

## Protecting unaccompanied migrant adolescents



*A Mexican immigration officer questions a repatriated migrant child in Tijuana, Mexico.*

Mexico is the fifth largest country in the Americas and ranks eleventh in the world in terms of population. Given its location between the United States of America and the rest of Latin America, it is a point of origin, transit and destination for migrants, experiencing both internal (rural to urban) and external (cross-border) migration. In 2009, around 78 per cent of Mexicans were living in urban areas. Increased urbanization has been spurred by migration to the northern border states, where the rapid growth of the maquila industry has attracted workers, and to tourist centres such as Cancun on the Caribbean coast. Large numbers of Mexicans have also crossed borders, most notably to the United States, where an estimated 10.3 million first-generation Mexican immigrants were living in 2004.

Recently, ensuring the rights of young people in the context of migration has become a challenge for Mexico. Children and adolescents migrating alone make up one of the least visible faces of migration. These young people, the majority of whom are adolescents aged 12–17, are on the move for various reasons, seeking to reunite with their families, to earn income or to escape violence and exploitation. During their journeys, adolescents are vulnerable to exploitation by unscrupulous persons and may fall prey to trafficking for labour or sexual purposes or be subjected to physical and sexual abuse. They are regularly exposed to humiliating and confusing situations that can leave deep scars. Within the last two years, over 58,000 adolescents and children – close to 34,000 of whom were unaccompanied – were repatriated from the United States to Mexico. Mexico, in turn, repatriated almost 9,000 adolescents and children to their countries of origin.

The Government of Mexico has taken determined steps to address issues related to migrant adolescents and children. The Inter-Institutional Panel on Unaccompanied Child and Adolescent Migrants and Migrant Women, set up in March 2007, has been instrumental in advancing this agenda. The panel brings together some 17 institutions, ranging from public authorities such as the National Family Development System, the Ministry of Foreign Affairs and the National Migration Institute, to international agencies such as UNICEF, the Inter-

national Organization for Migration (IOM), the United Nations Development Fund for Women and the United Nations Refugee Agency. It develops public policies and coordinates programmes oriented to the protection of this highly vulnerable population.

Such efforts have resulted in the development of a new model for the protection of unaccompanied migrant adolescents and children, and in 2009 the Mexican Congress increased the national budget allocation for its implementation. The Government, in partnership with UNICEF and other stakeholders, has also made considerable efforts to ensure that the rights of adolescents and children in migration are taken up in international forums. Consequently, regional guidelines for the protection of unaccompanied migrant children were approved in 2009 at the Regional Conference on Migration. The guidelines are applicable in 11 countries of North and Central America as well as the Dominican Republic.

Specific actions have also been taken to respond to the immediate needs of repatriated adolescents and children, such as setting up special care units in the northern border areas of Mexico. Bilateral efforts are also under way between Mexico, as the transit and destination country, and countries of migrant origin, such as Guatemala.

Globally, considerable challenges still remain in the endeavour to ensure the rights of migrant adolescents and children. Overall, a fundamental challenge is the general absence of a child perspective within migration laws and policies and the corresponding lack of a migrant perspective within childhood policies. Specific issues such as access to justice, family reunification and international special protection still need to be addressed. Protecting adolescents from discrimination based on nationality or migration status and from administrative detention will be pivotal. Lastly, the migratory circuit must be dealt with in a more comprehensive way in order to tackle the root causes of migration and to ensure that adolescents do not see themselves as forced to migrate, but instead are able to make choices that serve their best interests.

*See References, page 78.*

**“Protecting adolescents from discrimination based on nationality or migration status and from administrative detention will be pivotal.”**