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South American Voices: South American Civil Society Gathering on Migration

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Although some sociologists, political scientists, economists, and anthropologists speak of the nation-state as a concept that has been diluted by processes of globalization and rendered obsolete by transnational processes, national borders are still very real for many of the world's 175 million international migrants. The xenophobic conditions faced by millions of migrants, refugees, and other displaced people, particularly those who are undocumented, make these populations vulnerable to abuse and exploitation.

In light of this situation, the work of migrant organizations and of civil society organizations who work with migrants and their families is not just necessary but urgent. In order to be able to effectively advance the rights of migrants, it is essential for civil society organizations to create networks that allow for coordinated, systematized work.

The effort to create a space for dialogue and discussion about this issue in South America was initiated recently with a meeting in Quito, Ecuador that took place in late August. Behind the initiation of this process there were many years of work carried out by organizations represented at the meeting.

The meeting in Quito made participants rethink the complexity of the migration phenomenon in each region and in each country of Latin America. The context of South America is very similar to that of North America, Central America, and the Caribbean. Therefore, we should work together as one region, addressing the particularities of each country, but with one common objective: protecting the human rights of migrants.

From all the information presented and from the Political Declaration turned over to the South American governments, we can point to the fundamental factor in migratory flows as being the capitalist model which has destroyed economic systems of those countries located in less developed regions of the world, and that has led to financial crises, falling commodity prices, unemployment, loss of buying power, provoking the abandonment of these countries.

In spite of the fact that each country has different political and economic conditions, the situations of refugee, migrant, and displaced populations in nations throughout all of Latin America have a number of characteristics in common. South American migration is particularly tied to the European continent. In spite of the high cost of traveling to Europe, many Argentines, Ecuadorians, Brazilians, and Peruvians move to Spain and Italy.

However, not all migration flows from this region are directed towards Europe and the U.S. The nations of the regions themselves permanently receive populations from their neighbor countries. There are strong migratory flows of Bolivians, Paraguayans, and Brazilians to Argentina, of Peruvians to Chile, etc. Human mobility is a daily reality in the region.

A shared reality within Central and North America and the Caribbean is the militarization of national borders, a situation that has intensified since September 11. In spite of the fact that many Latin American countries have legal instruments specifically delineating the rights of migrants, most of these countries do not have formal, explicit, comprehensive migration policies. In some cases governments rely on laws or programs that were developed over 20 years ago.

The Political Declaration of the Organizations of the South, which was developed by participants in the civil society Quito Summit, is very clear and emphasizes the group's concern about the growing militarization of borders in Latin America. The Declaration demands the immediate effective application of relevant International Treaties and Conventions signed by Latin American countries regarding migrants and refugees, especially the Declaration of Cartagena of 1984.

The Declaration insists upon the need for governments to address migration in their regional and subregional integration agreements. It also affirms the need for governments in the hemisphere to develop economic policies that are respectful of human rights.

Additionally, the Declaration places special emphasis on the issue of family unity. It urges the introduction of national-level laws that allow for immediate family reunification of immigrants, and calls for the addition of gender violence as a category of persecution to international frameworks regarding refugees.

The Declaration concludes by saying: "Because we are part of one humanity and we see ourselves in all those who suffer, wherever the suffering may occur, we reaffirm with one voice our commitment to act together to transform the current international migration order that impinges upon human dignity into a new one that is more just and that allows for our full realization as human beings."

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