American Friends Service Committee

Community Perspectives on Border Externalization and Militarization
A Global Analysis

HUMAN MOBILITY is currently facing complex border control systems, with increased policies of externalization, informed by fear and negative propaganda around "threats" caused by people on the move. Global North countries have devised intricate border control systems beyond their physical borders, actively using them to regulate the movement of people, capital, and resources. These measures often favor specific interests while disproportionately impacting people on the move including migrants, asylum seekers, refugees, and those displaced because of environmental and climate injustices.

The report highlights the results of research conducted by AFSC to critically examine the global impact of border externalization and militarization on people on the move, border communities, and affected populations. Using a decolonial, intersectional, and community-centered lens, the research was conducted in Latin America and the Caribbean (LAC), Africa, the Middle East, and Asia, providing an analysis of the human rights violations inherent in current border governance policies and practices. The report further and highlights how contemporary migration policies and practices perpetuate historical colonial legacies, reinforcing racial, gender, and socio-economic inequalities.

Research Approach

The research employed a decolonial-intersectional approach to challenge dominant narratives and highlight systemic injustices faced by people on the move, especially from the Global South. This approach helped to:

- Deconstruct and challenge dominant practices that marginalize communities
- Provide a comprehensive understanding of how historical processes of colonization shape contemporary social and political dynamics
- Offer an alternative framework for understanding border externalization and militarization
- Prioritize the experiences and perspectives of those who have been historically silenced
- Advocate for recognizing different forms of knowledge, particularly those rooted in indigenous and local traditions
- Foster partnership and agency by validating and amplifying the voices of marginalized communities

Regional Trends and Border Community Experiences

Latin America and the Caribbean

Migration has doubled in the past decade, with the U.S. implementing aggressive externalization practices such as the "Remain in Mexico" policy. Communities experience these as containment strategies disguised as humanitarian responses. A Mexican advocate described "massive gaslighting" where authorities claim humanitarian approaches while implementing restrictive measures.

Militarization directly impacts vulnerable populations. As one defender explained: "It is very shocking to see women, girls, and elderly people being confronted by military bodies... prepared for military combat." Border controls now extend deep into countries' interiors, creating what organizations call Mexico's "Center Border" – internal checkpoints designed to exhaust migrants in what advocates term a "policy of fatigue."

Africa

European externalization policies have led to severe human rights abuses across Africa. Communities witness European border management extending deep into African territories, with one activist explaining how "the EU can bring personnel, equipment, and Frontex drones into Mauritania and Senegal" through working agreements.

Deportation systems are becoming increasingly coordinated. A Guinean community leader reported: "The Minister of Security went to Italy... they are in the process of signing protocols for the deportation of Guineans who have been denied papers." These policies often come with racist rhetoric that endangers migrants, with one returnee describing how a North African leader "criminalizes migrants, kills them and gives them to Libyans."

Middle East

Displacement due to regional conflicts has created the world's largest concentration of refugees, with Turkey hosting over 4.6 million migrants. Border externalization extends beyond European initiatives to include practices within the region itself, as one organization explained: "We started our work after the Jordanian government deported around four hundred Sudanese refugees back to Sudan."

Bureaucratic barriers severely impact access to essential services. A Syrian advocate noted: "Since UNHCR stopped registrations in Lebanon, the biggest obstacle has been the lack of legal documentation of birth certificates which prevent children accessing basic services." Criminalization through stereotyping creates additional challenges, with Sudanese refugees labeled as "troublemakers or militants" by security forces.

Asia

Migration due to climate change, conflicts, and economic pressures has intensified border control throughout Asia. Community leaders observe a direct connection between militarization and displacement, particularly with the Rohingya crisis which one academic attributed to "undemocratic governments... behind the issues of ethnic cleansing."

Externalization forces people into dangerous situations. A Bangladeshi representative explained it "is preventing people from seeking asylum... encouraging those who want to migrate despite the risks." Labor exploitation is endemic, with one returnee reporting: "They discriminated against me... They were reluctant to give me food when I was hungry. They do not think of us as human beings."

Cross-Regional Patterns

Despite geographic differences, similar patterns emerge: externalization creates opaque deterrence systems, militarization impacts vulnerable groups disproportionately, and border controls extend both within countries and across third nations. These policies have severe mental health consequences while spurring community resistance strategies, from trans-regional support networks to counter-campaigns against racist rhetoric.

Key Findings

Violation of Human Rights
Externalization policies consistently violate international human rights laws and reflect colonial legacies by shifting responsibilities and human rights obligations away from wealthier nations to third countries, often in the Global South.

Militarization and Vulnerability
Increased militarization of borders disproportionately affects vulnerable populations, exacerbating hostility, fear, and systemic injustices against migrants, particularly impacting women, children, and LGBTQ+ individuals.

Outsourced Migration Governance
The practice of outsourcing migration governance to third countries frequently leads to violent conditions, abuse, exploitation, and inadequate asylum procedures, leaving migrants vulnerable and unprotected.

Criminalization of Migration and Humanitarian Assistance
Migration is increasingly treated as a criminal act, and humanitarian organizations providing aid to migrants are criminalized, further aggravating human rights abuses.

Inadequate Living Conditions
Living conditions in refugee camps and detention centers are severely inadequate, characterized by barriers to essential services such as healthcare, sanitation, and safety.

Exposure to Violence
Migrants experience extensive violence throughout their journeys, including state-sanctioned violence, human trafficking, gender-based violence, and sexual abuse.

Mental Health Impacts
Displacement, detention, and threats of deportation severely impact the mental health of migrants, causing profound psychological distress to individuals, families, and communities.

Role of Civil Society and Activists
NGOs, community groups, and activists play a crucial role in defending migrants' rights despite facing increasing criminalization and hostility from authorities.

Recommendations

The report recommends adopting a decolonial and intersectional approach to addressing migration issues. Key recommendations include:

- Challenging the legacy of colonialism within contemporary migration policies.
- Developing inclusive, humane policies that center the voices, dignity, and rights of migrants.
- Ensuring accountability for human rights abuses resulting from externalization and militarization practices.
- Promoting community-driven research and policy-making that includes marginalized voices, including women, ethnic minorities, and vulnerable groups.
- Fostering global and regional solidarity networks to address systemic injustices and advocate for comprehensive and rights-based migration governance.

Advocacy and Resistance Strategies

Communities and organizations are responding to these challenges through various strategies:

1. **Resisting Colonial Legacy**
   Organizations are critically aware of how colonialism established racial hierarchies and entrenched systems of social stratification. Some are creating coalitions to challenge neo-colonial practices.

2. **Building Safe Spaces**
   Many organizations focus on providing direct support to people on the move and creating nurturing communities that can mobilize quickly in response to emergencies.

3. **Strengthening Collaborations**
   Collaboration with other organizations and networks enhances the effectiveness of advocacy work, allowing groups to pool resources and strengthen their collective voice.

4. **Creating Networks Across Borders**
   Organizations are developing trans-regional networks that offer dedicated support to migrant families throughout their journeys across regions.

5. **Diverse Advocacy Methods**
   Effective advocacy includes legal challenges to unjust policies, public campaigns to shift narratives, and direct action to protest harmful practices. Digital advocacy is also playing a key role.

The report underscores the urgent necessity for systemic changes in border governance policies, prioritizing human rights, dignity, and community perspectives to counteract the harmful legacies of border externalization and militarization.

READ THE FULL REPORT

The full report is available on the AFSC website, which you can visit at the following link or by scanning the QR code:

afsc.org/borderanalysis

REPORT

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