

country would not be considered Dominican nationals. The ruling was said to be applicable retroactively to 1929. Scores of Dominicans of Haitian descent would lose the nationality they had acquired by birth. Many Haitians left the Dominican Republic for Chile following this ruling. According to journalist Jonathan M. Katz, and based on data from Human Rights Watch, from 2015-2018 Dominican authorities deported an estimated 70,000 to 80,000 people of Haitian descent—more than a quarter of the Dominico-Haitian population. By late 2018, the Dominican government has only restored citizenship documents to about 19,000 of those denationalized in the five years since the ruling.

**Chile's reception of Haitian migrants**

When the current wave of immigration started, in 2010 and 2011, Haitians migrants were mostly well received in Chile. In personal interviews conducted with new arrivals attending free Spanish-language classes in Santiago, migrants from Haiti usually declared that, in spite of difficulty adapting to the language and the climate, they felt that they would be able to integrate

into Chilean society. Racism was not the first obstacle they identified in their attempts to settle in Chile.

As the number of Haitian migrants has increased, however, along with increasing migration from Venezuela, Colombia and the Dominican Republic, this has changed. From 2014 to 2017, the Haitian presence in Chile grew by an astounding 4,433%. In the same period, the number of Venezuelans increased by 1057% and Colombians, 507%. Perhaps because of the increased pressure on Chilean resources, the welcome Haitians once received in that country has begun to wear thin. Many Haitian migrants in Chile experience food insecurity. They are also reported to be the subject of most of the debate about immigration in Chile, even though they do not represent the largest group of foreigners in the country. The conversation is mostly negative and tainted by racism.

The growing presence of Haitians in Chile has meant that their importance to the Haitian economy has soared, as well. Some studies show Chile in second place in the amount of remittances sent to Haiti, after the United States and Canada.

**The challenges ahead**

As the citizens of Chile grapple with the reality of a more diverse society, many challenges lie ahead for Haitian migrants. First, they face an urgent need to better organize with other migrant communities to develop a collective response to the suspicious attitudes and sometimes blatant racism they encounter in some sectors of society. Second, they will need diplomatic support from state officials in Haiti to better protect their status abroad.

The current context of political unrest in Chile, where the discussion centers around a new social pact aimed at alleviating inequality, offers an opportunity to find ways to integrate migrants into Chilean society. It represents a chance to change the prevailing view of immigrants as a source of cheap labor whose vulnerability is easily exploited to deny them basic human rights. With improved organization and the support of the many Chilean organizations that actively support migrant communities, the new social pact under debate could take up the challenge to contribute to social integration, a feature that is lacking in the current discussion about migrant communities in Chile.

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Nicaraguan and Cuban homeless migrants demonstrate outside the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) office to demand help during the coronavirus pandemic in San José, Costa Rica on April 21, 2020. EZEQUIEL BECERRA/AFP via Getty Images.

# Migration from Nicaragua to Costa Rica and the Impact of COVID-19 (2018-2020)

by Alberto Cortés Ramos

Migratory flows between Nicaragua and Costa Rica run in a north/south direction. Two key factors explain this trend: first, the consistently stable political environment in Costa Rica, in contrast to the authoritarian and violent nature of political regimes throughout Nicaraguan history; and second, the dynamics of the Costa Rican

productive system, in particular, the need for foreign labor to harvest crops and fill other jobs local workers are unwilling to perform, such as construction and domestic chores. A third factor, which has gained importance in recent years, is the strength of the Costa Rican social security and educational systems. These benefits are generally available to all of the country's inhabitants, regardless of their citizenship or migratory status.

**The dynamics of migration between Nicaragua and Costa Rica**

Since the end of the nineteenth century, political and economic factors have driven migration cycles from Nicaragua to Costa Rica. Significant migration began in the 1880s, when Nicaraguans helped build the railway to Costa Rica's Caribbean coast. Later, and until the middle of the twentieth century, thousands of Nicaraguan workers sustained the banana plantations in the Caribbean and Pacific lowlands.

A constant flow of political refugees joined the flood of migrants during the years of the Somoza dynasty (1936-1979), growing in significance in the early 1970s, when repression and political violence increased and the Sandinista Front for National Liberation (FSLN) used Costa Rica as a strategic rearguard in the final stages of its war against the dictatorship.

By the time of the Sandinista victory in July 1979, an estimated 80,000 Nicaraguan migrants resided in Costa Rica. A decade later, after the abuses of the Sandinista regime and the US-funded *contra* war, the number had risen to more than 120,000, nearly 40,000 of them enjoying refugee status. Most of this population returned to Nicaragua in 1990, after the electoral triumph of President Violeta Barrios de Chamorro over Daniel Ortega, but the returnees' dream of a new Nicaragua characterized by democracy, peace and prosperity soon proved elusive.

The profound transformations of the early 1990s ushered in a new cycle of political and economic instability in Nicaragua. Besieged by an aggressive and well-organized Sandinista opposition, harassed by its own political allies, and coping with the adjustments to newly acquired democratic institutions (privatizations, disarmament of the *contras*, transformation of the Sandinista Party militia into a true National Armed Force, election of a non-partisan judiciary, severe droughts and recurrent famine in the northern highlands, among other pressures), the Chamorro government was incapable of ensuring economic growth and internal peace. At the same time, Costa Rica was beginning a cycle of economic diversification and

expansion. Observing the contrast between the two countries, urban and rural Nicaraguans alike resumed their pilgrimage to the south in what would become the largest migration cycle in binational history.

In 1999, as a result of a pact with President Arnoldo Aleman, the FSLN gained new status as a political power broker, culminating in Ortega's return to the presidency in 2006. Despite his refusal to surrender political power in several electoral processes marred with irregularities, economic stability gradually returned to Nicaragua. Largely resulting from Ortega's privileged relationship with the Chávez and Maduro regimes in Venezuela, Nicaragua's GDP grew by a consistent 5% between 2013 and 2018. Even so, census figures show that between 2011 and 2020, the Nicaraguan population in Costa Rica grew from 287,766 to around 500,000, representing approximately 12% of the national population. This is one of the highest percentages in Latin America, especially considering Costa Rica's size (only 50,000 sq. km, a little smaller than Alabama, Arkansas or North Carolina), and its weak economy, which was already faltering prior to the COVID-19 pandemic.

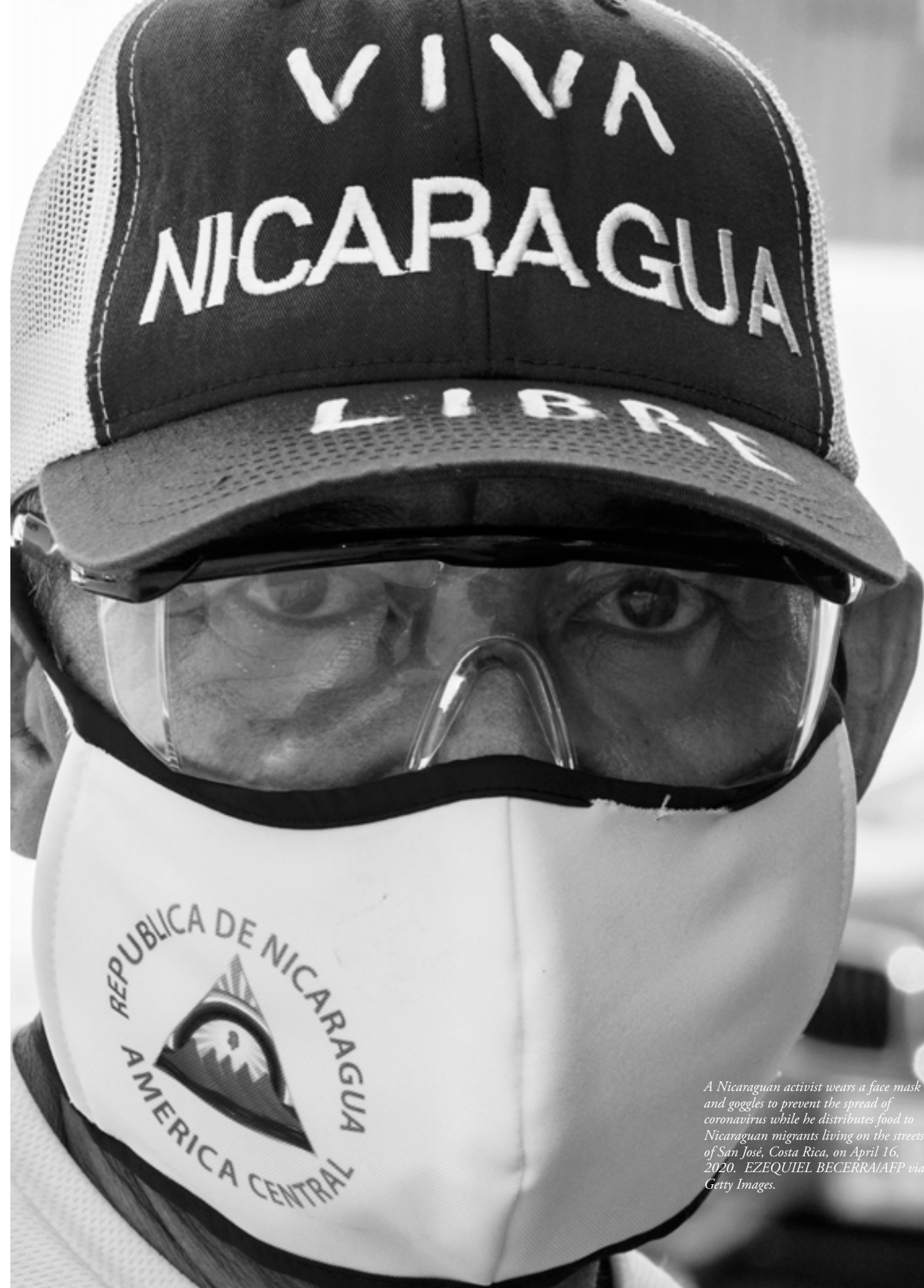
A new cycle of Nicaraguan migration to Costa Rica began on April 18, 2018 when the Nicaraguan government announced a series of social security reforms that included taxing pensions. Protests by university students, civil society activists, feminists and senior citizens affected by the reforms were violently suppressed by FSLN shock forces and the National Police. The crackdown was broadcast live for more than three hours on national television and went viral on social media soon after. The official repression spurred even more students to take to the streets over

the following days and to occupy the public university campuses. The regime's reaction was brutal and unexpected; instead of seeking a negotiated settlement of the crisis, the government authorized paramilitary groups and the National Police to step up their use of violence against the protesters. By May, some 360 people (mostly unarmed civilians) had been killed or disappeared, more than 600 imprisoned without trial, and dozens of women raped in one of the most violent state-sponsored terror campaigns in Nicaragua since 1979. Unyielding to international pressure and direct appeals from the United Nations, the Vatican and the Organization of American States, and determined not to allow any signs of internal fractures, the regime continued its repressive actions, forcing many opponents – students and journalists, in particular – to seek asylum in Costa Rica.

Between January and March 2018, the Costa Rican authorities received only 22 refugee applications from Nicaraguans. By early June, after snipers attacked the Mother's Day parade in Managua, the number of applications rose to 3344, and in July, it reached 5279. Between June 2018 and March 2020, an average of 2900 Nicaraguans applied for refugee status in Costa Rica every month, for a total of about 70,000 new applicants in two years.

#### ***Fiscal and economic pressures in Costa Rica***

The Costa Rican government, coping with a critical financial situation and resulting social conflict in the second half of 2018, could not have foreseen the abrupt arrival of tens of thousands of people fleeing violence and repression in Nicaragua. At the time, unemployment in Costa Rica stood at more than 10%,



*A Nicaraguan activist wears a face mask and goggles to prevent the spread of coronavirus while he distributes food to Nicaraguan migrants living on the streets of San José, Costa Rica, on April 16, 2020. EZEQUIEL BECERRA/AFP via Getty Images.*

further complicating the insertion of the arriving migrants into the labor market. The adverse economic context inhibited the ability of the Costa Rican authorities to channel public resources toward the migrant influx, but even scant support triggered xenophobic reactions from some sectors of the local population. On August 18, a small but vocal protest erupted in the capital of San José calling for the expulsion of Nicaraguans from the country. Most Costa Ricans rejected the protesters' tone as well as their demands, but the implications were clear: an ill-handled migration policy could have serious consequences for social peace.

With the support of the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR), the International Organization for Migrations and other civil society organizations, the Costa Rican authorities expedited identification cards and work permits for migrants within three months of application for refugee status. This allows for the regularization of employment conditions while improving the personal and family situations of refugees in the country. Nevertheless, Costa Rica has a rigid policy for granting refugee status. Only 25% of all cases are approved. The explanation for this seemingly Draconian policy is twofold: on the one hand, the government fears that the easing of refugee status could be interpreted as an open-door policy that would encourage an uncontrollable flow of migrants; on the other hand, there are well-grounded concerns that flexibilization could open the door to people linked to international criminal networks, particularly the so-called *maras* (gangs), traveling through Nicaragua from the Northern Triangle of El Salvador, Guatemala and Honduras.

### ***Characteristics of the Nicaraguan refugee population***

The latest wave of migrants to Costa Rica from Nicaragua is very different from those that preceded it. To begin with, the motivation for leaving Nicaragua is mostly political. Today's migrants are often civil and political activists, journalists or human rights defenders fleeing persecution under the Ortega regime. In terms of social capital, they have a higher level of education and, because of their practical experience as activists, a greater capacity to make themselves heard and claim their rights. University students, professionals, and civil, political and intellectual leaders figure prominently among the migrants. They are a highly connected community that has managed to maintain an important level of articulation based on territorial, political and sectoral affinities.

Thanks to their social networks, these migrants also maintain relationships with their families, communities and organizations in Nicaragua, transforming their linkages into a truly transnational social space. In Costa Rica, they are able to engage in online activism impossible to pursue in Nicaragua due to government restrictions. Unlike previous waves of migrants, who tended to send remittances home to their families, the new arrivals receive support from their relatives in Nicaragua and other countries, especially the United States.

Those migrants from rural areas also behave differently than their predecessors. Most have resisted insertion into the agribusiness plantations along Costa Rica's northern border, choosing to rent land and cultivate it themselves. For them, producing food for

their organizations and fending for themselves is a way of resisting and fighting the Ortega regime. In this process, they have demonstrated a great political, productive and organizational capacity.

Despite the initiative they have shown, Nicaraguans seeking refuge in Costa Rica since 2018 have faced significant obstacles, including employment. Those with professional careers have struggled to validate their credentials in Costa Rica. Previous waves of Nicaraguan migrants typically sought unskilled jobs that paid the worst salaries and for which there was little local competition, but newer arrivals may be perceived as a threat to the Costa Rican professional sector, potentially competing for jobs in a context of economic crisis and high unemployment. This could become an even more serious problem following the COVID-19 crisis.

A second critical issue for newly arrived migrants is gaining access to the public health system. While historically Costa Rica has given Nicaraguans direct access to health care, new requirements and obstacles are inhibiting migrants from receiving services. Institutionalized xenophobia hinders the foreign population from accessing health services even in an emergency, including some cases when individuals have insurance.

### ***The COVID 19 crisis and the refugee population***

In March 2020, the COVID-19 pandemic hit Central America and the rest of the world. While the impact the pandemic will have on migration flows from Nicaragua into Costa Rica in the coming months and years is still uncertain, several changes can already be observed.

First, the flow of migrants has decreased significantly. In response to the pandemic, many Nicaraguans returned to their home country, reacting both to the strict measures taken by Costa Rica in closing its borders and the prospect of deteriorating economic conditions. Facing the possibility of a productive catastrophe in Costa Rica, many migrants chose to return to their home country, despite the risks.

Second, the Costa Rican government implemented the so-called "Protect Bond," a 3-month payment of between US\$110 and \$220 to people without income or whose wages were significantly diminished by the crisis. The bonus was also available to refugees and asylum seekers with a provisional identity card, a group representing about half of the total migrant population. Despite efforts by UNHCR to support those who had not yet regularized their immigration status, a good part of the migrant population faced destitution.

Third, the Ortega-Murillo regime's irresponsible management of the COVID-19 pandemic<sup>1</sup> has raised grave concerns in Costa Rica that thousands of sick Nicaraguans will be forced to travel to neighboring countries for health services that their own government is unable to provide. In that scenario, it would not be farfetched to imagine a collapse of the Costa Rican medical system and mass infection of the local population. This fear was fueled by the rapidly increasing numbers of COVID-19 patients filling the

already insufficient and ill-equipped hospital space in Nicaragua and the detection of dozens of migrants testing positive for COVID-19 in the border region. These migrants were quarantined and hospitalized at once, but such reports raised concerns of a xenophobic reaction against the refugee population in the country.

One final element to note is that the seasonal rural migrants who travel to Costa Rica for relatively short periods of time (4 to 9 months) will not be allowed to enter the country until the pandemic is significantly under control. Given the dependence of transnational agrobusiness on this foreign workforce, the potential labor shortage has created alarm that crops could be lost. Any relaxation of border restrictions to allay these concerns or attempts to thwart the regulations could become a source of coronavirus infection throughout the country.

Nobody can know how the pandemic will evolve in Costa Rica and Nicaragua, but even without it the political crisis surrounding the Ortega regime is far from over and could enter another acute phase as national elections approach in 2021. The economic scenario does not look positive for any country in Central America, much less for Nicaragua, given the untrustworthiness of the government, the sanctions it faces from the US and other international actors, and the productive disarray caused by the increasingly repressive and dictatorial Ortega regime.

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<sup>1</sup> As of this writing, Ortega refused to acknowledge the threat that the COVID-19 pandemic represented for the Nicaraguan people and dismissed the "stay at home" campaign promoted by the opposition and civil society organizations. The Ministry of Health failed to provide reliable information and statistics, let alone testing for the virus. FSLN party structures throughout Nicaragua, following Ortega's orders, promoted mass gathering without any consideration for social distancing.