Migrant Deaths and Disappearances: Between Criminalization and Border Closures

Guillermo Castillo Ramírez

Wednesday 14 December 2022, posted by Guillermo Castillo Ramírez

Every year in different regions of the world, poverty, lack of work and violence produce cross-border migrations of millions of people. For decades, these contexts of expulsion of migrants have increased with the structural increase in inequality, the deterioration of the living conditions of a large part of the population and the accumulation of wealth derived from neoliberal globalization.

International migrations imply spatial redistribution through different countries with large populations and a massive labor force (essential for the productive processes of the high-income economies of the global north). But there are also thousands of migrants who, year after year and on very adverse and dangerous geographical routes, lose their lives and disappear, in places like the Mediterranean and the desert on the Mexico-United States of America (USA) border. According to the Missing Migrant Project, and knowing that these are conservative figures that do not reflect the seriousness of the situation, by 2021 there were 6,041 migrant deaths and disappearances globally. And the historical figures from 2014 to date, and according to the main regions of the world, are very drastic: 24,667 dead and missing migrants in the Mediterranean; 11,816 in Africa; and 6,672 in America, mainly on the US-Mexico border, a place with more than 60% of the continent.

Likewise, for years and in various places in the global north (USA, certain European countries, among other regions), the narratives and social and state practices of stigmatization, discrimination, and racism have also increased. These narratives and practices, without empirical foundation and lacking in evidence, "hold migrants responsible" for various sociopolitical and economic problems in destination countries and societies. There is a growing trend in various countries and regions of the global north towards the closure of borders, the containment and state criminalization of irregular migrant populations.

In this context, and as different studies and reports have pointed out (Documentation Network of Organizations Defending Migrants, Jesuit Migrant Service, Doctors Without Borders), migrant deaths and disappearances are not natural and neutral facts; nor are they due “solely” to the risks of the biophysical environments of migratory routes. On the contrary, they have processes of social construction and are related to the exercise of political-legal engineering by countries of transit and destination to conceive and "produce" migrants as lawbreakers and criminals. From the state apparatus and certain sectors of the media system, the fact that migrant populations are "shown" as violators of legal frameworks, allows the configuration of policies that criminalize them, close borders and violate their rights. This also makes migrants more vulnerable to attacks, abuses, and crimes against them; and, in order to evade the authorities of the countries of transit and destination, expose themselves to much more dangerous, insecure and invisible transit routes.

An example of this is what happens in the irregular migration processes from Central America and Mexico to the US. As the investigations by Cornelius, Heyman and Martínez and the work of various pro-migrant networks and organizations (Documentation Network of Organizations for the Defense of Migrants, Jesuit Migrant Service, Doctors Without Borders) have shown, based on US immigration

policies of criminalization migration and the closing/militarization of borders from the mid-1990s to the beginning of this century (considering to date), the migratory transit routes have been modified and have become much more dangerous and insecure.

This has led to a substantial increase in the number of migrants killed and disappeared on the US-Mexico border, mainly in places with intense irregular border crossing processes, such as the Altar desert (between Sonora and Arizona) or the Rio Grande. For example, only between 2014 and to date, the Missing Migrant Project reached 4,071 deaths and disappearances on the US-Mexico border. This is a powerful reminder that, in order to save lives, it is necessary to stop criminalizing migrants and desist from closing and securitizing borders. On the contrary, it would be necessary to demand respect for human rights and the exercise of social justice towards irregularized foreign populations. Migrants are not criminals, but people who, with various strategies and agency capacities, try to have a better life by making use of migration.