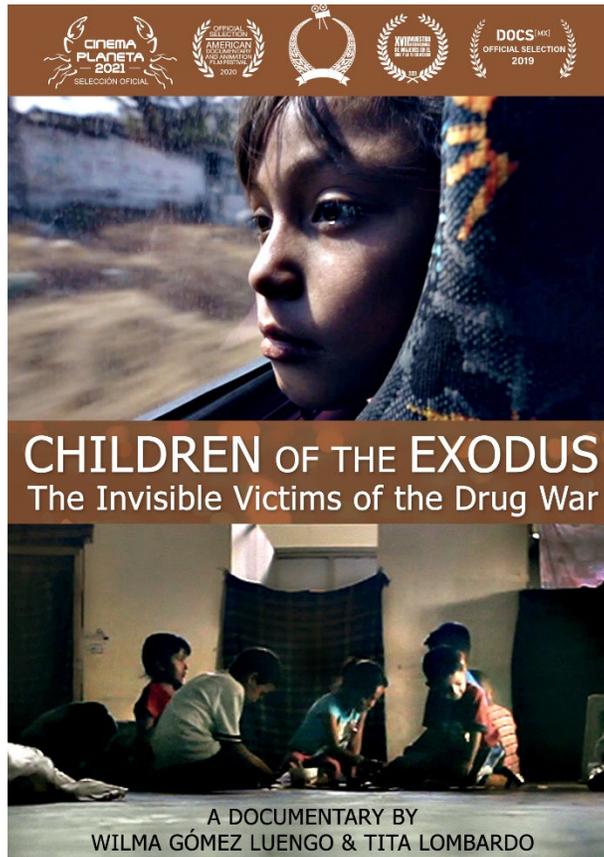




CHILDREN OF THE EXODUS (LOS NIÑOS DEL ÉXODO)



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Children of the Exodus (Los niños del éxodo)

Hundreds of communities in the Tierra Caliente de Guerrero, Mexico have been displaced by organized crime that wants to control territory to traffic drugs and exploit the natural resources. Refugees in a strange city, children reveal the humanitarian crisis of forced displacement and the consequences of relocation and violence in their lives.

Guerrero

Guerrero is a state in the southern part of Mexico, and is located on the country's Pacific Coast. In addition to the Pacific Ocean, it borders the states of Michoacán, México, Morelos, Puebla, and Oaxaca. It is one of Mexico's most mountainous states. Guerrero's population is about 3.5 million people.¹ Its capital city is Chilpancingo de Los Bravo. Chilpancingo has a population of about 280,000 people. Both Chilpancingo and the state of Guerrero have high levels of poverty. In Chilpancingo an estimated 41 percent of the population lives in moderate poverty and 13 percent in extreme poverty.² In the state of Guerrero, the percentages are 44 percent and 23 percent, respectively.³

Tierra Caliente

Tierra Caliente—which means “hot land” in Spanish—is a region in southern Mexico, part of which is located in the state of Guerrero. As its name suggests, the climate in this area is generally hot. In addition to Guerrero, Tierra Caliente includes parts of the states of Michoacán and Mexico. This area is also important to drug traffickers and the people who live there are often caught in the middle of violent conflicts as organized crime groups fight one another for control drug production land and trafficking routes.

Mexico's War on Drugs

Many critics charge that violence in Tierra Caliente—and throughout Mexico—started to become significantly worse in 2006 when Felipe Calderon became president of Mexico and declared a war on the country's drug cartels. Under that war, critics argue that the government's efforts to crack down on drug cartels has not eliminated drug trafficking, but has merely created many smaller and more violent gangs. In a recent report, the U.S. Congressional Research Service explains, “The splintering of the large DTOs [drug trafficking organizations] into competing factions and gangs of different sizes began in 2007 and continues today. The emergence of these different crime groups . . . has made the crime situation diffuse and the crime groups' behavior harder to suppress or eradicate.”⁴

¹ <https://datamexico.org/en/profile/geo/guerrero-gr>

² <https://datamexico.org/en/profile/geo/chilpancingo-de-los-bravo>

³ <https://datamexico.org/en/profile/geo/guerrero-gr>

⁴ <https://sgp.fas.org/crs/row/R41576.pdf>

The war on drugs continues today, but many people believe that it has not been successful. According to a 2020 report by the International Crisis Group, organized crime has become so widespread and so powerful in the state of Guerrero in particular, that it will be difficult to stop. The organization says, “[Guerrero] is the epicenter of organized crime in Mexico, with more groups jostling for turf than in any other single region. At least 40 outfits fight over a portfolio of criminal ventures, ranging from drug production and trafficking, above all heroin for the U.S. market, to several newer rackets, extortion foremost among them.”⁵

Filmmaker Wilma Gómez Luengo explains how the war on drugs has made life more dangerous for the people who live in the Tierra Caliente region. She says, “In 2007, the declaration of war on narco-trafficking changed the situation in the mountains. The villagers told us that arms began to flow into the mountains, and other groups invaded and began violent confrontations with those that were already in control of the area.” According to Luengo, “Gradually the outside gangs began extorting money and abusing these communities, forcing people to work for them, and finally they began to threaten them with forced recruitment.”⁶ She says that when these gangs began to threaten the recruitment of boys as young as twelve, many community members finally decided to leave their homes.

Internal Displacement

The people who have been forced to leave the Tierra Caliente area because of violence are known as internally displaced. Internally displaced people are people who are forced to flee from their homes as a result of violence, armed conflict, natural disasters, or other threats to their safety. Unlike refugees, however, they stay within the borders of their own country. Internal displacement happens all over the world, for a variety of reasons. The Internal Displacement Monitoring Centre (IDMC) reports that as of the end of 2020, about 55 million people worldwide were living in internal displacement.

Mexico’s system of mining concessions has also contributed to the problem of internal displacement. Under the country’s constitution, all minerals in the ground—such as gold and silver—are owned by the nation, regardless of who actually owns the land on the surface. In addition, under Mexico’s Mining Law, mining those minerals is preferred over any other use of the land. As a result, in areas where minerals are located, the government has granted many mining concessions to mining companies. A concession allows a mining company to conduct mining activities in the area of the concession, regardless of who actually owns the land. Estimates vary, but by some estimates, more than half of the country has been concessioned to mining.⁷ The system of concessions is

⁵ <https://www.crisisgroup.org/latin-america-caribbean/mexico/80-mexicos-everyday-war-guerrero-and-trials-peace>

⁶ <http://theprisma.co.uk/2020/08/17/flight-of-the-innocents-abandoned-by-the-mexican-state/>

⁷ <https://www.ccmss.org.mx/mineria-en-mexico-ni-desarrollo-ni-empleos-ni-impuestos-ni-bienestar-un-proceso-de-despojo-y-destruccion-que-necesitamos-detener/>

widely believed to contribute to internal displacement, with critics pointing out that an increase in concessions has coincided with an increase in displacement.⁸



According to the United Nations Human Rights Office of the High Commissioner, displaced people have a number of basic rights, which include, “The right to basic humanitarian assistance (such as food, medicine, shelter), the right to be protected from physical violence, the right to education, freedom of movement and residence, political rights such as the right to participate in public affairs and the right to participate in economic activities.” In addition, it says, “Displaced persons also have the right to assistance from competent authorities in voluntary, dignified and safe return, resettlement or local integration, including help in recovering lost property and possessions.”⁹ It explains that helping and protecting internally displaced people is primarily the responsibility of the government of the country where those people live.

In Mexico, thousands of people are displaced every year. IDMC says that in 2020, about 9,700 people in Mexico were displaced from their homes as a result of conflict and violence, and that since 2006, a total of 357,000 people have been displaced from their homes.¹⁰ The organization notes that these are estimates, not official statistics, because the government in Mexico does not officially track internal displacement. Actual numbers are thought to be higher. The Mexican Commission for the Defense and Promotion of Human Rights (CMDPDH) reports that in recent years, there has been a decrease in the number of communities displaced by violence. The historical maximum was reached in

⁸ http://www.scielo.org.mx/scielo.php?script=sci_arttext&pid=S1405-91932013000100002

⁹ <https://www.ohchr.org/en/issues/idpersons/pages/issues.aspx>

¹⁰ <https://www.internal-displacement.org/sites/default/files/2021-05/figure-analysis-mex.pdf>

2017, when a total of 20,390 displaced people were registered. However, in the state of Guerrero, forced displacement has not shown a significant decrease.¹¹

Thanks to the efforts of some nongovernmental organizations and human rights activists, in 2019 the Government of President López Obrador officially recognized the existence of the phenomenon of forced displacement and committed to taking action to address this issue. Since then, various federal institutions have begun to start working on this goal, however much remains to be done. The CMDPDH explains, “There is still no specialized regulatory framework at the federal level that determines the distribution of resources and responsibilities among the different authorities that, from the three levels of government, will be in charge of designing and implementing coordinated prevention and comprehensive care policies for the phenomenon. Likewise, a comprehensive diagnosis is needed to measure and characterize the situation of internal displacement at the national level.”¹²

Effects of Displacement

Internal displacement is believed to have many potential harms. Valeria Uribe, Director General of the Pan American Development Foundation, explains that displacement comes with many challenges. She says that people who are displaced often have trouble finding a job and a place to live, and that young people frequently fall behind in their schooling. Overall, she says, “[They] face an uphill battle in re-establishing their lives in a new location. Although those who move within the same country share a language and, to a certain extent, cultural values, the trauma of having to leave their communities of origin because of threats or violence makes integration into a new host community incredibly challenging.”¹³

The Internal Displacement Monitoring Centre explains that the negative effects of displacement often force people into a downward spiral, where one negative effect leads to another. It says, “Some of these impacts can have further repercussions and create vulnerability loops that are difficult to get out of. For instance, when a family loses its income as a result of displacement, young family members may be forced to drop out of school to support their parents, sacrificing their chance to get a degree and eventually making it harder for them to find decent work.”¹⁴ According to the United Nations Human Rights Office of the High Commissioner, displaced people are often extremely vulnerable, and are more likely to experience physical harm, and less likely to have adequate food, shelter, or health services than the rest of the population.

A Continuing Problem

¹¹ <http://cmdpdh.org/episodios-de-desplazamiento-interno-forzado-masivo-en-mexico-informe-2019/>

¹² <http://cmdpdh.org/temas/desplazamiento/> [Google Translate translation]

¹³ <https://mexicobusiness.news/policyandeconomy/news/run-home-internally-displaced-persons-mexico>

¹⁴ https://www.internal-displacement.org/sites/default/files/publications/documents/internally_displaced_youth_final.pdf



Overall violence in Mexico remains extremely high. In 2018—the year that Andrés Manuel López Obrador became president—homicides there reached an all-time high.¹⁵ They have remained at a high point since then. Rates are particularly high in the states of Baja California, Chihuahua, Colima, and Guanajuato.¹⁶

Obrador’s security policies differ from previous presidents; he has pledged to bring peace to the country by addressing the underlying causes of violence, such as corruption and poverty. For example, in his first state of the union address, he promised to end government corruption, saying, “Nothing has damaged Mexico more than the dishonesty of its rulers—and this is the main cause of the economic and social inequality, and of the insecurity and violence, that we suffer.”¹⁷ He also addressed cartel violence. “The extermination war against so-called organized crime is over,” he said, “The country will be pacified.”¹⁸ Many people have nicknamed this a “hugs, not bullets,” policy, and it has received widespread criticism because Obrador has not been able to reduce violence and deaths nationally.¹⁹ Overall, violence remains a serious problem in Mexico, and thousands of people continue to be displaced from their homes there every year.

¹⁵ <https://www.wsj.com/articles/mexicos-murder-rate-hit-record-high-in-2018-11564079972>

¹⁶ <https://apnews.com/article/homicide-coronavirus-pandemic-latin-america-mexico-a90c2a172f39ab2546de465c73a60543>

¹⁷ <https://apnews.com/article/de550da5319c466e93d022eef5461a>

¹⁸ <https://apnews.com/article/de550da5319c466e93d022eef5461a>

¹⁹ <https://www.npr.org/2020/07/23/893561899/as-mexicos-dominant-cartel-gains-power-the-president-vows-hugs-not-bullets?t=1624659253689>

Additional Resources

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