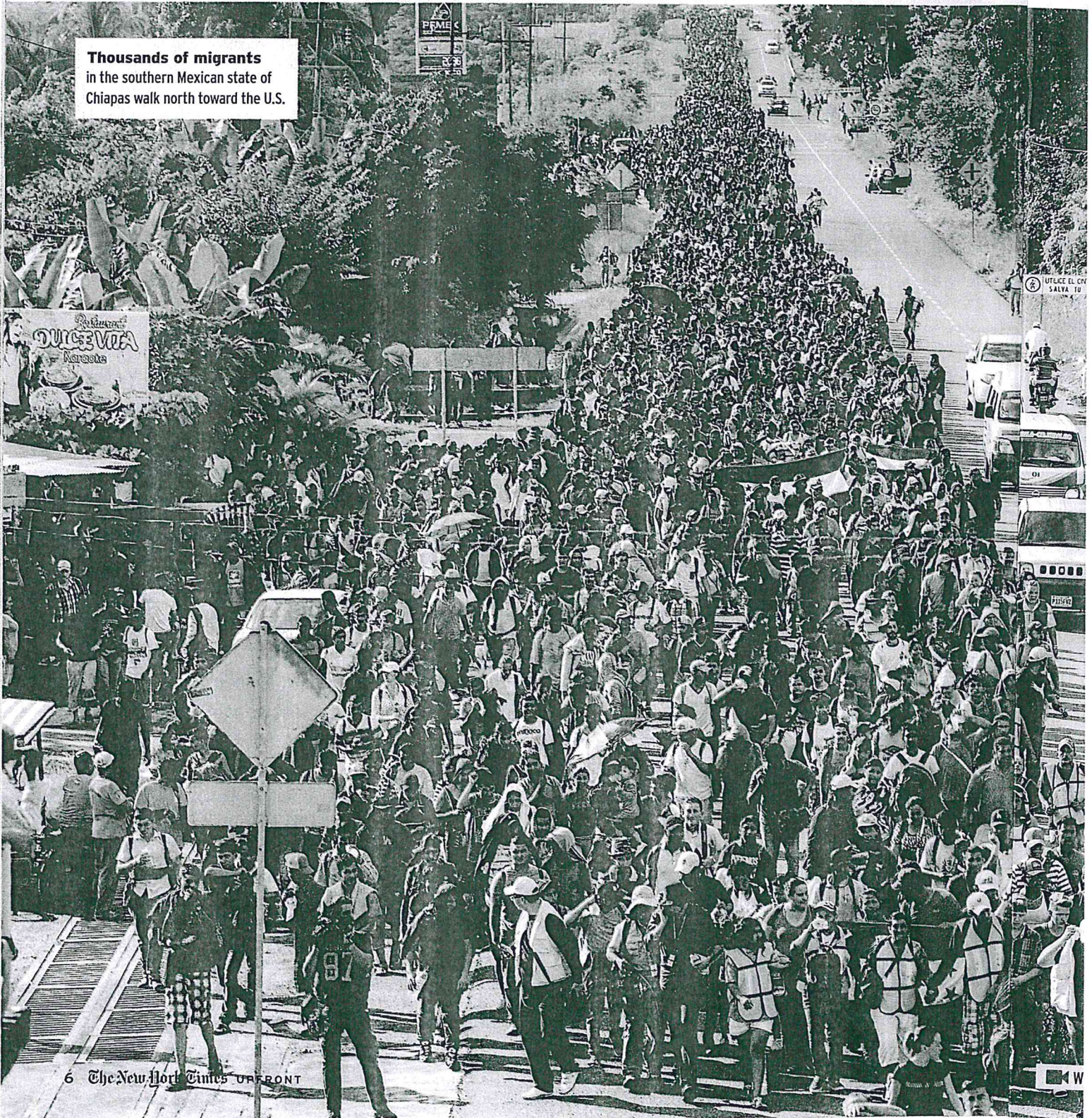


Desperate

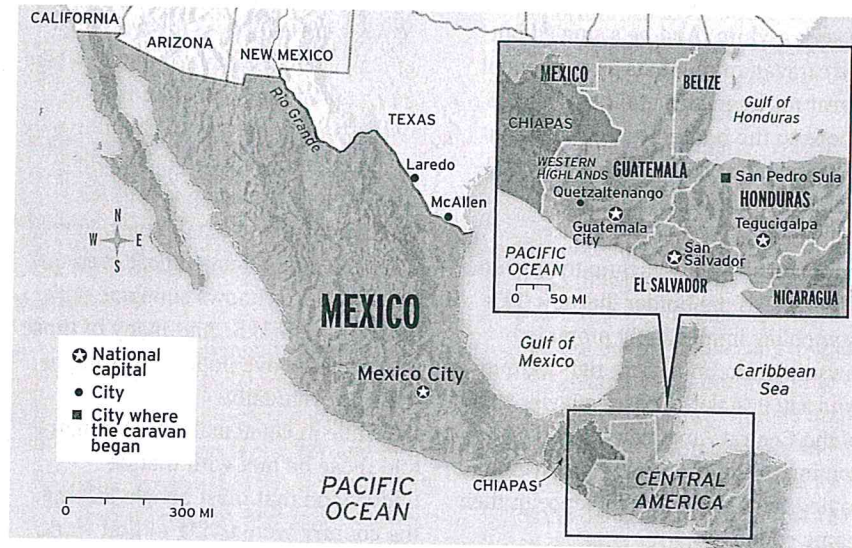
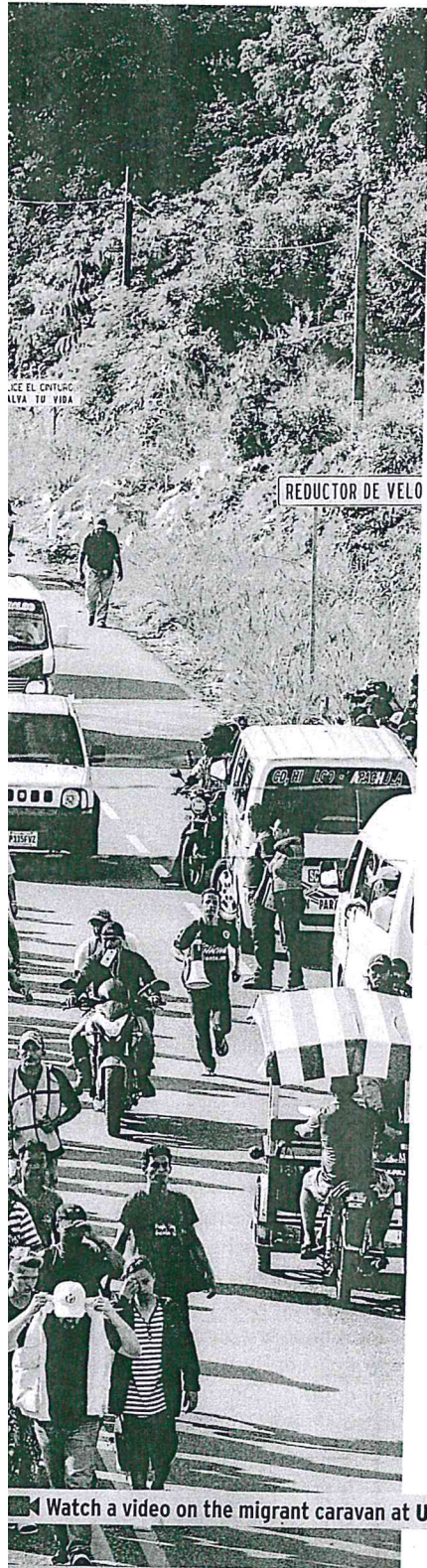
With little but poverty and violence at home, migrants from Central America are ri

Thousands of migrants in the southern Mexican state of Chiapas walk north toward the U.S.



Journeys

Are they risking everything to get to the U.S. What will happen to them? BY PATRICIA SMITH



Thousands of men, women, and children—many carrying small bags with a few precious belongings and wearing flimsy shoes—were trekking north through Mexico last month.

They had joined a caravan of Central American migrants from Honduras, El Salvador, and Guatemala who were fleeing poverty and violence and were desperate to reach the United States.

Though the trek through Central America and Mexico to the U.S. border is notoriously dangerous—there are unscrupulous smugglers, dangerous desert crossings, and the risk of kidnapping by deadly Mexican drug cartels—many migrants, who heard about the growing caravan on Facebook and WhatsApp, said they had no choice but to leave their home countries for a chance at a better life.

Kinzinyer Gabriela Hernández, 17, was traveling in the caravan from Honduras with her 2-year-old daughter and her 16-year-old sister.

“My husband knows that we’re on

our way, but not exactly where we are,” she said, as she washed in a river near a small town in southern Mexico. “God gives me the faith to keep going.”

Crackdown on Immigration

The people in the caravan are part of a surge in migration from Central America to the U.S. that began a few years ago. In the past year, more than 100,000 families from Honduras, Guatemala, and El Salvador have been apprehended or otherwise stopped at the U.S. border with Mexico. Another 38,000 children traveling by themselves from those three countries were also stopped. The number of Guatemalan and Honduran families picked up at the border has more than doubled in the past two years. And an unknown number of migrants from these countries have made it into the U.S. without being caught.

Americans remain divided over what to do about the situation. While many people sympathize with the migrants’ plight and favor giving them some form of assistance,

PEDRO PARDO/AFP/GETTY IMAGES (MIGRANTS); JIM McMAHON (MAP)

Watch a video on the migrant caravan at UPFRONTMAGAZINE.COM

anti-immigrant feeling has also swelled recently. In fact, opposition to illegal immigration became a big issue in the recent midterm elections.

President Trump has vowed to crack down on illegal immigration and those coming to the U.S. from Central America

to seek asylum. And he's singled out the caravan of migrants as a potential threat to Americans and has sent U.S. troops to the border to keep them out.

"We cannot allow our country to be violated like this," Trump said.

Trump has also vowed to automatically deny asylum to anyone who crosses the border illegally. This new policy immediately prompted lawsuits from immigrant rights groups, who say it violates existing laws. Many of the Central American migrants coming to the U.S. apply for asylum, saying they are fleeing violence in their home countries.

The U.S. has also tried other methods to stanch the flow of migrants from Central America. In late September,

Kevin McAleenan, the commissioner of Customs and Border Protection, traveled to Guatemala, Honduras, and

El Salvador—the three countries that make up the bulk of the migrants apprehended at the southwestern border.

One of the places McAleenan visited was the western highlands of Guatemala, a region where 76 percent of the population lives in poverty and 67 percent of children younger than 5 suffer from chronic malnutrition, according to the U.S. Agency for International Development.

It's a region where almost everyone has family—or knows someone with family—in the U.S. And many of those who remain have hopes of getting to the U.S. eventually.

While in Guatemala, McAleenan told those he met with that he understood that most people leaving the country were trying to find work. But he reminded them that illegally crossing the American border is a crime, and he warned of smugglers

who have misled desperate migrants by assuring them that they can remain in the U.S. if they arrive as families.

"There is no ability to stay in the United States if you bring a child, and there is no ability to stay if you are pregnant," McAleenan said. "We need to continue to provide accurate information so they won't make this dangerous journey, where they face physical and sexual assault."

Smugglers on Facebook

The United States is planning to spend more than \$200 million on projects in Guatemala over the next few years to create jobs and reduce poverty, officials say. The U.S. has also tried to deter illegal immigration by harshly cracking down on border crossings this year—including with the now-defunct and widely condemned practice of separating migrant children from their detained parents and other relatives.

Additionally, the U.S. has launched a \$1.3 million advertising campaign to warn people in Guatemala, El Salvador, and Honduras about the dangers of

Migrants ignore dangers in their hopes for better lives.

What They're Trying to Leave Behind

A look at the countries the migrants are coming from

HONDURAS

Population: 9 million

Per Capita GDP: \$5,600

(U.S. Per Capita GDP: \$59,500)

Overview: Plagued by a long history of corruption, poverty, and crime, Honduras is one of the least stable countries in the region. Gang violence is common, and the country has one of the highest murder rates in the world. The economy is heavily dependent on exports of bananas and coffee. Nearly half of Hondurans live in poverty.

GUATEMALA

Population: 17.2 million

Per Capita GDP: \$8,100

Overview: Guatemala endured a 36-year-long civil war that ended in 1996, leaving more than 200,000 people dead or missing. The country's economy is largely agricultural, with an emphasis on coffee and corn. The country also suffers from terrible gang violence and high rates of domestic violence.

EL SALVADOR

Population: 6.5 million

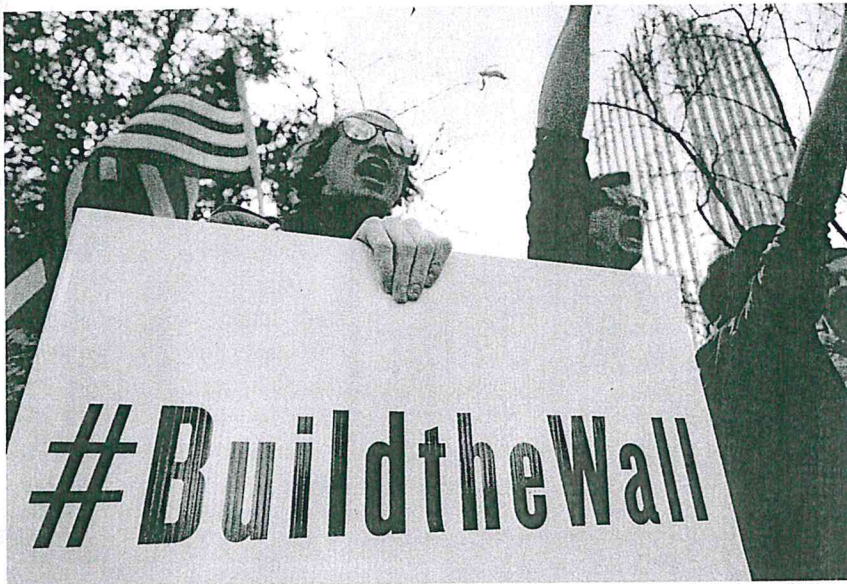
Per Capita GDP: \$8,900

Overview: Beset by rival gangs and rampant police corruption, El Salvador has one of the highest homicide rates in the world. About a third of the population lives in poverty, according to the World Bank. Coffee and sugar exports are a major part of the economy, and money sent home by Salvadorans living abroad (mostly in the U.S.) accounts for almost 20 percent of the country's GDP.



In Guatemala, many people live in extreme poverty.

AGE FOTOSTOCK/ALAMY STOCK PHOTO



Anti-immigration protesters in Portland, Oregon, in 2017

the journey north. In Guatemala, nine billboards, as well as radio and TV commercials, urge people not to make the trip.

But interviews with more than a dozen people in the Guatemalan highlands' largest city and several small towns showed that few residents have seen or heard the warnings. Many said they would not be persuaded to stay where they are anyway.

At the same time, a parallel—and far more powerful—messaging campaign by smugglers is spread by word of mouth.

Guatemalans say they see daily advertisements by the smugglers, known as coyotes, promising to get them to the U.S. On one radio station, smugglers regularly offer to transport and help finance northbound travels for migrants. Some smugglers also promote their services on Facebook.

At the urging of American officials, the Guatemalan government has begun offering rewards to people who turn in smugglers. But getting people to do so has been a struggle.

“No one will turn them in, because within the community they are not seen as bad people,” says Dora Alonzo, 27, who runs an organization

in Quetzaltenango to keep children from trying to migrate to America. “But everyone knows who they are.”

Alonzo says her father and a sister migrated to the U.S. with help from smugglers. Her father returned to Guatemala eight years ago, after spending seven years in the U.S. Her sister lives in South Carolina, she says.

Alonzo would not name the smugglers. But she says the American government’s plea for Guatemalans to remain at home is unlikely to be effective. The promise of a good life in the U.S. overrides the risks.

‘We have to create better opportunities for people so they can stay home.’

“That is the way to have a house and a car,” she says.

More than 1 million people in Guatemala’s rural areas lack electricity. Many earn little to no

profit from the coffee, corn, and beans they grow, and small farmers are unable to cover their costs. Additionally, residents cite drug trafficking, widespread corruption in the local government, and extortion by gangs as contributing to their decision to leave Guatemala (see “What They’re Trying to Leave Behind,” facing page).

“We have to create better

opportunities for people so they can stay home,” says Víctor Manuel Asturias Cordón, who heads the National Competitiveness Program, a Guatemalan government agency that promotes economic development.

“We also have to work on countering smugglers who have convinced people that their best opportunities to be successful lie in the [United] States,” he adds.

Trying Again and Again

That’s what Liset Juárez, who lives in the remote Guatemalan town of Concepción Chiquirichapa, believes. Eight months ago, her husband packed a bag, hugged their three children, and left for the U.S. It was his sixth attempt to cross the border illegally to find work.

The family had borrowed the equivalent of nearly \$13,000 from a friend to pay a smuggler for the trip. Juárez says her husband was aware of the dangers but felt he had few alternatives in Guatemala, where he was deep in debt after his business failed.

“What can we do?” Juárez says. “We have to feed our children.”

Juárez says her husband finally made it to the U.S. after nearly a half-dozen tries. He plans to stay three years. With the money he makes as a laborer, they plan to pay back their debt and save up to open another business.

Other Guatemalans are still trying. In the town of Cajolá, a 20-year-old woman who identified herself only as Onelia says she has tried to illegally cross the border into Texas at least three times—twice in Laredo and once in McAllen—before being deported back to Guatemala.

Undeterred, she says she plans to set off again soon for the U.S.

“We know about the risk and we know how hard it is,” she says. “But we still want to go.” •

With reporting by Ron Nixon, Kirk Semple, Annie Correal, and Maya Averbuch of The New York Times.

COMING SOON: *Upfront* profiles a migrant teenager from Central America.