

Costa Rica closes its borders to Cuban migrants

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The Costa Rican Government has closed its borders to a new wave of Cuban migrants traveling by land to the United States. As of last Friday, 1,600 of them were stuck at the Panamanian border under overcrowded and reportedly unsanitary conditions.

The Costa Rican president stated the previous week, “We ask the Cuban migrants not to travel anymore... The government has ended its humanitarian assistance operation.”

Luis Miguel Hincapié, Panama’s vice minister for foreign relations, reported on Saturday that there would be a meeting “with [foreign relations] vice-ministers from all countries involved in the beginning of April... Cuba, Ecuador, Colombia and Central America.”

Costa Rica’s “humanitarian” act, which was officially terminated March 15, consisted of housing and arranging for the 7,800 Cubans who were stranded in Costa Rica since last November to continue their journey to North America. During the following week, the Costa Rican government doubled up border surveillance to prevent more Cubans from crossing.

The closing of the preferred corridor of Cubans to the US—from Ecuador to Panama, and northward to Texas, where, as opposed to Florida, they can enter legally by presenting themselves to US border officials—was initiated last November, when the Costa Rican police arrested several bands of *coyotes*, people-smugglers, forcing an initial wave of Cubans to go through the Nicaraguan border stations.

Soon after, on November 15, the Nicaraguan Government militarized its borders to prevent the Cuban migrants from crossing. They fired rubber bullets, tear gas, and high pressure water hoses, demanding that the Costa Rican authorities fix the problem by “removing” the migrants from the border.

According to the US Customs and Border Protection data, 43,159 Cubans entered the US in fiscal year 2015, a 78 percent rise from the previous year, and over five times as many as in 2011. A Cuban emigrant in Panama told Fusion news, “Cubans are afraid that [Presidents Raúl Castro and Barack Obama] are going to make a deal after their hug, and the US is going to revoke the Cuban Adjustment Act.” The Cold War-era act provides unique treatment to Cuban refugees, who are allowed to stay in the US once they set foot on US soil and are automatically granted legal residency after one year.

During January, and after several failed negotiations, Costa Rican authorities made deals with Mexico, Guatemala and El Salvador to let the migrants fly over to El Salvador and travel by

bus to Mexico for \$555—an opportunity about 5,000 Cubans took, while the rest desisted or used other *coyotes* to continue their dangerous trip to the US. Another 1,300 Cubans were flown directly to Mexico.

The Costa Rican General Department for Migration and Foreign Matters (DGME) congratulated the institutions and communities involved in this operation, but insisted that “it is not possible for the country to repeat it.” One of the agency’s main concerns is that the continuing inflow of Cubans will feed the growth of smuggling organizations.

Nicaraguan President Daniel Ortega, acting in concert with the Cuban government, intended to generate a humanitarian crisis to put pressure on Washington to stop the welcoming of Cubans into the United States under the 1966 Cuban Adjustment Act. Claiming to defend the rule of law and its national sovereignty, Nicaragua attacked migrants, including hundreds of children, and left them to their fates, at the hands of criminal organizations and in the face of a mounting health crisis.

Despite their initial scathing denunciations of Nicaragua, the other countries in the Cuban migration corridor have followed suit. Towards the end of November, the Ecuadoran Government, another Cuban ally, imposed a visa requirement for Cubans, making Guyana the only country in mainland Latin America without this restriction for Cubans.

Claiming that they don’t have the resources to continue their assistance, the Costa Rican authorities decided in December not to issue any more transit visas to Cubans. The foreign minister said the government spent \$3 million on sheltering and feeding the migrants, while the US State Department gave them \$1 million.

After allowing more Cubans to enter, the Panamanian Government has given very little assistance. According to NGOs aiding those at the border with Costa Rica, the Panamanian authorities have removed the Cubans living in tents and placed them in a border police “bunker” with very poor sanitation, leading to protests that resulted in five arrests last Wednesday.

The Panamanian authorities are now completing a census in order to deny assistance to incoming Cubans, who continue to enter in large numbers, primarily from Colombia.

The tensions between Central American governments have exposed the fragility of three decades of supposed economic, political, and social integration since the end of the civil wars in El Salvador, Guatemala, and Nicaragua. The UN Economic Commission for Latin America (ECLAC) recently celebrated the

creation of regional markets for medicines and electricity and the “95.7% harmonization of tariff lines” as part of the Central American Free Trade Agreement (CAFTA-DR) with the United States.

Nonetheless, historically, the economic liberalization, increased dependency on foreign capital, and rabid competition for greater foreign investment that results from these common markets and transnational free trade treaties has led to intensifying nationalism and xenophobia and subsequent attacks on the working class, especially through regressive taxes and cuts in social security and education.

For instance, the Central American Common Market, initiated in 1960, led to an initial tripling of foreign capital and cheaper imports for wealthier consumers, but resulted in the Honduran-Salvadoran 1969 war, increased inequality, and an economic recession once the market had reached its maximum demand by the late 1960s. The resulting social crisis and empowerment of the oligarchies were principal causes of the civil wars in the late 1970s.

Nicaragua’s spokeswoman and first lady Rosario Murillo blamed Costa Rica for the migrant blockade and warned on November 17: “We can’t rule out the possibility of another invasion of our territory promoted and encouraged by Costa Rica.” She was referring to a conflict over a river delta island at the border, which the International Court of Justice decided a day before her statement constituted Costa Rican territory and demanded reparations from Nicaragua for environmental damage and its military incursion on the island.

Government officials and the press in both countries have used the migrant issue to instigate greater xenophobia. For instance, on November 25, the Costa Rican ambassador in Nicaragua, Javier Sancho, when denying visas to over 1,000 Nicaraguans requesting work visas that day, compared them with livestock: “People have to understand that Costa Rica is a country of rights, there are laws and procedures they have to fulfill; Costa Rica is not some pasture [‘potrero’] that everyone can come into.”

After several unsuccessful meetings with the other Central American governments throughout December, Costa Rica condemned the other countries for their lack of cooperation and “bad faith” and decided to break from the Central American Integration System (SICA), the UN sponsored political body for the region. These political ruptures are an expression of the tensions generated by economic deceleration due to falling commodity prices and the exporting of US capital between Central American countries and to Southeast Asian economies, particularly Vietnam.

These regional conflicts generated by the world economic crisis historically have been exploited by the US and local elites in an attempt to convince workers of the various countries on the Central American isthmus to blame each other rather than the real source of mounting social crises—capitalism and US imperialist domination.

This time around, however the US client regimes are all directly criticizing US foreign policy, namely the special refugee status for Cubans, for ultimately causing the present crisis.

These criticisms arise not only in relation to the millions of

dollars in costs in dealing with migrants and smugglers. The local ruling elites are also concerned about popular anger over the glaring disparity between the treatment of Cubans under the US Cuban Adjustment Act, and the treatment meted out to Central Americans trying to reach the United States.

It is not lost on Central American workers that their governments are aiding Cubans to move into the US as refugees, while they accept millions of dollars from the State Department to prevent their “own” citizens from escaping and seeking asylum away from the intense violence and poverty over which these same governments preside.

However, given the political rapprochement between Washington and Havana and the coming flood of US capital into Cuba, there are growing calls for the revocation of the act, meaning that Cuban migrants would be subjected to the same treatment as their Central American counterparts.

Instead of relieving the tensions and controversy, the State Department reminded Central Americans of their sub-colonial status by stating that it has no plans to change its migration policy. Instead, the Obama Administration has intensified its raids and deportations and continues to pay Mexico to stop Central American families fleeing, chiefly, Honduras, El Salvador, and Guatemala.

According to the *New York Times*, about 80 percent of Central American migrants appealing for refugee status since the large influx in 2014 are being deported, while the *New Yorker* reports fourteen flights a week since 2014 sending them back.

Through direct military coups, as in Honduras in 2009, increasing national antagonisms, and flooding the political elite’s coffers with “security and development” financing, such as the \$1 billion 2016 Alliance for Prosperity with Honduras, El Salvador, and Guatemala, the US State Department safeguards the region as a platform for cheap labor, natural resource exploitation, and military operations.

The Central American oligarchical elites will quiet their complaints against Washington—whether they come in the form of the timid criticisms of Solís or the phony “anti-imperialist” rhetoric of Ortega—and get on with their attacks on the living standards of the working class in service of imperialism.



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