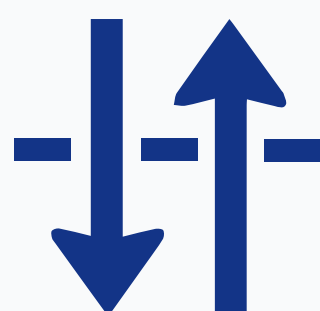**IOM • OIM** **DTM**
UN MIGRATION

▶ Introduction

This study is a baseline for the evaluation of irregular migration flows and the monitoring of mobility in the border localities of Costa Rica, El Salvador, Honduras, Guatemala and southern Mexico, which was developed in the context of COVID-19 in the period between June 2020 and July 2021 and analyzes migration flows from North to South America and vice versa.

This study is developed by the International Organization for Migration (IOM) through the Western Hemisphere Program and aims to quantify and analyze trends in migration flows and the presence of migrants in the previously established locations. For its implementation, information was provided by key informants, and also was obtained through field observations.
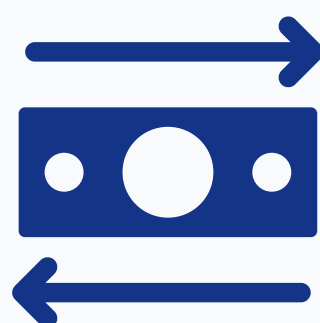
▶ Highlights

ⓘ Flow of highly vulnerable migrants

Increase in the perception of migration flows, both from south to north and from north to south throughout the study period, as well as a gradual decrease in the number of people identified as stranded at the borders.

Predominantly male migration, with Honduras as the main country of origin of migrants.

Increased livelihoods for border zone inhabitants, who have dedicated themselves to offering goods and services to migrant populations in transit.
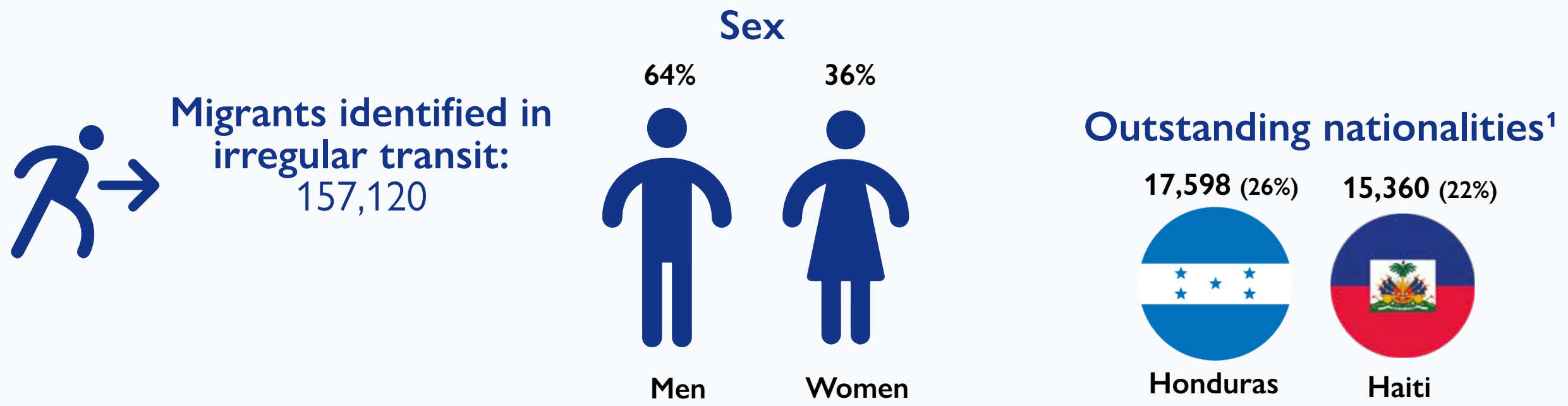
During the study period, it was noted that the effects of the COVID-19 pandemic and hurricanes Eta and Iota were among the main reasons for migration from South to North America. However, at the same time, a return migration flow to the countries of the region was noted, mainly related to the failure of migration plans of people who had previously migrated north.

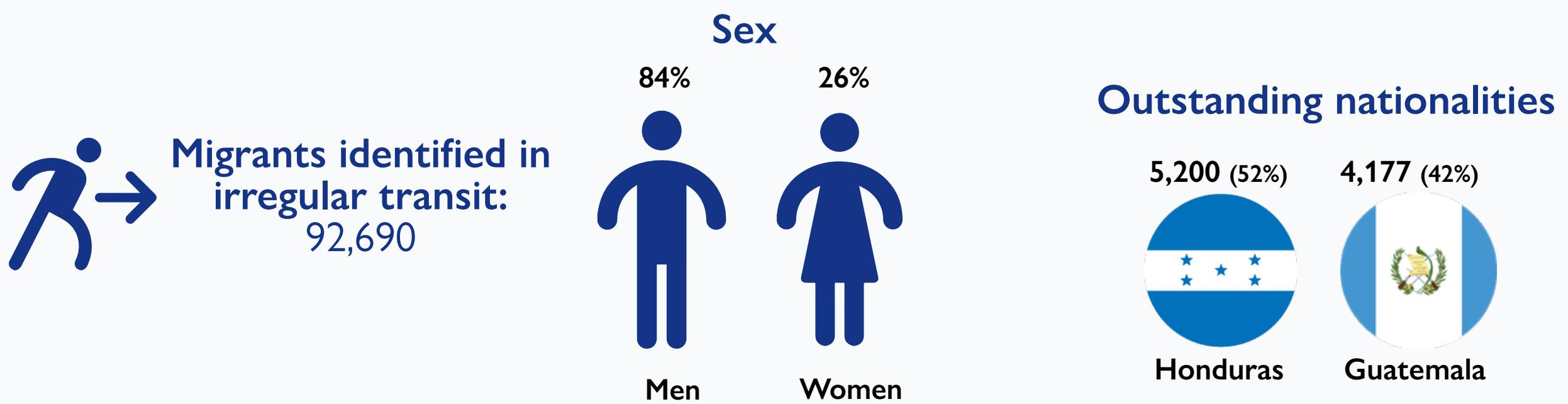A significant number of people were identified as being under some condition of vulnerability, especially children and adolescents. Children under five years of age were identified traveling with family members. Likewise, people with health problems were identified.
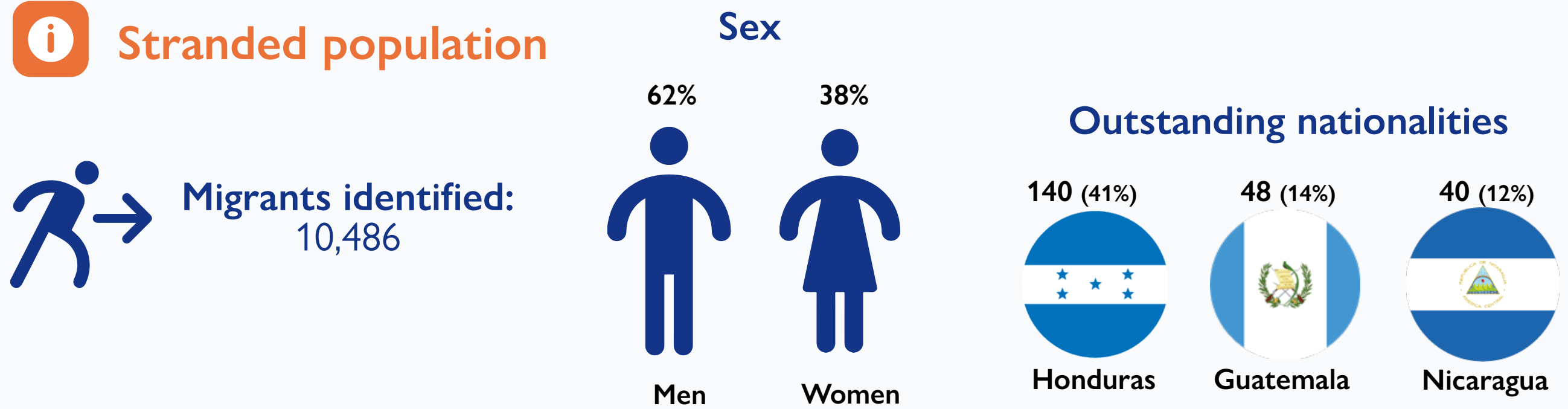
REGIONAL REPORT: HIGHLY VULNERABLE MIGRANT FLOWS AND BORDER MOBILITY IN GUATEMALA, HONDURAS, EL SALVADOR, COSTA RICA AND MEXICO

1

ⓘ South-north migration flow

Sex

64%   36%

Migrants identified in irregular transit:
157,120

Men   Women

Outstanding nationalities[1]

17,598 (26%)   **15,360** (22%)

Honduras   Haiti

ⓘ North- south migration flow

Sex

84%   26%

Migrants identified in irregular transit:
92,690

Men   Women

Outstanding nationalities

5,200 (52%)   **4,177** (42%)

Honduras   Guatemala

ⓘ Stranded population

Sex

62%   38%

Migrants identified:
10,486

Men   Women

Outstanding nationalities

140 (41%)   **48** (14%)   **40** (12%)

Honduras   Guatemala   Nicaragua

Bus stop in Ciudad Neily. Ciudad Neily, Costa Rica © IOM 2021

[1] *In this report, for the quantification of the nationalities identified, the data shown in the following table correspond to maximum data reported in the different monitoring rounds and are not the result of data accumulated over the study period.*

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2

ℹ️ Methodology

Sources: 103 Key informants

The Displacement Tracking Matrix (DTM), through the flow monitoring and mobility tracking subcomponents, is an IOM methodology whose purpose is to quantify and analyze trends in migration flows and the presence of migrants in specific localities during a specific period. This baseline was carried out in border localities in Costa Rica, El Salvador, Honduras, Guatemala and the southern border of Mexico between June 2020 and July 2021. It should be noted that in Costa Rica and Mexico, data collection was conducted only during the quarter between May and July 2021.

Data collection was carried out through monthly or quarterly monitoring rounds in each country, based on interviews with strategically selected key informants, as well as through local media monitoring. For the selection of key informants, IOM took into account criteria such as on-site presence, physical proximity, organizational and thematic scope, local representativeness and a priori reference. To complement this exercise, IOM carried out field observation work starting in June 2021, in view of the relaxation of biosecurity measures due to the COVID-19 pandemic in the different countries.

A total of 103 key informants were interviewed throughout the region, divided by country as follows: 20 in Costa Rica, 14 in El Salvador, 37 in Guatemala, 30 in Honduras and 20 in Mexico. These key informants are representatives of government institutions, non-governmental organizations, human rights centers, migrant shelters, religious associations, local governments, civil society, merchants and community-based organizations.

Finally, for the analysis of the data, a classification of migration flows was made according to their direction based on the data reported by the key informants. Thus, the analysis is developed according to two identified trends:

1. Migration flow with direction from the north to the south of America

2. Migration flow from South to North America.

Limitations

For the quantification of the nationalities identified, the data shown in this report correspond to maximum data reported in the different monitoring rounds and are not the result of data accumulated over the study period. On the other hand, limitations persisted at the regional level in identifying differentiated profiles in relation to persons presenting some risk factor.

Estimates provided by key informants and field observation may be biased due to the difficulty of estimating unrecorded irregular flows and the dynamics of the migration flow itself. In addition, there are important discrepancies between the estimates of population flows from different key informants, in quantitative and qualitative terms. Therefore, the results of this report are general approximations of the situation.

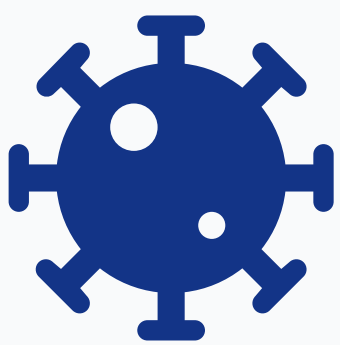*Suchiate River, Ciudad Hidalgo, Mexico © IOM 2021*

REGIONAL REPORT: HIGHLY VULNERABLE MIGRANT FLOWS AND BORDER MOBILITY IN GUATEMALA, HONDURAS, EL SALVADOR, COSTA RICA AND MEXICO

3

Location

Map I. Border study locations (june, 2020-july, 2021)

Map key

- ⊙ Border locaties
- ┈ Land route
- → Flow with south-north direction
- → Flow with north-south direction

Countries view of North Central America
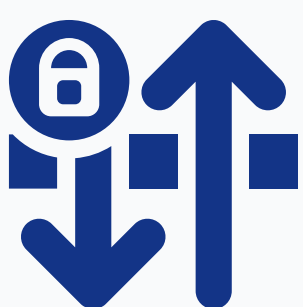
Basemap source: ESRI and UN World Map

This map is for illustration purposes only. The boundaries and names shown and the designations used on this map do not imply official endorsement or acceptance by the International Organization for Migration.

Situational context

In the context of COVID-19, several requirements for international mobility were gradually established, including COVID-19 tests (PCR, antigens, NAAT, LAMP) prior to entering countries such as Guatemala, Honduras and El Salvador. Also, as progress has been made in the vaccination processes regionally, countries have begun to request a complete vaccination certificate. This situation has generated different reactions in the migrant population, from the purchase of falsified certifications to the evasion of migration controls through irregular migration due to the high costs of COVID-19 screening tests.
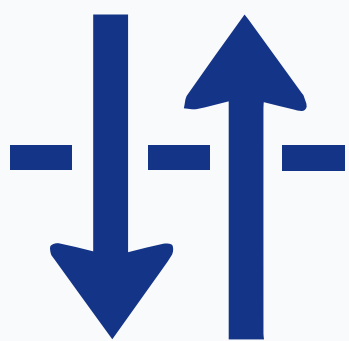
Given this scenario, in El Salvador, according to the measures implemented by the Government on surveillance and border control of blind spots in the context of COVID-19, a specialized unit of the National Civil Police is maintained in conjunction with the Armed Forces and the border patrols of the General Directorate of Migration and Immigration (DGME). These are in charge of guarding and monitoring the entry and exit of migrants through unauthorized points on El Salvador's borders, through preventive and constant patrols.

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In March and April 2021, the Mexican Government met with its counterparts in Honduras and Guatemala to implement measures to contain migration. In addition, Mexican President Andrés Manuel López Obrador, agreed with the Government of the United States to deploy more than 10,000 soldiers to the southern border[2]. In addition to the Mexican Government's containment strategy, efforts have been made to extend the "Sembrando Vida" (Sowing Life) program in El Salvador and Honduras.

In Honduras, the crisis caused by COVID-19 had a direct impact on informal employment, entrepreneurship and caused closures of family businesses in communities near the borders, resulting in an increase in the socioeconomic vulnerability of entire family groups. Likewise, hurricanes Eta and Iota caused disasters mainly in the northern part of the country, where at least 13,386 houses were affected, 985 damaged and 27 destroyed[3]. Thus, according to key informants, these situations have had a direct effect on the decision to migrate as a method of adaptation to the crisis.

In Costa Rica, the borders were opened to certain profiles of the migrant population; however, operations for entry and regular transit permits for extraregional migrants[4] have been paused, mainly due to the economic crisis faced by the country. This situation has not prevented extraregional migrants from entering the country, coming from South America and Panama, and moving by the land route to North America. According to data from the Government of Panama, as of August 2021, 70,376 extraregional migrants entered the country through the southern border with Colombia.

In Guatemala, there was an increase in the detection of extraregional migrants in transit through the country bound for North America, according to information sources from the Guatemalan Migration Institute (IGM) and the National Civil Police (PNC). This was based on border patrols carried out in the country's migration corridors, mainly in the borders of San Marcos, Huehuetenango and Petén.

In several border towns in the region, extraregional migration has been perceived as an opportunity to improve the livelihoods of communities. However, income generation may be associated with practices that facilitate the smuggling of migrants, as well as with price increases (excessive charges in dollars) for basic products such as food, hygiene items and mobile data for cell phone recharging. Likewise, the solidarity of local people with the migrant population has manifested itself through community organization, in order to defend the rights of migrants from outside the region.

Likewise, the solidarity of local people with the migrant population has manifested itself through community organization, in order to defend the rights of migrants from outside the region. Despite this, in some communities, manifestations of xenophobia have increased.

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[2] INM. More than a thousand elements will be sent to reinforce the containment of migrants. April 12, 2021.
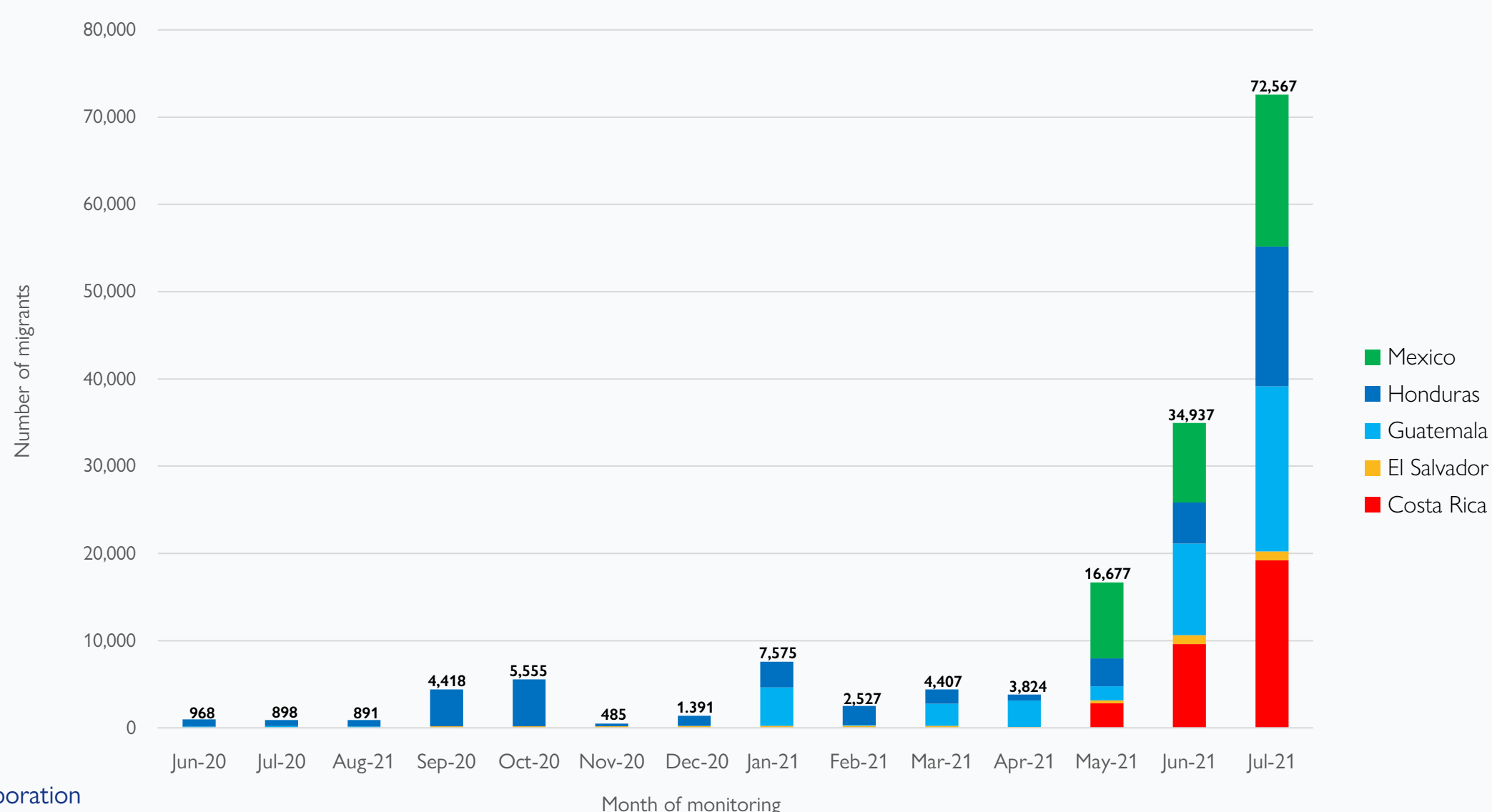Available at: www.inm.gob.mx/gobmx/word/index.php/tema-migratorio-130421/
[3] COPECO. Informative Bulletin No. 21. (Tegucigalpa, 2021).
[4] Extraregional migrants are defined as those persons originating from countries outside the Central American region and Mexico, who enter the Central American region by land.

ⓘ **Migration flow from the South to the North of America**

Figure 1. Approximate quantification of south-north migration flow by country and monitoring month (June 2020-July 2021)
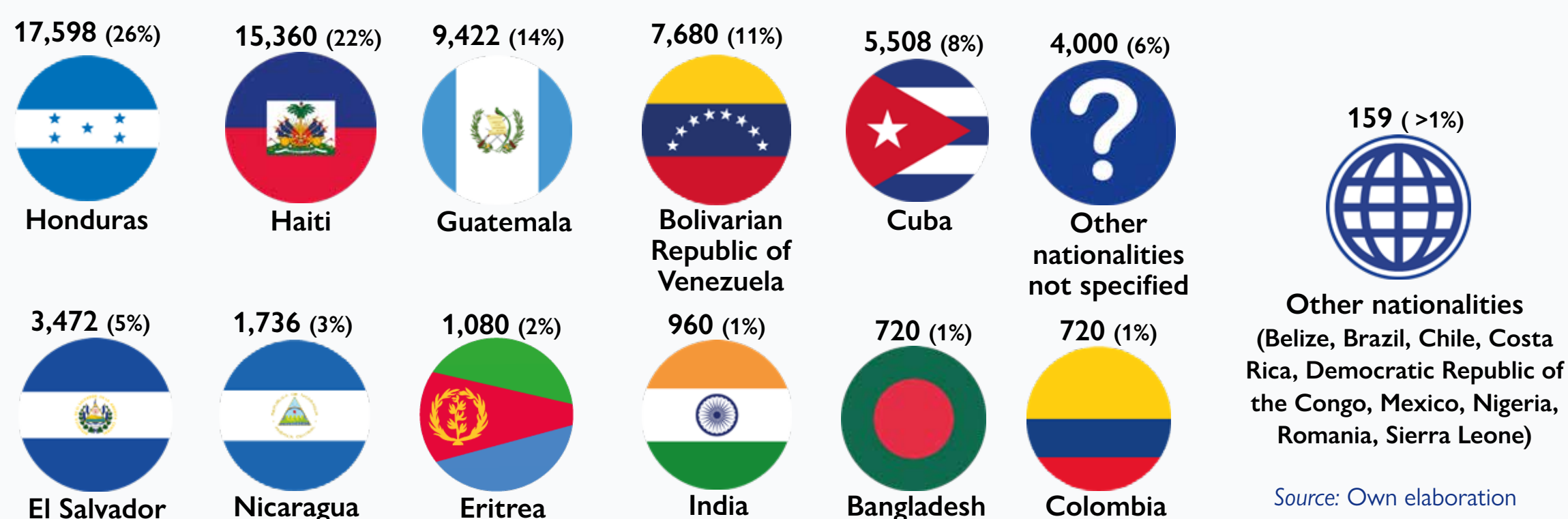

Source: Own elaboration

The south-north migration flow was the most perceived by key informants, mainly in Costa Rica, Honduras, Guatemala and Mexico. In the annual trend, the localities with the greatest mobility were Paso Canoas in Costa Rica with 31,620 migrants detected, Bethel in Guatemala with 21,860 people, Ciudad Hidalgo in Mexico with 21,600, and finally Trojes in Honduras with 9,200 migrants identified. As can be seen in Figure 1, these flows increased significantly, according to the perception of the different reports, as of May 2021.

In the south-north migration flow, 79 percent of the identified persons occurred in the quarter between May and July 2021. This is due to different aspects, including the inclusion of Costa Rica and Mexico in the monitoring and the incorporation of field observation practices by the researchers.

Image 1. Main nationalities detected

17,598 (26%) Honduras
15,360 (22%) Haiti
9,422 (14%) Guatemala
7,680 (11%) Bolivarian Republic of Venezuela
5,508 (8%) Cuba
4,000 (6%) Other nationalities not specified
159 (>1%) Other nationalities (Belize, Brazil, Chile, Costa Rica, Democratic Republic of the Congo, Mexico, Nigeria, Romania, Sierra Leone)

3,472 (5%) El Salvador
1,736 (3%) Nicaragua
1,080 (2%) Eritrea
960 (1%) India
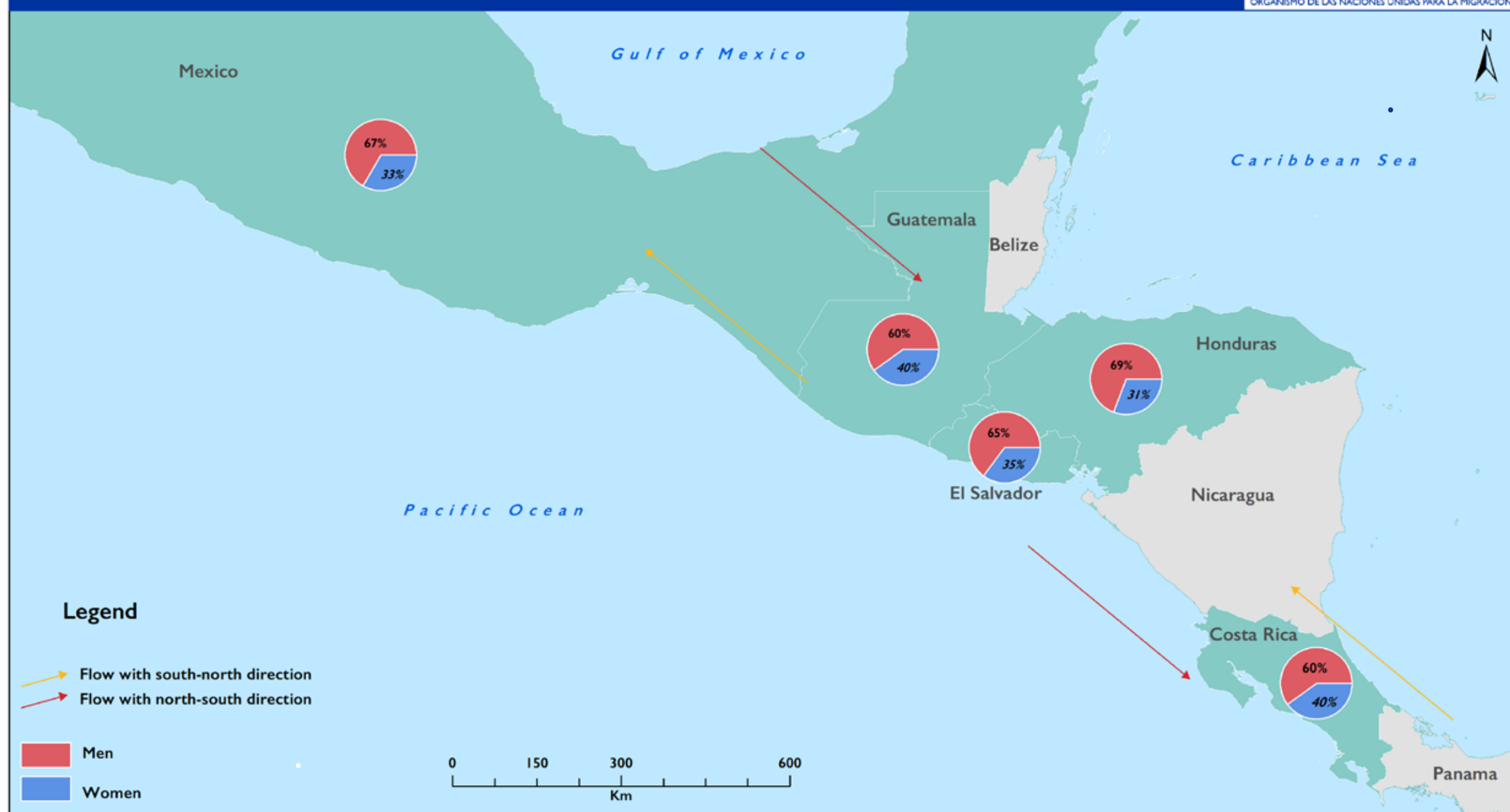**720** (1%) Bangladesh
720 (1%) Colombia

Source: Own elaboration

The nationalities that stood out for presenting maximum values in the flow to North America at the regional level were Honduras (17,598 persons), Haiti (15,360 persons), Guatemala (9,422) and the Bolivarian Republic of Venezuela (7,680 persons). At the national level, the trend is differentiated because each country shows particularities according to the conditions of the migration flow in transit, for example: in Costa Rica, Haitian, Venezuelan and Cuban nationals stood out, while in Honduras, Guatemala and Mexico, Hondurans, Guatemalans, Salvadorans and Haitians predominated in the migration flow detected.

In the case of extraregional migrants, they are difficult to detect due to the way they travel through Central America, since, according to key informants, they may opt for illegal migrant smuggling networks and therefore use undetected routes.
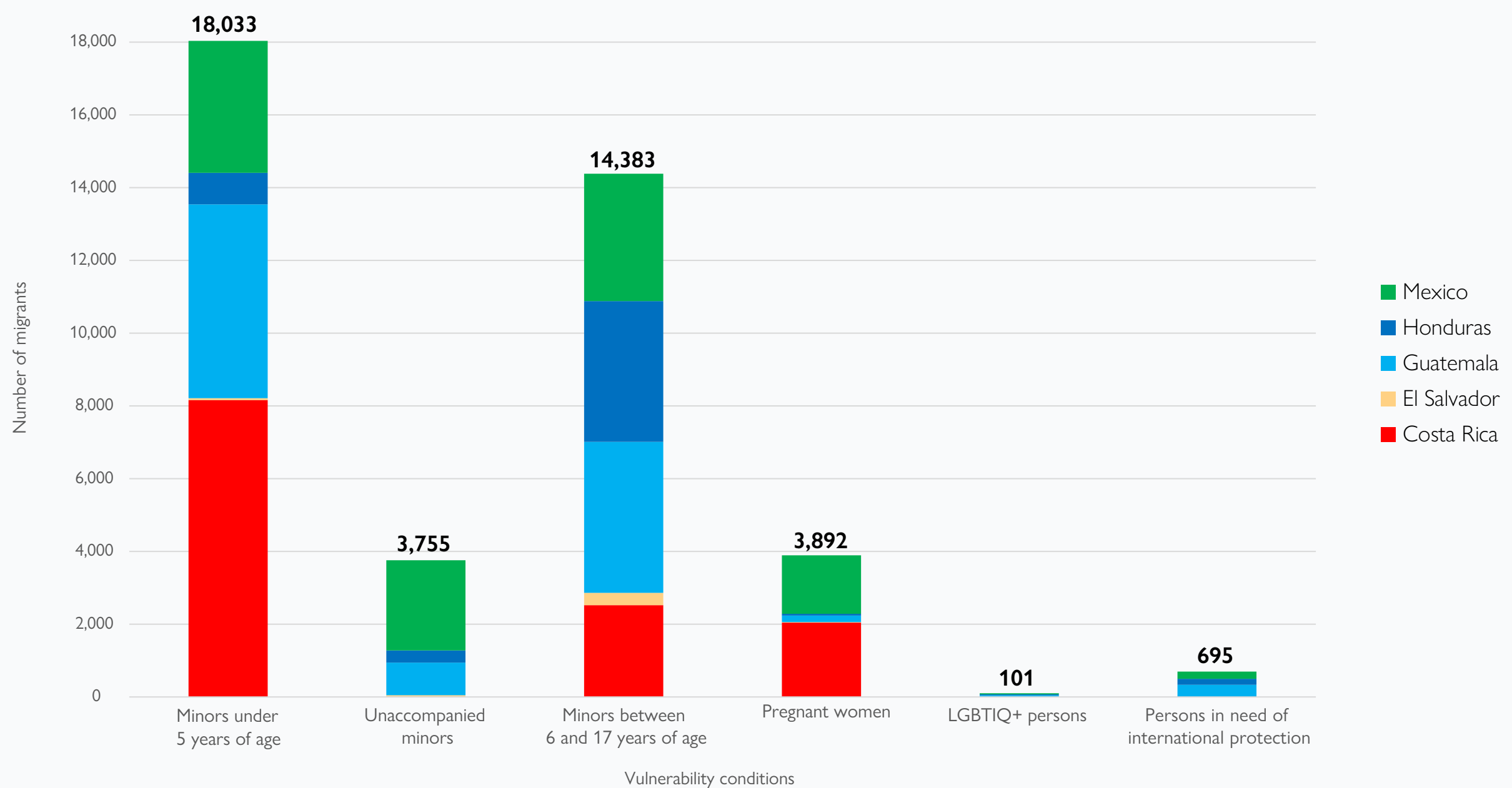
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[5] *Highly vulnerable migrant flow is defined as the number of international migrants arriving (inflows) or departing (outflows) from a country over the course of a set period in an irregular manner through unofficial crossing points. These data are a dynamic measure for counting the number of people crossing a border and include those migrants who cross once or several times in a set period (IOM, ²⁰¹⁹).The data collected show the perception of key informants, so the data are interpreted as averages and general estimates of the situation.*

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Map 2. Approximate sex ratio of south-north migration flow by country (June 2020-July 2021)

Regarding the sex composition of migrants, 64 percent of the people detected were men and 36 percent were women. It is worth noting that the trends in the characteristics of the travel group in persons from Honduras and Haiti are similar, since it is in these nationalities that family-like groups composed of mothers, fathers, boys and girls have been detected.

Figure 2. Approximation of the quantification of migration flow under specific vulnerability conditions in the countries with the highest detection of migration flow in a south-north direction (June, 2020-July, 2021)
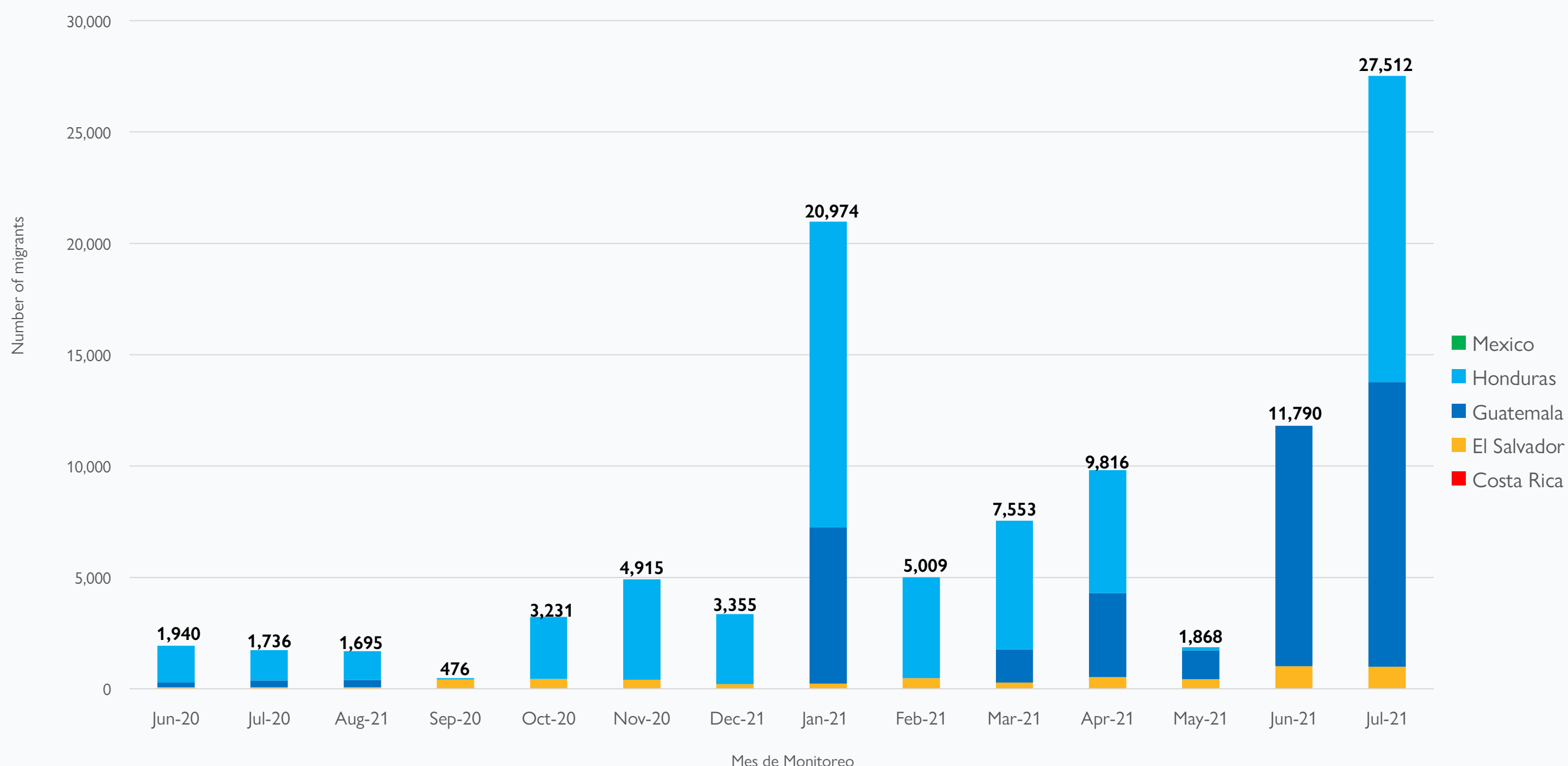

In terms of migrants identified under vulnerable conditions, 40,963 people were detected under these conditions, 79 percent of whom were minors under 17 years of age, especially children under 5 years of age (44%). The border location of Paso Canoas in Costa Rica was where the largest number of children under 5 years of age was detected, with 8,160 infants detected, while in Corinto in Honduras, the largest number of adolescents under 17 years of age was detected, with 3,009 leaving this country. Likewise, children under 5 years of age also presented chronic illnesses related to gastrointestinal infections and respiratory diseases, particularly those who were detected in Paso Canoas, Costa Rica.

These minors apparently travel accompanied by their fathers, mothers or close relatives. It was also noted that adolescents of Honduran nationality have family members in the countries of destination, so that family reunification is one of the reasons why they migrate; in addition, given the impacts produced by the COVID-19 pandemic and the effects of the disasters triggered by hurricanes Eta and Iota, adolescents migrate in order to obtain employment to improve their family's income and socioeconomic situation.
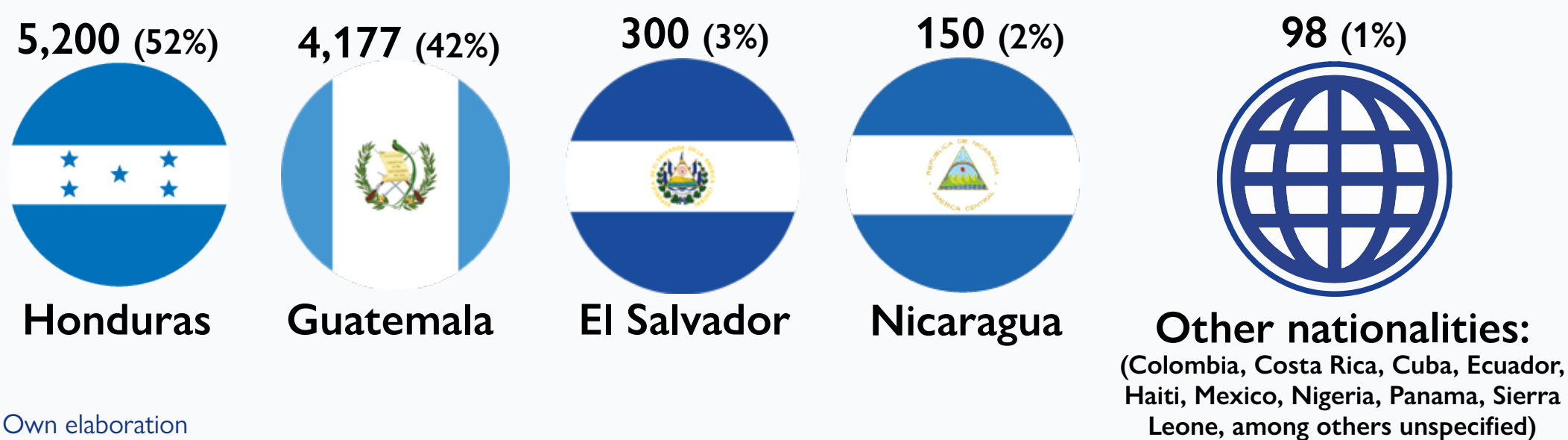
REGIONAL REPORT: HIGHLY VULNERABLE MIGRANT FLOWS AND BORDER MOBILITY IN GUATEMALA, HONDURAS, EL SALVADOR, COSTA RICA AND MEXICO

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Figure 3: Approximate quantification of North-South migration flow by country and monitoring month, (June 2020-July 2021)

Source: Own elaboration

The annual trend shows that the countries where key informants mostly reported people detected in the north-south migration flow are Honduras and Guatemala, particularly in the border town of Corinto, located on the Honduras-Guatemala border, with at least 34,817 migrants identified.

Image 2. Main nationalities detected

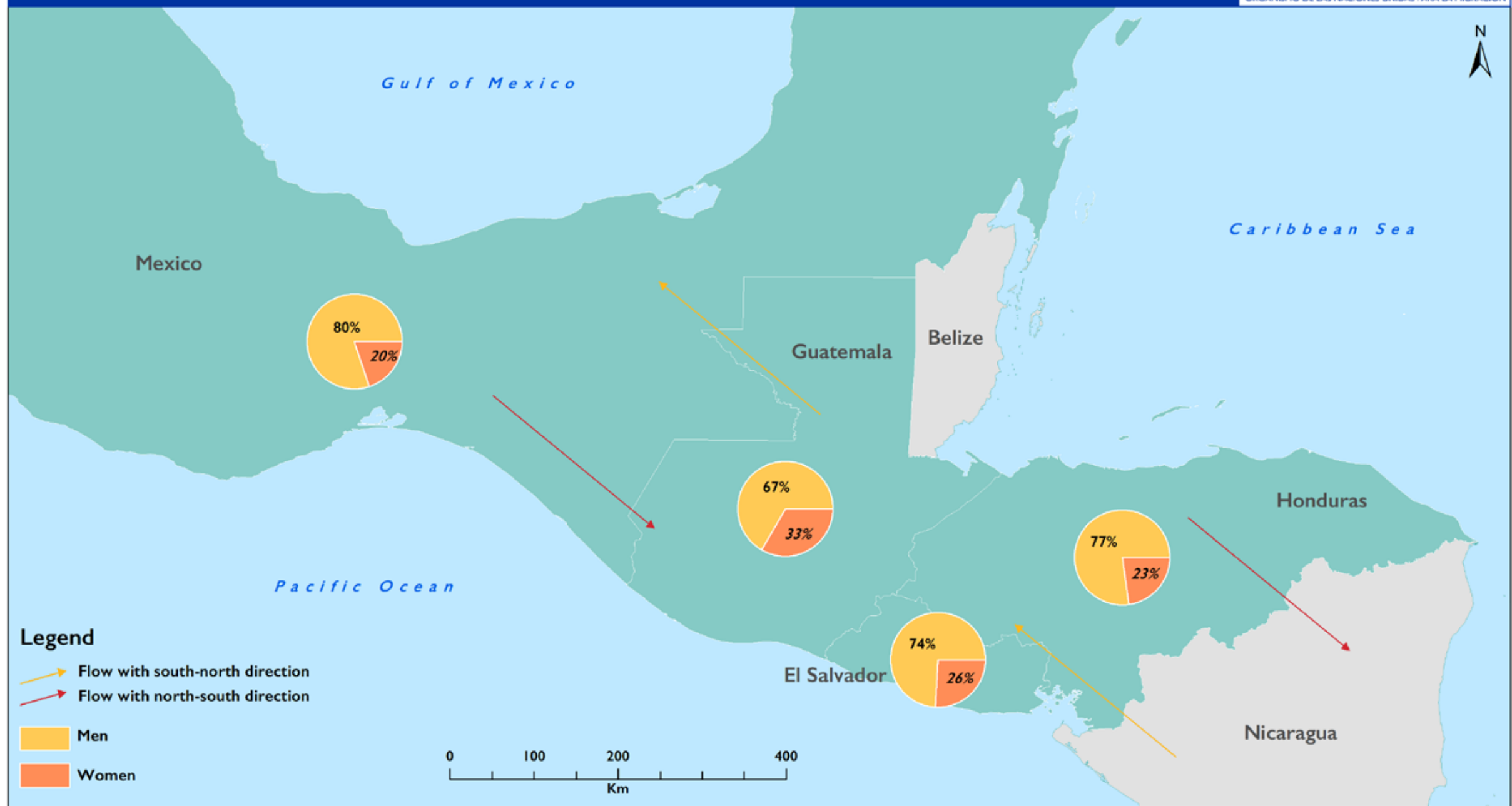| 5,200 (52%) | 4,177 (42%) | 300 (3%) | 150 (2%) | 98 (1%) |
| Honduras | Guatemala | El Salvador | Nicaragua | **Other nationalities:** (Colombia, Costa Rica, Cuba, Ecuador, Haiti, Mexico, Nigeria, Panama, Sierra Leone, among others unspecified) |

Source: Own elaboration

With respect to nationalities, the north-south migration flow included people from Central America, mainly from Honduras, Guatemala, El Salvador and Nicaragua, so this migration could be related to return flows. However, challenges were identified in differentiating between regular and irregular migration flows, mainly along the border between Guatemala and Honduras. Therefore, the systematized figures may be the result of underreporting.

In the case of migrants from Honduras, key informants indicated that these people migrated to North America previously as a caravan; however, they returned after not succeeding in their migration plan. The migration flows of Central American migrants are due to intraregional migration flows related to seasonal labor migration.

It should be noted that nationals from Colombia, Costa Rica, Cuba, Ecuador, Haiti, Mexico, Nigeria, Panama and Sierra Leone were also identified, in addition to people from Africa, Asia and the Caribbean, whose countries of nationality could not be identified by the key informants. The migration dynamics of these people was related to situations where they were refused regular entry by the neighboring country or because they were related to migration routes associated with transit through the Gulf of Fonseca in El Salvador, with destination to the North of the continent. This can be deduced from the fact that the border towns of El Salvador (especially El Amatillo on the border with Honduras) were where the largest number of migrants were detected under this modality.
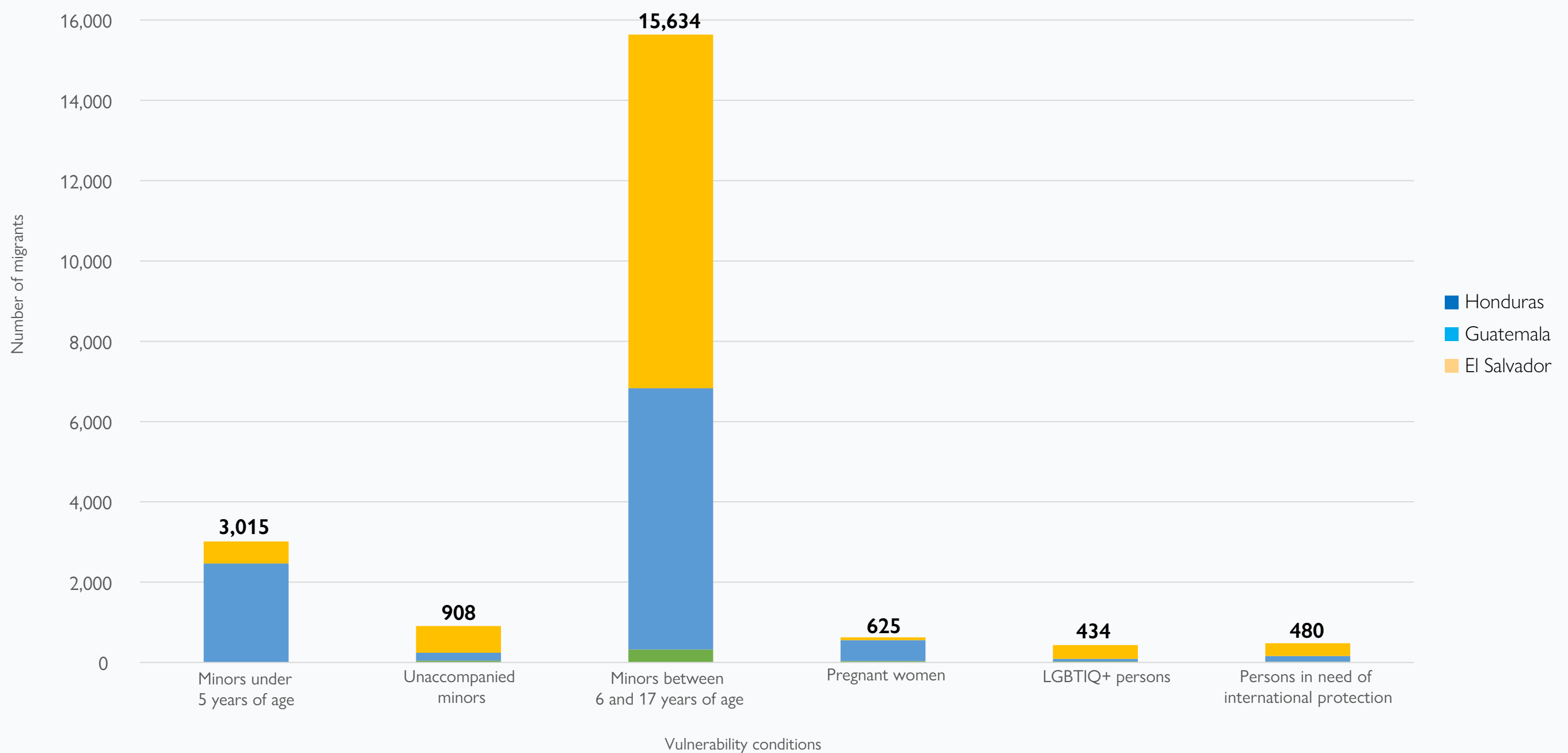
REGIONAL REPORT: HIGHLY VULNERABLE MIGRANT FLOWS AND BORDER MOBILITY IN GUATEMALA, HONDURAS, EL SALVADOR, COSTA RICA AND MEXICO

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Map 3. Approximation of the proportion by sex in the countries with the highest detection of north-south migration flow (June 2020-July 2021)

Legend
- Flow with south-north direction
- Flow with north-south direction
- Men
- Women

Basemap source: ESRI and UN World Map
This map is for illustration purposes only. The boundaries and names shown and the designations used on this map do not imply official endorsement or acceptance by the International Organization for Migration.

In the countries with the highest detection of irregular migration flows with a north-south destination, the trend indicated that there is a majority of men migrating under this modality. However, key informants indicated that particularly in Corinto, people migrated in groups apparently made up of families, where it was common to observe female migrants accompanied by underage children. In El Salvador, the trend indicated that people migrate alone or in groups of acquaintances and is associated with circular migration for labor reasons.

Figure 4. Approximation of the quantification of migration flow under specific vulnerability conditions in the countries with the highest detection of north-south migration flow (June, 2020-July, 2021)
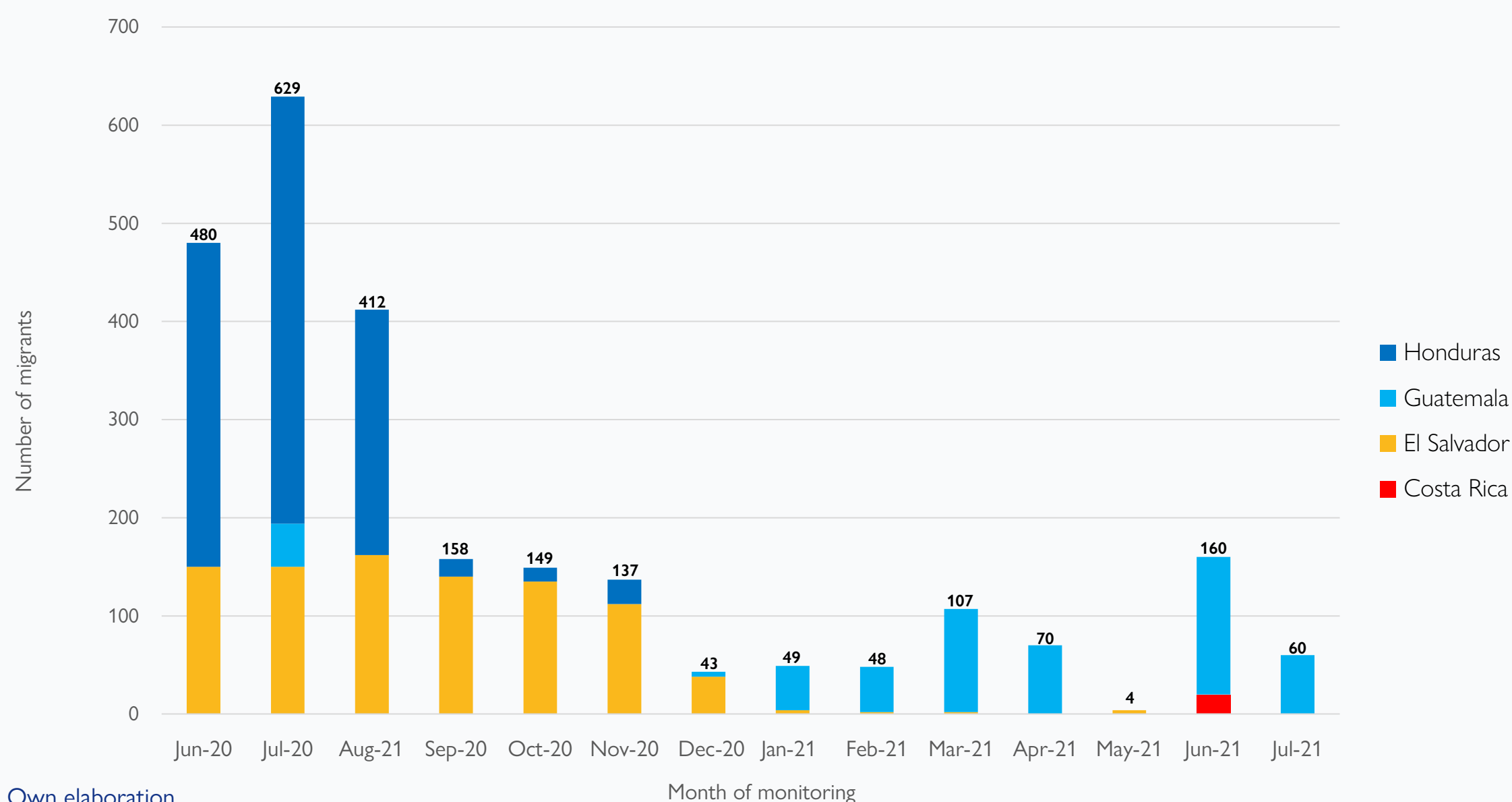

Despite the limitations in the identification of differentiated profiles, nearly 21,218 people with some risk factor were detected, among whom those under 17 years of age stand out, representing 74 percent of the total number of people identified under these conditions. It should be noted that these minors were detected migrating accompanied, particularly in travel groups characterized by family members (in the vast majority of cases, Honduran nationals).

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Figure 5. Approximate quantification of migrants stranded at border locations by country and month of monitoring (June 2020-July 2021)

Legend:
- Honduras
- Guatemala
- El Salvador
- Costa Rica

Values (Number of migrants by Month of monitoring):
- Jun-20: 480
- Jul-20: 629
- Aug-21: 412
- Sep-20: 158
- Oct-20: 149
- Nov-20: 137
- Dec-20: 43
- Jan-21: 49
- Feb-21: 48
- Mar-21: 107
- Apr-21: 70
- May-21: 4
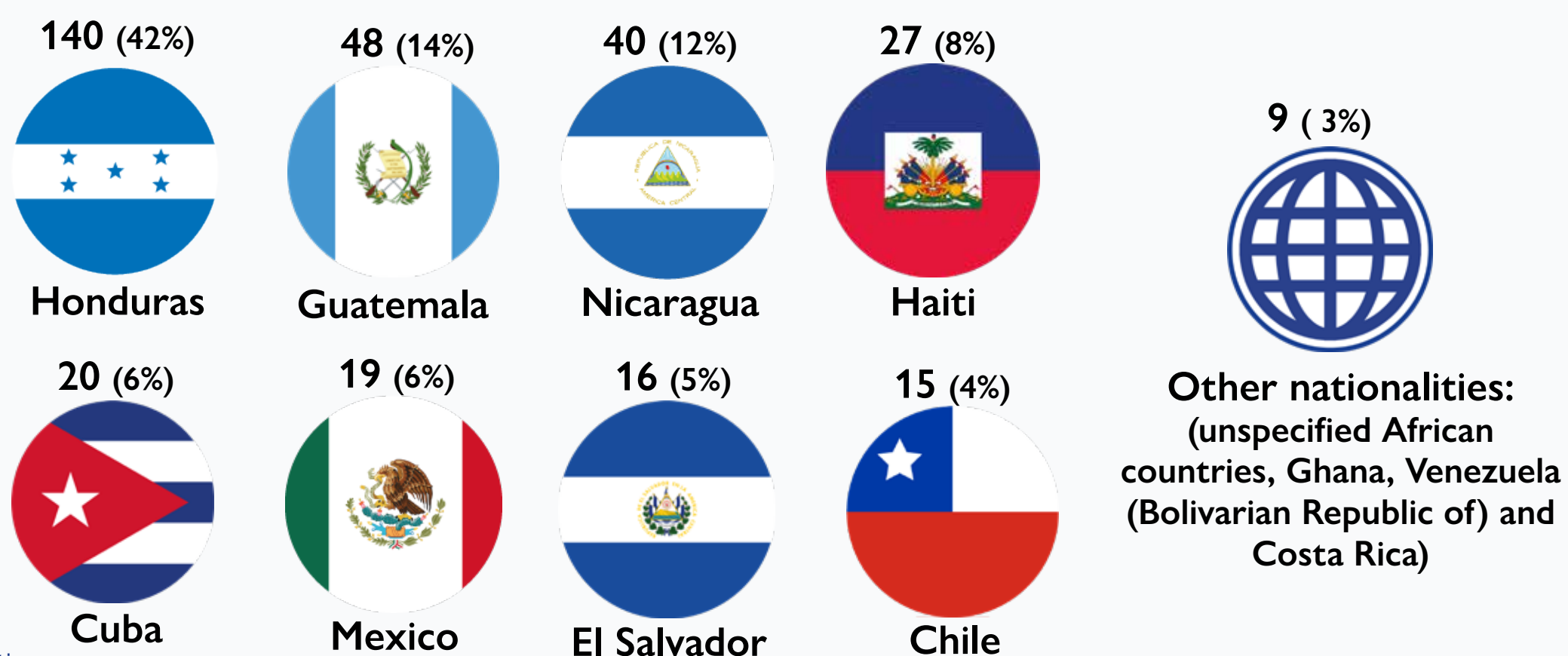- Jun-21: 160
- Jul-21: 60

Source: Own elaboration

In relation to persons stranded in border localities, El Salvador and Honduras were identified as the countries with the highest number of persons under this condition, particularly during 2020. These situations are related to changes in entry requirements, considering the new biosecurity provisions due to the COVID-19 pandemic.

It is also known that in Honduras, particularly in Trojes during the year 2021, there were cases of migrants stranded under conditions of multiple vulnerability. The main conditions of vulnerability of these stranded persons are related to the lack of economic resources, as well as to the deterioration of their health; however, at the time of data collection for this report, it was not possible to have quantitative data on the situation.

On the other hand, in Mexico no stranded persons were detected in the border localities under study, while in Costa Rica only stranded migrants were detected in Paso Canoas during the month of June 2021
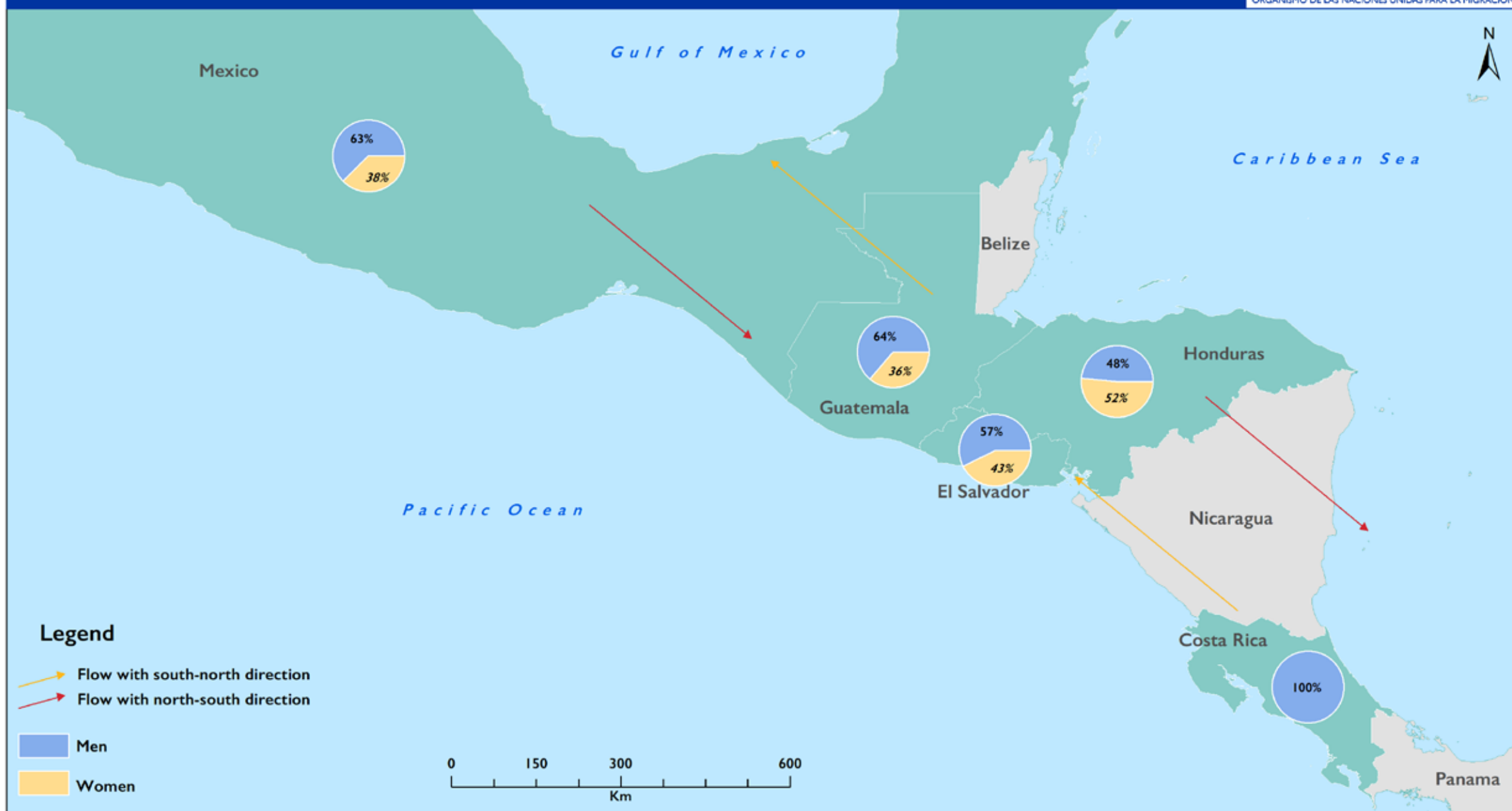
Image 3. Main nationalities detected

- **140** (42%) Honduras
- **48** (14%) Guatemala
- **40** (12%) Nicaragua
- **27** (8%) Haiti
- **9** (3%)
- **20** (6%) Cuba
- **19** (6%) Mexico
- **16** (5%) El Salvador
- **15** (4%) Chile

Other nationalities: (unspecified African countries, Ghana, Venezuela (Bolivarian Republic of) and Costa Rica)

Source: Own elaboration

Regarding nationalities, Honduran nationals represented the largest group of people detected, specifically in El Naranjo, a Guatemalan border town with Mexico. According to key informants in that town, El Naranjo is commonly used by people of Central American nationalities as a strategic stop-over community when they do not have sufficient economic resources to continue to Mexico.
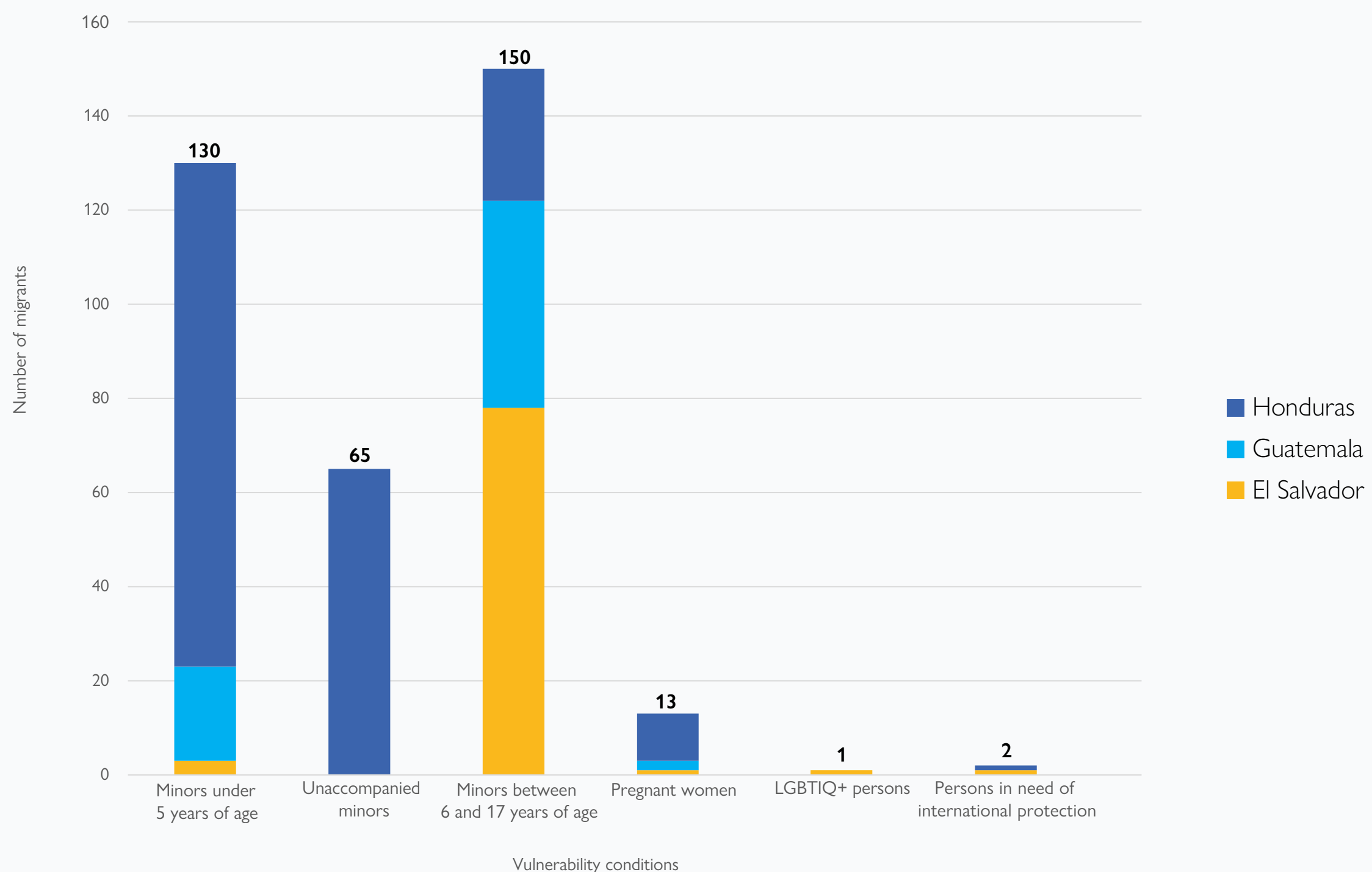
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[6] *Stranded population refers to migrants who are unable to return to their country of origin, to regularize their situation in the country in which they reside or to access regular migration channels that would allow them to move to another country. The term can also refer to migrants who are stranded in the country of destination, transit or origin for humanitarian or security reasons and who, as a result, are unable to return home or continue their journey elsewhere (IOM, 2019).*

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Map 4. Approximate sex ratio of stranded migrants by country (June 2020-July 2021)

Legend

→ Flow with south-north direction
→ Flow with north-south direction
■ Men
■ Women

This map is for illustration purposes only. The boundaries and names shown and the designations used on this map do not imply official endorsement or acceptance by the International Organization for Migration.

Basemap source: ESRI and UN World Map

Similar to the general trend in the proportion of migration flow by sex, men were the largest population detected as stranded. However, in El Salvador and Guatemala, family groups were identified, and women were identified as heads of groups.

Figure 6. Stranded migrants identified under conditions of vulnerability by country (June 2020-July 2021)

At least 369 vulnerable people were identified in El Salvador, Guatemala and Honduras alone. Of these, 76 percent were minors, particularly adolescents. In the town of El Amatillo in Honduras, the largest number of children under 5 years of age was detected (97 children), as well as unaccompanied children and adolescents (65 unaccompanied minors).

At the regional level, it should be noted that border localities do not have the capacity to care for stranded migrants in terms of both shelters and institutional technical capacities. In addition, there was no activation of protocols according to protection needs based on vulnerability criteria.

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CONCLUSIONS

This study shows the complexity of irregular migration, which in the context of the COVID-19 pandemic has not stopped and, on the contrary, continues without being associated with a single nationality, country or direction, but is characterized by greater risks for migrants. This overview of migration flows indicates the need to strengthen a comprehensive approach at the regional level with attention to humanitarian needs in border localities and to strengthen local capacities for detection and assistance to highly vulnerable migrants in transit.
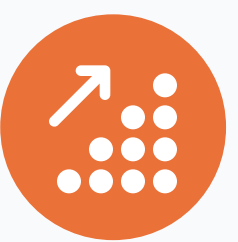
In the month of May 2021, a significant increase in the perception of migration flows throughout the region was noted, derived from the inclusion of Costa Rica and Mexico in the monitoring and the incorporation of field observation practices

Family reunification, the search for job opportunities, improved quality of life, structural violence and political persecution in the country of origin are the main reasons why migrants seek to migrate to North America. It should be noted that key informants indicate that the United States of America is the intended final destination for these migrants.

The irregular migration flow detected is limited only to the movements perceived in the central routes of entry and exit of the selected border localities. The smuggling of migrants and the very nature of irregular migration lead migrants to use other routes not included.

The information provided by key informants supports that the migration flow to North America is the most perceived. However, key informants have limitations in conducting systematized monitoring of irregular migration flow beyond what their mandates or scopes of action allow them to do. This is also due to the fact that key informants have reduced possibilities to provide direct assistance to such persons.

In general, it was in the border towns of El Salvador where the least amount of irregular movements were detected, according to key informants, these dynamics are due to changes in entry requirements for biosecurity reasons and the measures taken at the political level to mitigate COVID-19. However, key informants also considered that migrants may use routes not monitored under this exercise, associated with blind spots, gang presence, and/or night crossings.

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Key informants at the regional level recognized limitations for the identification of differentiated profiles related to conditions of vulnerability, especially for cases related to LGTBIQ+ population, people with chronic diseases, pregnant women with early gestation, and people with international protection needs. One of the main reasons for these limitations is due to the fact that the migration flow is in transit, with low possibilities of insertion in the border locality, so that the follow-up of cases would be practically nil.

Field work by IOM o cers. Northern Central American countries (Guatemala, Honduras and El Salvador) © IOM 2020

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