

Canadian aid in Honduras: an ambiguous issue

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Canada has long been seen as a haven for Central American migrants, even though its mining interests in a country like Honduras have had a significant impact on its socio-political situation. The author describes the reasons for this ambiguous relationship, the terms of which could change with the recent election of Xiomara Castro, the first left-wing president of Honduras.

Since the adoption in 2021 of the Roadmap for a Renewed U.S.-Canada Partnership,¹ North America's leaders have agreed to step up their commitment to managing the Central American migration crisis. At the Summit of the Americas held in Los Angeles in June 2022, Canada joined the Western Hemisphere's nineteen countries seeking to control migration to the north. The Los Angeles Declaration on Migration and Protection stems from the meeting and recognises "the need to promote the political, economic, security, social, and environmental conditions for people to lead peaceful, productive, and dignified lives in their countries of origin".² Based on four pillars, namely promoting stabilisation and assistance for communities, expanding regular pathways for migration, humane migration management, and a coordinated emergency response, the declaration makes provision for Canada to welcome 4,000 refugees from the Americas (South America, Central America, North America and the Caribbean) by 2028,³ the vast majority of whom will come from Central America's Northern Triangle (El Salvador, Guatemala and Honduras). These will be in addition to the 50,000 agricultural workers from Mexico, Guatemala and the Caribbean that Justin Trudeau had pledged to welcome in 2022.

Honduras remains a telling example of forced displacement in the region due to generalised violence which concerns the North American countries, with over 247,000 internally displaced people between 2004 and 2018.⁴ Although the situation in Honduras conjures up a greater threat in the imagination of the United States (US) security apparatus on historical and proximity grounds,⁵ the socioeconomic and geopolitical ramifications have also been challenging Canada since the period of Central America's civil wars (1979-1990). Despite Canada having resettled thousands of Central American refugees in the 1980s and 1990s and the existence of a free trade agreement between the two countries since 2014, few texts

¹ Government of Canada, *Roadmap for a Renewed U.S.-Canada Partnership*, Prime Minister of Canada, Justin Trudeau, 23 February 2021, <https://www.pm.gc.ca/en/news/statements/2021/02/23/roadmap-renewed-us-canada-partnership>

² Government of Canada, *Los Angeles Declaration on Migration and Protection*, Prime Minister of Canada, Justin Trudeau, 10 June 2022, <https://www.pm.gc.ca/en/news/statements/2022/06/10/los-angeles-declaration-migration-and-protection>

³ Government of Canada, *Remarks at the Summit of the Americas*, Prime Minister of Canada, Justin Trudeau, 10 June 2022, <https://www.pm.gc.ca/en/videos/2022/06/10/remarks-summit-americas>

⁴ La Agencia de la ONU para los Refugiados, *Honduras – Informe Operacional 19*, July 2023, <https://data.unhcr.org/fr/documents/details/103111>

⁵ Yajaira M. Padilla, *From Threatening Guerrillas to Forever Illegals. US Central Americans and the Cultural Politics of Non-Belonging*, University of Texas Press, 2022.

address Canada's management of the Central American migration crisis.⁶ In light of the new opportunities for working together for the key state signatories of the Los Angeles Declaration, what is Canada's role in Central America, and what are the main challenges and progress areas for Canadian-Honduran cooperation in view of managing the migration crisis?

Canada and Central America: an alternative to the American Dream?

Two of the main causes cited as being at the root of the migration crisis in Central America are US interventionism since the countries achieved independence in the nineteenth century and support for authoritarian regimes throughout the twentieth century.⁷ During the Cold War, US intervention – undertaken with the collusion of local oligarchies – fuelled poverty, inequality, violence and insecurity in the region, particularly during the Central American civil wars. Indeed, all these factors drove over two million Central Americans to seek refuge in Mexico, the US and Canada between 1974 and 1996.⁸ Admittedly, migration from Latin America to Canada remained extremely low before the 1970s.⁹ However, Canada's position changed following the Chilean coup d'état in 1973, with the country accepting over 7,000 Chilean political refugees as a result of the unprecedented mobilisation of civil society and the Canadian people.¹⁰ Indeed, it was the actions of international non-profit organisations, especially religious and human rights organisations, which helped reframe the national debate on immigration in Mexico, the US and Canada, giving displaced people a voice.¹¹ As such, civil society action in favour of human rights, peace and democratic transition remains one of the influences on Canadian diplomacy with Central America in the 1980s and 1990s.¹² Consequently, differences between the Canadian and US responses to the Central American conflicts in the 1980s enhanced Canada's image as a haven of peace and refuge for displaced Central Americans.¹³

Having played an advisory role in the Central American peace process, Canada went on to take part in various United Nations (UN) peacekeeping operations, specifically in El Salvador and Guatemala, between 1989 and 1997. However, at a time when Central America was struggling to get back on its feet after several decades of fratricidal violence, Hurricane Mitch wreaked havoc in late October 1998, causing "over 6,000 deaths and US\$4 billion in damage in Honduras".¹⁴ Canada and other lead donor countries formed a group, now known as the G-16, to coordinate aid in Central America in order to "reduce environmental, social, and economic vulnerability".¹⁵ Yet while respect for human rights

⁶ Marc-André Anzueto, "Canada's approach toward Central American migrants", *Policy Options*, 10 August 2018, <https://policyoptions.irpp.org/magazines/august-2018/canadas-approach-toward-central-american-migrants>

⁷ Bernard Duterme (dir.), *Fuir l'Amérique centrale*, Éditions Syllepse, 2022.

⁸ María Cristina García, *Seeking Refuge: Central American Migration to Mexico, the United States, and Canada*, University of California Press, 2006.

⁹ Christina Gabriel and Laura Macdonald, "Latin American migration to Canada: new and complex patterns of mobility", in Pablo Heidrich and Laura Macdonald (eds.), *Canada's Past and Future in Latin America*, University of Toronto Press, 2022, pp. 133–155.

¹⁰ Marc-André Anzueto, « Les deux visages de Janus ? : les droits humains dans la politique étrangère du Canada en Amérique centrale », in Nancy Thede et Mélanie Dufour-Poirier (dir.), *L'Amérique latine : laboratoire du politique autrement*, Presses de l'Université du Québec, 2014, p. 227–245.

¹¹ María Cristina García, *Seeking Refuge...*, *op. cit.*, p. 2.

¹² Stephen Baranyi and John W. Foster, "Canada and Central America: citizen action and international policy", in Peter McKenna (ed.), *Canada Looks South: In Search of an Americas Policy*, University of Toronto Press, 2012, pp. 240–264.

¹³ María Cristina García, "Canada : a northern refuge for Central Americans", *Migration Policy Institute*, 1 April 2006, <https://www.migrationpolicy.org/article/canada-northern-refuge-central-americans>

¹⁴ Canadian International Development Agency, *Evaluation of CIDA's Honduras Program – 2002-2010*, Synthesis Report, September 2011.

¹⁵ Canadian International Development Agency, *Evaluation of CIDA's Honduras Program – 2002-2010*, *op. cit.*

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remained a *sine qua non* of Canadian diplomatic efforts in Central America through the 1980s, the fact that Canadian mining interests took precedence over the promotion of democratic values and social justice raised many questions during the 2000s. Indeed, from 2000 to 2008, the socio-environmental impact of the San Martin opencast gold mine, operated by the Canadian mining giant Goldcorp, prompted the Honduran President, Manuel Zelaya, to declare a moratorium on new mining concessions in 2006.¹⁶ However, the reforms envisaged as part of a new draft mining bill were hampered by the 2009 Honduran coup d'état.

Canadian diplomacy in Honduras and its impact on migration

The 2009 Honduran coup d'état highlighted that Canadian diplomacy was serving the interests of Canadian mining companies at the expense of Canada's human rights obligations and their ramifications on migration.¹⁷ In 2011, Canada initiated with Honduras "bilateral free trade talks and joined in a mining counter-reform in the wake of a military coup d'état", while the Harper government (2006-2015) played down Honduran and Canadian civil society opposition.¹⁸ Yet, since 2009, authoritarianism and the mining industry in Honduras have not only contributed to poverty, corruption and violence against human rights defenders (HRDs) but have also been push factors for forced population displacement and migration.¹⁹ In 2015, a report by Canada's House of Commons expressed concern about attacks against HRDs, who faced "stigmatisation, displacement and enforced exile", and called on the Canadian government to "ensure protection for human rights defenders and combat crime and insecurity in Honduras".²⁰

In 2015, the Canadian government responded that it would continue to raise human rights issues in the G-16, while reiterating its support for HRDs under threat.²¹ As a matter of fact, on the day that the free trade agreement between the two countries came into force – 1 October 2014 – Canada discussed with Honduras the "concerning issue of migration of unaccompanied children from countries in the Northern Triangle (Honduras, Guatemala, El Salvador) to North America".²² However, it was under the government of Prime Minister Trudeau that Canada adopted more ambitious international instruments to tackle the various migration crises, including the Central American one. In 2016, Canada joined the member states of the UN General Assembly to unanimously adopt the New York Declaration for Refugees and Migrants. This declaration "launched separate processes to create two non-binding international agreements: one for refugees (Global Compact on Refugees) and one for migrants (the Global Compact for Safe, Orderly and Regular Migration)".²³

¹⁶ Jen Moore, "Wrapped in the Canadian Flag": Precious Metals Mining and Canada's Deadly Diplomacy in Latin America", in Pablo Heidrich and Laura Macdonald (dir.), *Canada's Past and Future in Latin America*, University of Toronto Press, 2022, pp. 233-234.

¹⁷ *Idem*.

¹⁸ Hugo Lavoie-Deslongchamps, « L'émergence du néo-continentisme dans la politique du Canada à l'égard des Amériques », *Études internationales*, vol. 50, n° 1, 2019, p. 84 [our translation, editor's note].

¹⁹ James J. Phillips, *Extracting Honduras: Resource Exploitation, Displacement, and Forced Migration*, Rowman & Littlefield, 2022.

²⁰ House of Commons Canada, *Overcoming violence and impunity: human rights challenges in Honduras*, Report of the Standing Committee on Foreign Affairs and International Development, March 2015, p. 29.

²¹ House of Commons Canada, *Government's response to the Standing Committee on Foreign Affairs and International Development's Seventh Report: Overcoming violence and impunity: human rights challenges in Honduras*, 2015.

²² House of Commons Canada, *op. cit* [our translation, editor's note].

²³ Government of Canada, *Global Compact for Safe, Orderly and Regular Migration*, Backgrounder, 10 December 2018, <https://www.canada.ca/en/immigration-refugees-citizenship/news/2018/12/global-compact-for-safe-orderly-and-regular-migration.html>

Consequently, the 2022 Los Angeles Declaration, signed by both Canada and Honduras, is aligned with these multilateral initiatives. However, promoting the defence of migrants' rights in Central America proved particularly challenging during the Trump administration (2016-2020). In addition to his "zero tolerance" policy on illegal migration from Central America, President Trump remained silent about corruption and the dismantling of initiatives such as the International Commission against Impunity in Guatemala and the Mission to Support the Fight Against Corruption and Impunity in Honduras in 2020.²⁴ This is why the start of Joe Biden's presidency in 2021 and the 2021 election of Xiomara Castro, Honduras' first female left-wing president, paved the way for new partnership opportunities to manage this migration crisis.

Canadian-Honduran cooperation: opportunities, challenges and progress

The election of President Castro is rousing high hopes, particularly after the extradition to the US of the former President of Honduras, Juan Orlando Hernández, who is accused of turning the country into a "narco-state".²⁵

On the one hand, the president wants to break away from the corruption and impunity of her predecessors since the 2009 coup d'état and from the authoritarianism of her Central American counterparts.²⁶ On the other, she is regarded by Washington as a reliable partner with the capacity to address the deep-rooted causes of migration and forced displacement.²⁷ Her election could also open up the possibility of cooperation on Canadian priorities in the areas of "gender equality, economic opportunities, governance, including strengthening of justice and democracy, irregular migration, and the fight against impunity and corruption".²⁸ Thus, in May 2023, Canada, the US and Spain announced the *Trilateral statement on joint commitment to Latin America* to underscore "the commitments" in the *Los Angeles Declaration* and the United States' "call to action" for Central America.²⁹

While Honduras was the main beneficiary of Canada's international aid in Central America, receiving over US\$31 million in 2022,³⁰ the Central American country is a good example of the contradictory interests of Canadian diplomacy, with major migratory ramifications affecting the protection of the rights of women and of indigenous, small farmer and Afro-descendant communities. In this respect, in

²⁴ Marc-André Anzueto, « Un modèle unique de la coopération internationale et de la justice transitionnelle : l'expérience de la CICIG (2007-2019) », blog *Un seul monde*, 28 septembre 2020, <https://ieim.ugam.ca/un-modele-unique-de-la-cooperation-internationale-et-de-la-justice-transitionnelle-l'experience-de-la-cicig-2007-2019>

²⁵ Jean-Marc David Dominguez, « Passation de pouvoirs au Honduras : Quelles perspectives économiques et politiques ? », *IdeAs. Idées d'Amérique*, n° 19, mars 2022, <https://journals.openedition.org/ideas/12735>

²⁶ Sebastián A. Cutrona, Jonathan D. Rosen and Katy A. Lindquist, "Not just money. How organised crime, violence, and insecurity are shaping emigration in Mexico, El Salvador, and Guatemala", *International Journal of Comparative and Applied Criminal Justice*, vol. 47, no. 3, 2023, pp. 255–278.

²⁷ Karen Spring, "A new era for Honduras. After more than a decade of right-wing rule, Xiomara Castro enters office facing high expectations and a social movement prepared to fight to secure change", *NACLA Report on the Americas*, vol. 54, no. 1, 2022, pp. 2–6.

²⁸ Government of Canada, *Canada-Honduras relations*, 2022, <https://www.international.gc.ca/country-pays/honduras/relations.aspx?lang=eng>

²⁹ Government of Canada, *Trilateral statement on joint commitment to Latin America*, 3 May 2023, <https://www.canada.ca/en/immigration-refugees-citizenship/news/2023/05/trilateral-statement-on-joint-commitment-to-latin-america.html>

³⁰ Government of Canada, *Statistical Report on International Assistance 2021-2022*, 17 May 2023, <https://www.international.gc.ca/transparence-transparence/international-assistance-report-stat-rapport-aide-internationale/2021-2022.aspx?lang=eng>

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2023 the UN reiterated that attacks on HRDs and social conflicts linked to land and territory affect these self-same communities impacted by mining, and they directly contribute to “violence, displacement and migration”.³¹ A year after Xiomara Castro came to power, Amnesty International reiterated that “thousands of people continue to be displaced outside and inside the country, fleeing the devastation of the climate crisis, violence, poverty and inequalities” and appealed to Castro’s government to “address the structural causes of these issues with a human rights perspective”.³² Finally, it will be important and expedient to monitor the cooperation between Canada and Honduras and to study the development of Canadian support for HRDs, its linkage with mining policies and their impact on the migration crisis.

Translated from the French by Gillian Eaton

Biography

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Marc-André Anzueto, “Canadian aid in Honduras: an ambiguous issue”, *Humanitarian Alternatives*, no. 24, November 2023, pp. 72–81.

<https://www.alternatives-humanitaires.org/en/2023/11/17/canadian-aid-in-honduras-an-ambiguous-issue/>

³¹ Human Rights Council, *Situation of human rights in Honduras*, report of the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights, A/HRC/52/54, 28 February 2023, paragr. 17.

³² Amnesty International, *Honduras. Xiomara Castro’s government must firmly deliver on human rights agenda*, 27 January 2023, <https://www.amnesty.org/en/latest/news/2023/01/honduras-xiomara-castro-government-must-deliver-human-rights>