

## **Mexico as a Buffer Zone between Central America and the U.S.: The Chiapas Border**

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During early-December 2017, Professor Iwashita Akihiro, Hokkaido University, and I embarked in a brief, though successful visit to Mexico's Chiapas state, in order to experience first-hand some dynamics playing out in the borderland between Mexico and Guatemala. Eager to learn in the field from a long-established scholar on border studies, I was most grateful to receive Professor Iwashita in Mexico, knowing that I could add to my overall knowledge of borders, in my case focused on Asia, by sharing this experience with him.

I was determined, through preparations and appointments with the right people in Mexico City and in the field, to have this Mexico-Japan team develop a substantial contribution to future studies. While a lot has been studied on the dynamics along the U.S.-Mexico border -mainly because it is probably the most important border between the industrialized North and the global South, I still have the impression that much sociological and ethnographical work should be done regarding Mexico's southern border. Unlike Canada, Mexico is a buffer zone between the U.S. and Central America, point of origin of thousands of illegal migrants not only coming from these countries but from all over the world that during decades have been moving northbound for a better life for themselves and their families.

But now in fact since the Obama administration this influx is not only stopping but also inverting due to stringent immigration policies and stricter enforcement. In 2017 alone, Mexico, as a buffer zone between the U.S. and Central America, received around 500,000 illegal immigrants, 200,000 thousand of them placed at some moment at official immigration detention centers. While 90 per cent of those detained were Central American nationals, it is also known that 91 different nationalities were received in detention centers in Mexico that year. While the U.S. is doing so far a pretty efficient job in protecting its borders and deporting illegals, the question for Mexico is how to cope with such an influx of people without suffering an eventual migratory crisis. That question, in turn, lead academicians, government officials, and NGOs to look south to the other Mexican border. How is a regular day in Mexico's southern border? How illegal migration struggles when transiting in both directions? What can the Mexico-Guatemala border teach us in terms of the endurance of the human being in adversity, in terms of those perils faced as a by-product of globalization (like intense drug and arms smuggling), and in terms of the increasing difficulty for states to protect their territory? With these questions and others in mind we envisioned this short field trip to Chiapas.

In the early morning we arrived by plane from Mexico City to Tapachula, the nearest mid-size city from the Guatemala-Mexico border post at Ciudad Hidalgo, 24 miles by car (and only 20 miles by foot. Yes, this information is relevant there). First at Tapachula we paid a courtesy visit to one of the head officers of the National Immigration Institute's regional office, whose previous contact was kindly arranged by an experienced colleague well versed in border studies and himself an immigration high official in the past. After some one-hour waiting time they received us. This was partially, I am sure, due to our abrupt arrival on such a short notice leaving virtually no time for them to rearrange their own agendas, and also following, I guessed, the widely accepted protocol of waiting once you receive a positive response from the

bureaucracy.

Then we met a most gracious, young female official, area director and her staff, to whom we had one of the most interesting and open chats ever, considering her authority over the day-to-day task of regulating activities of border officials at their posts, enforcing the regular, orderly and secure migration to and from the migratory stations, and coordinating the overall processing of detainees (they were quick to clarify us that those immigrants, properly divided in the premises in males, females and kids/juveniles population, are not referred to as detainees but rather as temporary migrants in the process of relocation to their country of origin). Here we learned first-hand testimonies on the difficulties facing illegal immigration coming to Mexico, from severe conditions amid the smuggling process, to abuses and rapes suffered at the hands of delinquent groups, organized crime and other individuals. Particularly interesting during our meeting, though, was the contrast perceived between the tenacious determination of the federal officials to enforce the laws and to protect the immigrant if they happen to continue their travel to the U.S. (a quite paradoxical humanitarian task done by the Beta Group mainly in the northern border with the U.S.), and the overwhelming reality of illegal crossing from Guatemala largely outside the control of the authorities at no more than 50 meters away from the border check points themselves, something that we would witness the very next morning.

But before arriving to the border station in Ciudad Hidalgo we were later that day invited by Father Flor Maria Rigoni to his House of Migrant-Bethlehem Shelter, built at the outskirts of Tapachula, a peaceful place surrounded by both vast vegetation and a severely underdeveloped urban area. This shelter, hosting an average of 60 migrants per day who are allowed to stay for up to three nights, provides -mainly thanks to national and international donations- clean rooms, fresh breakfasts, clean water for washing clothes, dental basic services and spiritual comfort for the needy, and will probably be the only home those adults, mothers and children hoping to reach the American Dream may find for months, if they are lucky enough or have the means to support the long travel. In spite of this systemic adversity, a high-spirited, always smiling staff headed by Irmi and Jorge received us during breakfast with open arms, showed us the premises and the history of the shelter's network, and even shared with Dr. Iwashita and me the recent progress achieved over their technical school that provides immigrants wishing to learn with the practical knowledge, later a valid diploma and eventually with an official short-term permit to legally reside in Mexico if they wish.

Between the overwhelming reality of thousands of immigrants that particularly during the recent years also try to escape the violence in their homeland Central American countries, and the increasing difficulty of reaching the U.S., Father Flor's shelter is a place of peace, hope and defense for human rights. He was quoted in a 2016 Mexican newspaper interview as saying: "if you want to know a country, visit its borders, there is where all its problems combine, but also all its virtues". When we departed we happened to see a woman arriving at the shelter by taxi -surely from the border- with nothing more on her: no husband, no kids, no money and no food or extra clothes. Only their determination to cross Mexico into the U.S., and their human dignity, something clearly understood in the shelter. Setting foot into his oasis of humanity you could see glimmers of hope in the eyes of those migrants, and for that we thank Father Flor and his wonderful staff for the chance to grasp that moving experience.

The next morning, we planned to spend the whole day in the Ciudad Hidalgo-Tecun Uman, and Talisman-El Carmen border posts between Mexico and Guatemala, the very opposite border of Mexico's three thousand plus kilometers continental border with the U.S. And I must

admit, it was a thrilling experience far beyond my expectations. Being myself a careful observer of borders, mainly in maritime East Asia, I thought visiting my own country's southern border should be a more familiar experience, at least for me, in particular having the guidance of a relative who is himself well versed in trade and personal connections at the very same posts. But being largely at our own at the beginning, Dr. Iwashita and I started by arriving to the first official border post alone under a strange mixture of emotion and caution, knowing very well that the most interesting dynamics -and dangerous incidents, happen rather outside the international bridges. After a brief introduction by the Mexican officials to their main tasks there, they politely cautioned us about the unilateral attitude by the Guatemalan border officials to approve or not our departure, once we were to return to Mexico later in the morning. We couldn't verify the claim that a non-Mexican in the other side of that border might possibly need in fact to wait for up to 48 hours in the Guatemalan side before being allowed to re-enter Mexico thus leading us to re-evaluate whether we should enter or not and risk my Japanese friend alone on the other side of the border! Fortunately, we could exit Mexico without any delay, but we were discretely advised to avoid any misunderstanding with their neighbors by swiftly declaring our intention to cross just for a quick sightsee, a good Guatemalan coffee and breakfast, and appealing to their good common sense and honesty.



**Border Bridge to Guatemala**



**“Free Passage” on the Border River**

After crossing the bridge by foot -and seeing to our surprise the scale of open smuggling activities just meters away from the bridge on makeshift rafts—in fact timber over inflatable tires!—we approached the immigration post. To our surprise, the immigration guards were extremely friendly! After evaluating our cases we were allowed to enter the country after simply paying the equivalent of some 6 quetzals (less than one dollar) entrance fee; we even joked with them on how many beers and drinking water bottles should we bring back to them after our short trip. No doubt the joyful character of southern Mexicans and Central American nationals is something shared, even among officials, as we gladly discovered.

Some two hours of the finest street food, minor handicraft shopping and a couple of cold beers in Guatemala made us to forget that just besides the international bridge along the local market is the other border, the real one, which most illegal Central American and other nationalities' individuals use: that is a kind of no-man land where day to day non-official trade is done (no tax are declared, as suspected...), and where other criminal enterprises are surely happening -from drugs, cash, weapons and human traffic. We cautiously returned to the international bridge on our way back to Mexico (bringing indeed two beers and two water bottles which we eventually didn't have to hand over), and after a brief Mexican customs visit on board our Guatemalan motorcycle taxi, we were finally back... the first time.



**Lunch at a Guatemala Restaurant**

Soon afterward, led by our well-known contact there, we approached the trading posts along the Mexican side of the international river only meters away from the international bridge. Thanks to my relative we received the blessings of one of the leaders of those syndicate activities for what was about to be one of the most singular actions ever in my academic history in and outside a classroom. We boarded a raft guided by a young Salvadorian former member of the MS-13 gang, recently deported from the U.S. To our relief, he was most polite to both of us and even eager to tell us his gang history in Los Angeles while we approached the median line of the river without crossing to the Guatemalan side. Such a mixture of excitement, anxiety and amusement for the experience itself led us to forget the real danger a “normal” immigrant or a “returnee” might face in the border.

While watching the buzzing trade involving trucks, motorcycles, rafts and smugglers,



we also learned that, contrary to what you may expect, most of the trade of daily life goods is originating in Mexico for the high valued quetzal currency Guatemalan market. Confirming what previously I had seen in the Quintana Ro-Belize border, many Central Americans go to Mexico where commercial goods are usually cheaper. Even in Tapachula, discarded U.S. school yellow buses are daily used by low, middle and high-income Guatemalans alike to visit some big super markets stores like Walmart or Chedraui to shop big and returning across the border the same day. As we realized, the border is a place where, with the right capital and connections, huge legal and illegal fortunes are amassed, a socio-economic ecosystem where everybody can profit from.

After that second approach to the border line between Mexico and Guatemala, we were invited to visit the Talisman immigration post, some 22 miles away along the border, where we could observe the dimension of other trading activities, mainly used cars coming from the U.S. for the Central and South America market-and probably some others stolen in Mexican territory. We learned there that only three days drivers can transport their American vehicles throughout Mexican territory, a rule that has led to many accidents just for exhaustion in roads near the southern border; also, that trucks may face on a daily basis corrupt federal, state but mainly municipal police demanding bribes for this otherwise lucrative trade. Once on the international bridge, and again to our surprise, we received unusually courteous treatment, allowing us to cross the bridge until the very median line of the international border for some minutes where we quickly took snaps with locals, Mexican and Guatemalans alike. While guessing that such a deference might be quite difficult if we try, for instance, to sell a product or export some goods through formal -or informal- channels, we came back to the Mexican side knowing that we were taken care of in an exceptional manner.

The rest of the trip was basically sightseeing around Tapachula, amazed by the huge numbers of Central Americans roaming downtown -we were told so because we did not have a clear clue of how “different” a Central American look like compared with a Chiapas citizen, anyway-, and also by enjoying good blend at the Route of Coffee region just one hour away from the city into the mountains.

As I discovered amazing aspects of Mexico, of my countrymen and our Central American brothers struggling to cope with an intense southern border, I was truly honored to share with Professor Iwashita this experience and indeed encouraged to return there for a more systematic analysis of this amazing border.



**In front of the Border River with Guatemala**



**Presentation on Guatemala Borders at Association for Borderlands Studies  
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\*The essay was originally published as *Border Bites* 9 (2018):  
<https://drive.google.com/file/d/1S6GYoqy5NL3xX8eK9trdSJK21ISTihUW/view>