

The Plight of Thousands of Haitian Migrants at the US-Mexico Border

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California border, December 2016

The US-Mexico border witnessed at its doors in 2016 thousands of Haitians who sought to enter the US. At the San Ysidro port of entry alone, south of San Diego, over 5,000 Haitians have arrived since October 2015, compared to 339 people between October 2014 and September 2015.

It takes several weeks for border authorities to process these migrants, and since they cannot go back on their steps, many are at an impasse. Among those who have been accepted into US territory through San Diego or Calexico, many find themselves in precarious situations where language barriers, few shelters and the absence of programs for migrants, carry their weight of consequences.

Although the local community has mobilized itself to assist the migrants, their abilities are wearing thin. Over the last months, the San Diego United Methodist Church's Christ Ministry Center opened its doors to migrants. What started with 20 people rapidly turned into 200 sleeping on the floor, between benches and in the church corridors. The community is overloaded and the lack of space is about to become unbearable. More than a year after the sudden surge of arriving migrants, no emergency measure has been declared.





On the Mexican side of the border, in Tijuana, the lack of space is such that hundreds of migrants have decided to move east to Mexicali. A single visit in El Centro, a neighborhood of Mexicali where most of the shelters are located, betrays the magnitude of the migratory crisis. In the shelters, mattresses are thrown against the floor, repainting the cement or parquet flooring. Any space, whether it is a kitchen, a hall, a corridor or even a roof, is used to accommodate people and maximize unoccupied space. When possible, bed sheets are spread out between two pillars to delineate a private space that no longer exists.

The managers of Mexicali shelters also report a lack of space and resources for the migrant populations. While in some shelters medical visits occur each week, such services are not offered everywhere. The lack of space, the absence of intimacy and the anxiety of not knowing the outcome of this journey or the date on which it will end, weigh heavily on these migrants' mental health, whose stay on Mexican soils extends proportionately with the rise of arriving migrants.

Without a work permit but requiring money to survive, the migrants become prey to human traffickers, according to Sergio Tamai, owner of the Hotel Migrantes shelter and an advocate with Angeles Sin Fronteras. According to him, to minimize the abuses and facilitate the insertion of migrants into Mexico rather than risk of deportation, it is necessary to implement a comprehensive migratory policy. Such a policy would allow the migrants to get involved in the city's economic life and receive socio-sanitary services like access to healthcare and housing.



Underlying socioeconomics and sociopolitics

Haiti, January 12, 2010

Haiti's most populous capital city of [Port-au-Prince](#) and its surroundings, with about 40 percent of the country's population, were hit by a 7 to 7.3 magnitude [earthquake](#) in 2010 that left over 300,000 dead, 300,000 injured and 1.2 million people homeless. Trapped between ruins and an unprecedented social, political and economic crisis, thousands of people emigrated.

Brazil, a welcoming land

Brazil, then the biggest economy of South America, offered better perspectives. In response to administrative barriers about obtaining visas for Haitian citizens, a network of human traffickers emerged that conducted Haitian migrants to [Brazil](#) via the Amazonia. A few hundred Haitians thus embarked on a trip that could take up to three months and during which they crossed into the Dominican Republic, Panama, Ecuador and Peru. At the Brazilian border, these migrants presented themselves as refugees. Instead of deporting them, Brazil began to grant visas in 2011, starting with nearly 1,600 visas being issued by the end of that year. In January 2012, the administrative slowness and the afflux of migrants into Brazil caused a peak of nearly 2,000 Haitians being blocked at the border posts in the Amazonian region, waiting for a visa. To reduce the number of people risking their lives on the "jungle road," Brazil started to issue humanitarian visas from Port-au-Prince the same month. By June 2014, over 10,000 humanitarian visas were being issued to Haitians in one month.

Meanwhile, as early as 2013 the first signs of an economic crisis loomed over Brazilian horizons. A few years later, the collapse of the Brazilian economy pushed populations of Haitians to migrate toward the American border as opportunities disappeared and worries reappeared.



Unpredictable US immigration policy

Due to the humanitarian crisis from the January 2010 earthquake, the United States imposed a moratorium on deportations to Haiti. Haitians already in the US and living in illegal situations would therefore not be deported, and those arriving at the border would benefit from a Temporary Protection Status (TPS) valid for three years. On August 26, 2015, the Department of Homeland Security (DHS) announced an extension of the TPS until July 22, 2017.

Therefore the US moratorium on deportations to Haiti remained in place as the economic situation worsened in Brazil. So the quasi-simultaneous exacerbation of the Brazilian economic crisis and the increase in the number of Haitians coming from Brazil to the US were related. By October 2015, thousands of Haitians had left Brazil for the US hoping for better opportunities.

The continuous rise in Haitian arrivals at US borders led the US Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE) to call the situation an emergency. On September 22, 2016, the DHS announced a complete resumption of the [deportations](#) to Haiti. The DHS Secretary, Jeh Johnson, justified the withdrawal of the moratorium by citing an “improvement of living conditions in Haiti.”



From then on, any Haitian who had been allowed to enter the US since September 22, 2016 risked being deported. For those who are no longer allowed to enter the US, the only alternative is to seek asylum. Asylum seekers must convince the border agents of the existence of plausible persecution threats in their country. Those who succeed in doing so are offered asylum; those who fail are deported.

Hurricane Matthew, which hit several regions of Haiti in October 2016, worsened the situation as many migrants now report no longer having family in Haiti. With news of the hurricane, the US temporarily suspended the deportations but announced they would resume as soon as possible. Meanwhile, since the gradual resumption of the deportations of Haitian nationals considered as threats to US national security back in 2011, the Haitian government is said to have reluctantly collaborated. Indeed, the Haitian government allegedly only accepts about 50 deported people a month and is reported to have refused to receive deported people citing a lack of proof of their citizenship.

Caught in a vicious cycle where each country they cross seems to delegate to its neighbors the task of welcoming them, these migrants' future resembled an enigma that very few wanted to solve.

Although the moratorium was lifted and deportations resumed, some migrants manage to get accepted into the US after an examination by the border agents. The acceptance criteria, however, remain unknown.

For those left in Mexicali waiting to know their fate, the delay is now of about three months.



From Brazil to Mexico: a perilous trip

Between \$3,000 and \$4,000 per person, on average, and an epic journey through nine countries, which implies nine borders and nine times a real risk of not being able to complete the trip: such was the price to reach the US.

Under conditions highly similar to those in which the first waves of Haitians reached Brazil after 2010, Haitians attempting to reach the northern border of Mexico traveled for three months on average. They all took the same route: Brazil, Peru, Ecuador, Colombia, Panama, Costa Rica, Nicaragua, Honduras, Guatemala and finally the southern border of Mexico. At the Tapachula entry port, they received a document giving them 21 days to leave Mexico. They used that time to reach the northern border where their trek will end in either an entry into the US or a deportation to Haiti.

During their trip, all reported having seen death up close, whether it was when they walked by dead bodies, by people who became amputees after a bad fall or when they themselves ended in a distress they had not anticipated. All insisted particularly on the border between Colombia and Panama, where many affirmed having seen people fall from the tops of cliffs, alone or with their children. The dangers of this trip were such that many migrants have said nothing about it to their families who, to this day, still think they are in Brazil.



Excerpts from testimonials

The trip

The trip wasn't easy. It's often said that no one knows themselves until they've suffered.... It's a deadly journey. Deadly. So deadly that even wild animals refuse to take it. Even wild animals.

Their message

We'd like you to forward this message for us.... There are young people here. We're not idiots. There are professionals here. There are people who studied in universities.... Many people take the trip, many people [die] in rivers, on mountains. Nobody knows, except us... because we saw dead people. Women, men, children....

Available assistance

- *When you travel like this, on the road, if someone injures themselves, what do you do?*

H: *Oh my God, there aren't hospitals. Nothing.*

I try to confirm that no resources were deployed in spite of the rising number of people taking the same route.

- *So there isn't any assistance?*

They all laugh, fatalistically.

H: *What possible assistance? We have nothing. We lack everything. If someone gets sick...*

they may pray. Nothing else....



Looking back

- *Would you do the same thing over again? With the ordeals crossing mountains, desert, rivers? With [sights of] dead people?*

J: I can be honest: I'd rather die than live [in Haiti]. I'd rather die a thousand times. Because you live in a country, you were born in that country, and sometimes you can't eat. Your kids can't go to school. You don't have a job....

- *Do you think that the Haitian government knows that there are people like you who'd rather die than live in Haiti?*

He vigorously nods.

- *They know and nothing changes?*

J: Nothing changes.... Me, I wish that one day, we, Haitians, we can survive in our country. I wish that one day our country will get better.... But people from the government, the authorities, they haven't done anything to change the situation. I'd like people to know that if we leave our country it's not [just] to leave. It's to seek something better, to improve our lives, our situation.... Talking about Haiti.... it hurts me to speak badly about my country but that's the truth. Just the truth.



Sources: *Christiane Ndedi Essombe* holds a BSc in Biochemistry and a Masters in Public Health. She is originally from Cameroon and lives in Montreal. She visited Mexico City, Mexicali and Calexico from November 30 to December 11, 2016. During this trip she observed the situation of the Haitian migrants and conducted a series of interviews with them. For her more extensive report on the topic, go [here](#). | All photos are from October 2016: one through five by [Cuartoscuro/Expansion](#) show Haitian migrants in Tijuana; six by [Luis Arellano Sarmiento/Animal Politico](#) shows Haitian migrants in Calexico; seven to nine by [Sergio Haro/Animal Politico](#) show Haitian migrants in Mexicali, Baja California.

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