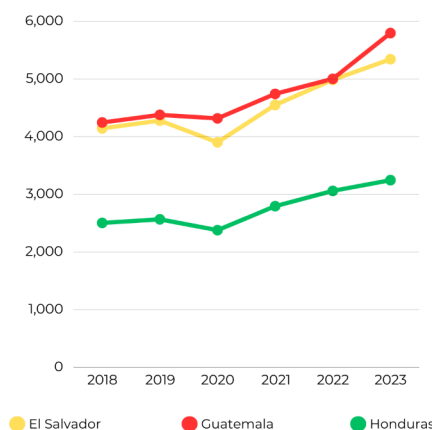
Table 4 - Asylum-seekers and Refugees (under UNHCR’s mandate) from Honduras in the United States of America between 2018 and 2023

Year	2018	2019	2020	2021	2022	2023
Asylum-seekers	60,417	81,375	101,617	113,713	128,780	143,425
Refugees	12,578	15,110	15,940	17,149	19,319	21,659

Source: UNHCR (2024).

The COVID-19 pandemic has caused the global economy to suffer setbacks, and this has been no different for the countries under analysis. The following graphs show the fall in the Gross Domestic Product of El Salvador, Guatemala, and Honduras and the fall in GDP per capita, demonstrating the impoverishment of the population as a reflection of the economic difficulties of the period. This worsening of economic living conditions can be seen in the data on GDP per capita from the World Bank (2024c) available at graph 1.

Graph 1 - GDP per capita in USA Dollar for El Salvador, Guatemala, and Honduras between 2018 and 2023



Source: Own elaboration based on World Bank data (2024c).

In addition to the economic context, El Salvador, Guatemala, and Honduras face problems related to violence, especially drug traffickers, both in the countryside and in the city. Rural violence, such as in Guatemala, caused by drug trafficking, as Devine *et al.* (2020) call it, is a constant issue. Groups of drug traffickers invade land, evict residents from their homes, and force them to work for them or flee the area. The gangs seek to control forest areas close to the border with Mexico to clear areas to traffic timber and open more accessible and guarded land routes for the trafficking of arms, drugs, and people. Guatemala has shown no ability to curb criminal practices or protect the population, which is faced with the dilemma of staying and working under hostility and danger or migrating internally to survive. However, according to the authors, the security forces sometimes point to peasants as accomplices in drug trafficking, threatening them with criminal prosecution and imprisonment and putting them in a situation of double violence. In 2021, the offices of North and Central America and the Caribbean of the International Organization for Migration (IOM) produced a report stating that violence in the Guatemalan countryside is driving young men out of rural areas, with a high probability of this flow turning into international migration.

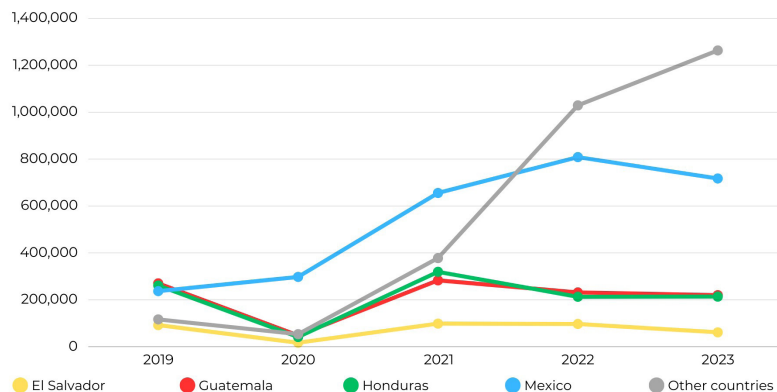
Another kind of constant violence that goes hand in hand with drug trafficking is gender-based violence, especially in Honduras. Women are exposed to multiple forms of abuse, neglect, and physical and sexual aggression, whether by family members, friends, or drug traffickers, according to Gutiérrez Rivera (2018). The author points out that drug traffickers conduct sexual assaults for nonpayment of merchants' fees, as well as for forcing women to be wives. As in the Guatemalan case, Honduras is unable to protect these women. Acharya (2015) proves that the impossibility of filing complaints and obtaining state protection pushes women to decide to migrate, as they find no form of security in their country, being raped by drug traffickers, or having their complaints exposed by security agents to their violators.

The violence practiced by drug-trafficking groups has already made El Salvador the most violent country in the world in 2015, with 106 homicides per 100,000 inhabitants, the result of more than three decades of crime not effectively combated by the state, according to Abreu (2024).

Under the authoritarian government of Nayib Bukele (2019 – present), states of exception were imposed, almost 2% of the population was detained and deals were made with drug traffickers to artificially reduce the homicide rate, according to Cabral (2024). The reduction in the homicide rate, the creation of mega prisons and the control of the legislature and judiciary have not reduced Bukele's support, as he is one of the most popular leaders in Latin America (Kinosian; Renteria, 2024).

However, controlling violence at the expense of democracy has not reduced the number of people migrating from El Salvador. The Salvadoran population continues to migrate toward the USA, as shown by data from the U.S. Customs and Border Protection (CBP) available at Graph 2. Graph 2 shows that more than 8 million migrants were detained by US border agents in the Southwest land border between fiscal years 2019 and 2023. Of these, 1.973 million were from the El Salvador, Guatemala, and Honduras, especially due to the presence of migrant caravans and the strengthening of migration in this period, as we will present in the following section.

Graph 2 - Total migrants apprehended at the U.S. Southwest land border by fiscal year according to CBP (2019–2023)



Source: Own elaboration based on CBP data (2024).

Migrants Caravans and Title 42

The Central American migrant caravans began in October 2018 as an organized movement of people who wanted to avoid the excessive costs of border crosses. They also aimed to reduce the risks of migration, as migrants were exposed to multiple forms of violence on their way through Mexico when they opted for clandestinity, such as robberies, extortion, kidnappings, rape and sexual exploitation, physical attacks, torture, and murder. López Recinos (2020) argued that caravans could be a form of migratory anarchy, as they characterize the lack of management of the humanitarian crisis in Central America and the production of forced migrants. However, we disagree with the author because we believe that the caravans were practically an insurgent movement that soon caught the attention of the US, with then-president Donald Trump investigating how to prevent the mobility of these people. Varela Huerta and McLean (2019) and París Pombo *et al.* (2021) agree that the 2018 caravans were a protest against Trump's violence and migration restrictions.

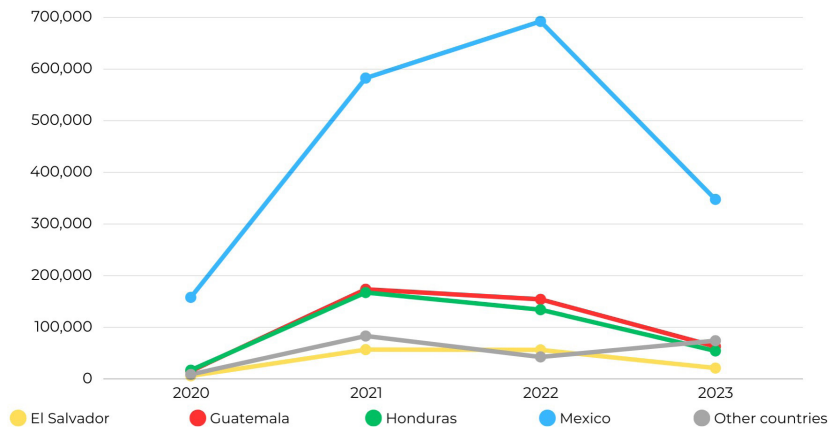
Sánchez *et al.* (2021) indicated that caravans were motivated by the fall in the prices of Central American agricultural products for export; a reduction in the profits of drug traffickers; a consequent increase in the financial extortion of residents of areas controlled by them; continued high rates of intentional homicide and gender violence; an increase in the prices charged by coyotes to cross borders and reach the USA; and corruption scandals in Guatemala and Honduras, which also included accusations that then-president Juan Orlando Hernández's brothers were drug traffickers. The context of crises is said to have led to these caravans by encouraging the flow of forced migrants in this troubled context.

Caravans have changed the demographic profile of migrants. Before the caravans, migrants were characterized as young men with job prospects in the US. With them, we began to see more women, unaccompanied minors, and entire families, illustrating that financial need was no longer the central focus of the migratory process but rather escape from the violence practiced in the El Salvador, Guatemala, and Honduras (Cabral, 2022). In addition, the caravans had to deal with multiple reactions from Mexico and the USA as they occurred, as border authorities could calmly receive them or with violence and persecution from migrants. The long journey could be made difficult at various stages, but it was at the US-Mexico border where the problem materialized. There, border agents did not allow these individuals to cross, reinforcing attempts to cross illegally, leading to arrests (as shown in the graph 2) and deportations of individuals in an increasing number between the fiscal years of 2018 and 2023.

The Trump administration (2017–2021) was known for its attempts to control irregular migration by Latin Americans, who were criminalized, and migrants were attacked with constant racist and xenophobic speeches by the then president and his most radical supporters. This included the attempt to build a wall on the US-Mexico border to stop migrants from entering the US territory and the creation of the Remain in Mexico program in January 2019. This program tried to make Mexico responsible for the refugee and residency requests of Central American migrants, transforming the nation into a safe third country and a large screening and waiting center for entry into the USA. According to Gramajo Bauer (2020) and París Pombo *et al.* (2021), Mexico was supposed to supply humanitarian help and stability to migrants, in addition to receiving those who were expelled at the border and deported by CBP authorities.

However, on March 20, 2020, with the COVID-19 pandemic, migrants were crossed with new restrictive US measures, such as Title 42, a 1944 measure, which was updated and used by Trump to close borders and maintain migration. We argue that Trump has used a health measure to fulfill his anti-immigration political aims. Title 42 allowed for the immediate deportation of anyone who crossed the border irregularly without the right to justice under the health argument of preventing the spread of COVID-19. Even under the administration of Joe Biden (2021-), who promised in his campaign to undo Trump's migration policies, they continued, with Latin American migrants still being a target as a threat to control (Cabral, 2022). Title 42 remained in force under the Biden administration until May 11, 2023, having detained more than 918,000 Central American migrants and 1,780,000 Mexicans, according to data from CBP (2023), from March 20, 2020, to May 11, 2023, as shown in the graph 3.

Graph 3 - Total migrants apprehended at the U.S. Southwest land border by Title 42 per fiscal year according to CBP (2018 – 2023*)



* The data are from March 20, 2020, to May 11, 2023, the term of Title 42.
Source: Own elaboration based on CBP data (2023).

Natural Disasters and Forced Migration in El Salvador, Guatemala, and Honduras

The IPCC (2022) writes that without rapid mitigation and acceleration of actions to adapt to climate change, Latin America will face major economic and ecological losses, disproportionately affecting the most vulnerable populations. In this case, the poorest are those most affected by socioeconomic inequalities that have marked our continent for generations. The report shows that between 2011 and 2020, the Earth's average temperature was 1.1 °C higher compared to the 1850 – 1900 period, used as a benchmark to keep us close. In a scenario where the temperature rises by up to 1.5 °C, as called for in the Paris Agreement, the Americas will experience more heat waves and more food losses due to variations in soil temperature. In the case of Central America, there will be more changes in rainfall, which could lead to major floods and extreme droughts.

Balsari, Dresser and Leaning (2020) described the Central American Dry Corridor, which crosses Nicaragua, Honduras, El Salvador and Guatemala, as a region of intense drought since the 2000s. These droughts have increased hunger and food insecurity among the population, who have lost their ability to work and earn income from crops, resulting in increased migration from these countries to the USA. For them, climate change can overlap with conflicts and social crises, making migratory flows more frequent and greater as the climate crisis progresses.

El Salvador, Guatemala, and Honduras have been identified by the IPCC (2022) as countries likely to be severely impacted by the climate crisis due to their history of poverty, socioeconomic vulnerabilities, exposure to multiple forms of violence and the fact that they already have environmental problems that are likely to worsen in the coming decades. In addition, the IPCC (idem) also says that climate-related migrations in these countries may occur more often due to drought and the increase in food and water insecurity. The report reinforces that it will be the poorest who will be affected and potential migrants, especially with the projection of more disasters by the middle of this century, which makes it essential to work on this issue and location. It seems redundant and repetitive to point out the class of people most affected, but it is not.

Climate change unequally impacts the poorest, who are already vulnerable to disasters due to earlier socioeconomic inequalities. In the period analyzed, El Salvador, Guatemala, and Honduras suffered from environmental/climatic disasters, as shown in the table below, based on data from the disaster compilation platform of the Catholic University of Louvain in Belgium, EM-DAT. In this sense, we will present separate tables by year so that we can better see the disasters that occurred, the countries most impacted and those affected by each event.

Table 5 - Occurrence of disasters in El Salvador, Guatemala, and Honduras, by type of event and population affected in 2018

Country	Disaster Type	Disaster Subtype	Total Affected
El Salvador	Flood	Flood (General)	7,099
	Drought	Heat wave	386,610
	Earthquake	Ground movement	2,499
Guatemala	Volcanic activity	Pyroclastic flow	1,714,414
	Flood	Flash flood	100
	Flood	Flood (General)	76,845
	Drought	Drought	1,500,000
Honduras	Flood	Flood (General)	6,948
	Drought	Drought	360,000

Source: Own elaboration based on EM-DAT data (2024).

As shown in Table 5, in 2018, the country that suffered most from natural disasters was Guatemala, especially due to the eruption of the Volcano of Fire, with the highest number of people impacted. Both countries were affected by drought, with more than 2.246 million people affected. However, another extreme weather event, flooding, which leads to other disasters, such as several types of landslides, was most often observed that year. In this sense, the IPCC has already pointed out that droughts and floods can occur concurrently, without one process canceling the other and bringing benefits to the population. It should be noted that drought is a factor of crucial attention for the three nations, considering that they are part of the Central American Dry Corridor, a region increasingly impacted by drought and heat waves, which can lead to forced migrations due to the loss of livelihood capacity, especially in rural areas.

Table 6 - Occurrence of disasters in El Salvador, Guatemala, and Honduras, by type of event and population affected in 2019

Country	Disaster Type	Disaster Subtype	Total Affected
El Salvador	Earthquake	Ground movement	160
Guatemala	Storm	Severe weather	15,000
	Storm	Severe weather	63,453
Honduras	Data not available on EM-DAT	—	—

Source: Own elaboration based on EM-DAT data (2024).

According to the data obtained, as shown in table 6, 2019 was relatively quiet in terms of disasters due to the low occurrence of disasters and the low number of people affected. Once again,

floods were highlighted in Guatemala, with two occurrences, as in 2018. The EM-DAT did not include public data on those affected by disasters or disasters that occurred in Honduras in 2019.

Table 7 - Occurrence of disasters in El Salvador, Guatemala, and Honduras, by type of event and population affected in 2020

Country	Disaster Type	Disaster Subtype	Total Affected
El Salvador	Mass movement (wet)	Mudslide	525
	Hurricane 'Eta'	Tropical cyclone	Undefined
	Hurricane 'Iota'	Tropical cyclone	Undefined
	Tropical storm 'Amanda'	Tropical cyclone	149,840
Guatemala	Hurricane 'Eta'	Tropical cyclone	2,415,888
	Hurricane 'Iota'	Tropical cyclone	131,298
	Flood	Flood (General)	16,000
	Flood	Flood (General)	4,070
	Tropical storm 'Amanda'	Tropical cyclone	306,886
Honduras	Hurricane 'Eta'	Tropical cyclone	4,566,584
	Hurricane 'Iota'	Tropical cyclone	578,000
	Flood	Flood (General)	17,700
	Tropical storm 'Amanda'	Tropical cyclone	1,200

Source: Own elaboration based on EM-DAT data (2024).

As shown in table 7, in 2020, Guatemala had the highest number of disasters. However, this time, Honduras appears to be the most affected country, especially due to the combined impacts of hurricanes Eta and Iota, which struck in November, causing large-scale damage in some of our countries and in the Caribbean. For El Salvador and the hurricanes mentioned, there are no data available on those impacted. Not even the displacement monitoring reports from Central America and the Caribbean Office of the International Organization for Migration (IOM, 2020) provide concrete data on the country, which may show that the damage there was less severe than that in its neighbors. It should be noted that 2020 was potentially problematic for these nations; as the COVID-19 pandemic broke out, they experienced decreases in their GDP per person, as we have shown above, and they faced repeated extreme weather events at the end of that year, with hurricanes, the tropical storm 'Amanda' and other floods.

Table 8 - Occurrence of disasters in El Salvador, Guatemala, and Honduras, by type of event and population affected in 2021

Country	Disaster Type	Disaster Subtype	Total Affected
El Salvador	Flood	Flood (General)	300
Guatemala	Flood	Flood (General)	2,245
	Flood	Flood (General)	11,799
	Flood	Flood (General)	10,572
Honduras	Wildfire	Wildfire (General)	2,503

Source: Own elaboration based on EM-DAT data (2024).

As in previous years, Guatemala was the nation most impacted by disasters in 2021, as shown in table 8. Floods once again appear to be the main natural disaster in the country. This time, at least, the total number of people affected was lower than that in 2020. It does not necessarily mean that there has been a stability of those affected previously, and they may even have been victimized in some way in consecutive years.

Table 9 - Occurrence of disasters in El Salvador, Guatemala, and Honduras, by type of event and population affected in 2022

Country	Disaster Type	Disaster Subtype	Total Affected
El Salvador	Hurricane 'Julia'	Tropical cyclone	9,273
	Tropical storm 'Bonnie'	Tropical cyclone	100
Guatemala	Hurricane 'Julia'	Tropical cyclone	457,311
	Flood	Flood (General)	2,890,023
	Earthquake	Ground movement	31,302
Honduras	Hurricane 'Julia'	Tropical cyclone	144,000
	Flood	Flood (General)	1,800
	Flood	Flood (General)	76,657

Source: Own elaboration based on EM-DAT data (2024).

The year 2022, as shown in table 9, was once again more disastrous for Guatemala, which was the most affected by extreme weather events and landslides, with more than 3,347,000 people affected. There was a discrepancy between those affected by Hurricane Julia, with El Salvador being less affected. One explanation lies in the geographical location, since most of these hurricanes form in the Caribbean Sea, impacting countries bordering it, such as Honduras and Guatemala, while the Pacific Ocean borders El Salvador, without access to the Atlantic such as its neighbors. In this sense, the fact that El Salvador is not a bioceanic nation may, in some way, favor the country because hurricanes potentially reach its territory with less force, but this does not necessarily free it from tropical storms formed in the Pacific.

Table 10 - Occurrence of disasters in El Salvador, Guatemala, and Honduras, by type of event and population affected in 2023

Country	Disaster Type	Disaster Subtype	Total Affected
El Salvador	Tropical storm 'Pilar'	Tropical cyclone	500
Guatemala	Volcanic activity	Ash fall	1,054
	Flood	Flood (General)	4,400,005
	Mass movement (wet)	Landslide (wet)	123,325
Honduras	Tropical storm 'Pilar'	Tropical cyclone	Undefined
	Storm	Severe weather	46,658
	Drought	Drought	10,300

Source: Developed by the author based on EM-DAT data (2024).

The year of 2023, as shown in table 10, demonstrates that, once again, all three countries dealt with extreme weather events. Guatemala was the country with the highest number of people

affected, followed by Honduras. Despite the lower number of people affected, El Salvador declared a national state of emergency due to the severity of the rains and the potential losses the country could suffer.

Using the data from IDMC, we can see at table 11 that there are disparities in these flows depending on the country and year chosen. We will follow the same format as the presentation of data on disasters, working with an annual cutoff.

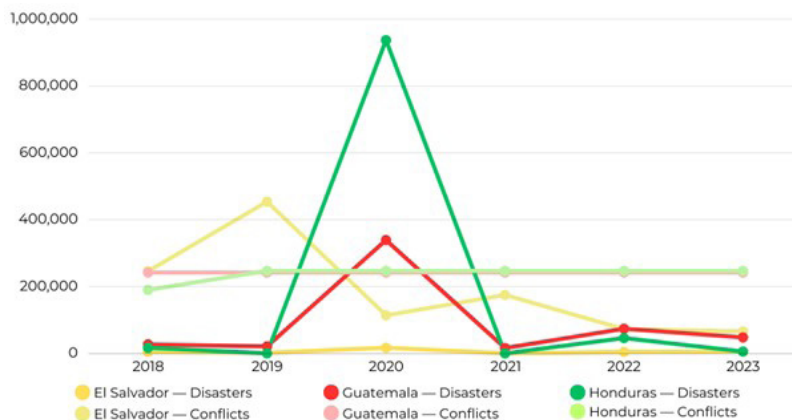
Table 11 - Internal displacement in El Salvador, Guatemala, and Honduras due disasters, conflicts, and the sum between 2018 and 2023

Country	Year	By disasters	By conflicts	Total per year
El Salvador	2018	4,700	246,000	250,700
	2019	1,900	454,000	455,900
	2020	17,000	114,000	131,000
	2021	550	175,000	175,550
	2022	4,600	73,000	77,600
	2023	5,300	66,000	71,300
Guatemala	2018	27,000	242,000	269,000
	2019	21,000	242,000	263,000
	2020	339,000	242,000	581,000
	2021	16,000	242,000	258,000
	2022	74,000	242,000	316,000
	2023	48,000	242,000	290,000
Honduras	2018	17,000	190,000	207,000
	2019	390	247,000	247,390
	2020	937,000	247,000	1,184,000
	2021	260	247,000	247,260
	2022	46,000	247,000	293,000
	2023	5,800	247,000	252,800

Source: Own elaboration based on IDMC data (2024a, 2024b, 2024c, 2024d).

Translating the data from table 11 into graphical elements, graph 4 identifies the fluctuation in displacements due to disasters per year. Honduras is the country with the most internally displaced people due to disasters, followed by Guatemala and El Salvador. Graph 4 shows that all three countries saw their displacements increase in 2020, with the IDMC pointing to hurricanes 'Eta' and 'Iota' as the main triggers for these displacements. It should be noted that, unlike the data presented on disasters, which put Guatemala in the lead in terms of occurrences, this time Honduras takes the position as the nation with the most environmentally displaced people. This allows us to point out that this is because Honduras is the most socioeconomically vulnerable of the three countries, especially when we consider the GDP per person data presented in section 3. There is even a correlation between the decrease in Honduran GDP per person in 2020 due to the COVID-19 pandemic and the exponential increase in displaced people due to disasters compared to previous years. We believe this is a sign that the deepening of poverty may have contributed to the decision to migrate at a time when two major hurricanes hit the country.

Graph 4 - Internally displaced by disasters and conflicts in El Salvador, Guatemala, and Honduras between 2018 and 2023



Source: Own elaboration based on IDMC data (2024a, 2024b, 2024c, 2024d).

Based on IDMC data, Graph 4 shows that the reality of each new displacement per person in the three countries is changing. Disasters only appear to be the main motivation for this migration in 2020 in Guatemala and Honduras for the reasons explained above. Armed conflicts and violence continue to be the main motivation for migratory flows in all three nations, with El Salvador leading the way in this regard in 2018 (by a small margin compared to Guatemala) and in 2019, when it exceeded 455,000 internal displacements. The apparent stability of Guatemala and Honduras from 2018 to 2022, with an accumulated stock of 242,000 people living internally displaced by violence at the end of the year, is due to the inconsistency of IDMC data. In its 2024 report, IDMC points out the lack of updated data from Guatemala and Honduras on internal displacement due to conflict, but without explaining the reasons for this. IDMC explains that the most recent data for Guatemala is from 1997 (242,000 internally displaced by conflict) and Honduras from 2018 (with 247,000 internally displaced by conflict). This makes it difficult to obtain a more exact reading and better indications in terms of violence and conflicts between drug trafficking groups and/or with security forces, although approximations can be made. Despite this problem, the IDMC's country profile reinforces the data we obtained from the EM-DAT, indicating that the main disasters that triggered internal displacement between 2018 and 2022 in El Salvador were storms/hurricanes, floods, earthquakes, landslides, heat waves and volcanic eruptions.

Conclusion

El Salvador, Guatemala, and Honduras have certain similarities in their pasts and contemporary daily lives. Both are marked by poverty, inequality, political crises, violence perpetrated by drug traffickers, and by the fact that they are vulnerable to natural disasters due to their geographical location on an isthmus between two oceans in a location that is the site of intense hurricanes, such as the Caribbean Sea. Furthermore, after Mexico, these countries correspond to the main countries of origin of migrants to the USA. This perspective can be seen in the data presented in this article on the apprehensions of migrants by US border agents, apprehensions that can be translated into later arrests, expulsions from the border to Mexico or even deportations to the countries of origin.

This article tried to identify environmental refugees in the migratory flows of El Salvador, Guatemala, and Honduras by examining data on the arrival of migrants at the Mexico-US border and then showing the reasons for this process. In the period of analysis, from 2018 to 2023, we found that these three countries are severely affected by disasters, with Guatemala and Honduras being severely more impacted than El Salvador, whose internal migrations are more motivated by issues of violence than by extreme climatic or geophysical events. Our analysis showed that despite using data platforms that correlate disasters and internal displacement, it is not possible to infer a direct relationship between these episodes and the international flow of migrants. We believe that it is not possible to establish a direct cause and consequence relationship between disasters and migration, since mobility in Central American countries is built in a context of migratory multicausality. We therefore agree with the literature review proposed by Piguet (2022) that multicausality should be considered when analyzing migrations related to or induced by natural disasters, whether they are correlated with climate change. There are several nuances that need to be analyzed in depth and the impact of disasters deserves special attention in a climate change scenario, making them stronger and more frequent. Although the IDMC compiles data on internal displacement due to disasters, conflicts, and violence, there are still no well-established bases for conducting the same detailed survey when migrants cross international borders.

Furthermore, as we have argued, the journey from Central America to the USA is dangerous, so people must resort to clandestinity to reach their destinations. Although migrant caravans have existed since October 2018 as a phenomenon of resistance to restrictive US migration and border policies, Cabral (2022) argued that caravans have not managed to change the reality of migrants. This is because despite all their political and media importance, their numbers did not correspond with the arrival of migrants at the border, showing that the flows remained clandestine because caravans were a mobility strategy.

For the motivation for these migrations, by comparing the flows with the disaster data, we can try to connect causality with a certain consequence. However, it is not yet possible to prove a direct and explicit correlation because there are no specific data on international migration and natural disasters, even though there are indications and predictions from the IPCC that this correlation could become routine in El Salvador, Guatemala, and Honduras. However, because we work with an expanded view of the concept of environmental refugees based on Ramos (2011), we politically support the argument that it is necessary for these internally displaced people to have more rights and to have their mobility protected in the same way as refugees. Many have lost their homes, lands, communities, and cultural and emotional connections to extreme weather events that will be amplified by climate change. When their realities are destroyed and their lives put at risk, migration is an alternative for survival, whether internal or external to national borders. Thus, based on the IDMC, we can say that there are potential environmental migrants/refugees among the internally displaced in El Salvador, Guatemala, and Honduras, but we cannot yet transpose this certainty to international displacement due to the lack of data on the motivations of these cross-border flows. Although the data presented indicates that there is internal displacement in El Salvador, Guatemala and Honduras due to disasters in the period analyzed, it is not possible to say that disasters are an independent effect on the mobility of these individuals to the USA. The complexity of the migratory context in El Salvador, Guatemala, and Honduras means that the data cannot yet demonstrate this direct effect of the cause and consequence relationship between natural disasters and international migration. In the future, more people will be displaced by disasters, making it necessary to recognize the category of environmental refugees so that these

people are not treated as mere economic migrants and with fewer guarantees that their human rights will not be violated during the mobility process, which includes leaving, moving, arriving in a new place and adapting to there.

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