The caravan is an exodus

The migrants have bigger concerns than U.S. policy. They know the terrors they are fleeing.

From the Editors in the November 21, 2018 issue

In mid-October about 160 Hondurans began a long, hazardous journey to the United States from their home in San Pedro Sula, a center for gangs and drug trafficking which has been called the murder capital of the world. Their decision to travel together for safety is a common phenomenon for migrants, and their journey was not particularly remarkable until the group reached the Guatemala border, by which time it had grown to more than 1,000. Word spread on social media, and by late October, when the caravan crossed into southern Mexico, it included Guatemalans, Hondurans, and Salvadorans, and numbered more than 7,000.

President Trump has portrayed the caravan as an “assault” on the United States. He has claimed that Middle Eastern terrorists are among the migrants and blamed Central American nations for allowing the migration. The Department of Defense has ordered troops to the border to protect Americans from this “onslaught.”

Talk of blame and crackdowns at the border make little difference to the migrants themselves. They know the terrors they are fleeing. El Salvador has a murder rate of 65 per 100,000 residents. (The U.S. rate is 4.9.) Sixty percent of Hondurans are unemployed or underemployed, and violence and threats of violence from gangs and from the police are daily occurrences. Guatemala suffers from the same toxic combination of social, economic, and political collapse. The dangers ahead for migrants can be no greater than the ones they are desperate to leave behind. “Everyone wants to know who is guilty, who is behind this,” said Irineo Mujica, director of the human rights organization Pueblo Sin Fronteras. “But no one has the power to organize this many people. No one can engineer an exodus.”

When asked what they will do at the U.S. border, many migrants say they will apply for asylum. Others hope to find a way to cross illegally or say they will turn themselves over to authorities and hope for the best. Some have no idea. Oscar

Chacón, executive director of Alianza Americas, observes: “When you are desperate, you believe in miracles. [Migrants] truly hope that by making this show of collectiveness, by joining this caravan, somebody’s heart will be touched and a miracle will happen.”

The caravan may be unsettling, but it isn’t hard to understand. Migrants need what all of us need: food and security, a place to raise a family without starving or seeing a loved one murdered. The caravan vividly displays our shared humanity and our interconnectedness on this continent. The violent drug trade in the migrants’ home countries is fueled in large part by gangs founded in the United States and by Americans’ demand for illegal drugs. The economic collapse of Central America can be traced in part to U.S. economic policies going back decades. And if Trump cuts off aid to Central America in retaliation for migration, it will only place more desperate people on our doorstep. Some Americans don’t like the available choices for responding to the caravan. But all along these migrants’ choices have been intertwined with our own.

A version of this article appears in the print edition under the title “What the caravan really is.”